

CWS unique experience for fans, players

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right words.

"It's big time," Hochgesang said of his second CWS experience. "Everyone feels a little bit closer to the big leagues. You've got the press conferences after the game, you've got ESPN, the cameras, and the crowd that no one has ever played in front of."

"That could bring a lot of pressure, but I think all the teams here are having a lot of fun."

Of course, the veterans do occasionally have to remind themselves — and their teammates — that they're not here to have fun. They're here to win a national championship. The difference between finishing second and finishing eighth among the eight-team field is minuscule.

But when it comes right down to it, the field is generally so strong that anybody can beat anybody on any given day. Basic baseball fundamentals and the mental aspect of a game often make the difference.

"Baseball, it's so mental," Hochgesang said. "It's all in how you approach things. The main thing I want to get across to my teammates is after all the hype and the cameras and the huge crowd, it's just baseball. Once you cross the white lines, it's what we've been doing all year long. If we do that, we'll put ourselves in a good spot to win the whole thing."

The fans, on the other hand, aren't always as concerned with who comes out on top. Sure, you've got the backers from each individual team — they really care. They've driven hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles to cheer on their team.

But mixed in with the individual-team diehards are thousands of people just looking for a good time and some good baseball — like Ed Vescio.

The Omaha native has sat in the same two seats down the third baseline since 1970. His strategy: stick with the underdog all the way through. When one gets knocked out, root for the next lowest-seeded team.

Of course, it's not just about baseball, Vescio explained, as he crossed his arms and leaned up against the new brick pillars in front of the stadium.

Through his thick, wide-framed glasses, the skinny Vescio took in the atmosphere while he waited for his seat partner.

"It hasn't changed," he said, breaking into another long stare. "It's just gotten bigger. It's the same old situation — with a few more home runs."

Just off the sidewalk, which sat directly in front of Vescio, a middle-aged man with wild brown hair drove by in a rusted-out white pickup, waving two tickets in his left hand.

"Who needs tickets," he asked in almost a whisper that Vescio certainly didn't hear.

The loud-mouthed scalpers were having a little more luck sticking to the

ticket-less suckers on the sidewalk, in the parking lot and across the street.

Also in the money-making business was Tom Stratman, who stood on the edge of the raised entrance to his buddy's sports card shop selling parking spaces.

"Hey, watch my beer," Stratman warned as he took a quick peek at his napkin-wrapped aluminum can before returning his attention to the street.

The sun had evidently got the best of his nose and business wasn't going quite as well as he had hoped.

"The atmosphere?" he mumbled, without breaking eye-contact with the busy street. "It's circus-like, carnival-like."

"I'd say about 90-percent of the people are great and happy. But there's always a few assholes."

Tuesday's games were rained out, but a little drizzle didn't stop the tailgate parties that seemingly never end.

Even Amy Hurd, confined to the Art Wears T-shirt tent selling anything with a CWS logo, wore a giant smile on her face.

"It's one big party," said Hurd, a Plattsmouth native. "People are, like, really friendly and happy because they're on vacation, or whatever. It's really fun."

Almost directly across the street, a team bus pulled up in front of Rosenblatt. Kids of all ages mobbed together to get autographs from players whom they couldn't name.

It was a win-win situation — except for the coaches, who could only sit back and hope the players don't let the hype go to their heads.

"It's very difficult if you don't have anybody on your team that's ever been here before," Stanford Coach Mark Marquess said. "It's totally different than what you're used to during the normal year."

Luckily, Marquess has Hochgesang and Cogan, along with a handful of other College World Series veterans, to keep his team level headed.

"You can't get caught up in all the hoopla involved," Cogan said. "You have to really stay focused on winning a national championship instead of getting caught up in all the other things: all the barbecues, the banquets, the T-shirts, the hats, and the fans. Being here before, you've already experienced that. So you can enjoy that for what it's worth, but still focus on the task at hand."

Stanford, 2-0 in the tournament, will take the field again tonight at 7:30 p.m., and a win could send the Cardinal to the championship game Saturday afternoon. Miami, the only other undefeated team, will play at 2:30 p.m., for the right to advance to the championship game.

But no matter who takes home the title, Cogan said, the experience will no doubt be memorable.

"I told them before we came," Cogan said, "You're about to experience the best week of your life."

