

All eyes on All-Star weather forecast

Sara Croke keeps Royals informed, with a chance of rain slipping into her prediction.

By ERIC ADLER

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At the Weather or Not offices in Shawnee, Sara Croke (center) checked the weather pattern Tuesday with employees Brian Koochel (left) and Jordan Thies.

For some 27 years, since Kansas City's one great World Series of yore, Sara Croke has been the Royals' prognosticator of tempests and seer of scorching heat.

She is, as the owner of the forecasting firm Weather Or Not, the Royals' official weather watcher. For half her life, she and the baseball team she loves have been linked as closely as sky and turf.

"We put our jobs in her hands," said Trevor Vance, who as Royals director of grounds and landscaping is in charge of maintaining Kauffman Stadium's natural grass diamond, its base paths and outfield with "Field of Dreams" perfection.

In a way, that's exactly what now — in these last days before baseball's All-Star Game — has Croke a bit worried.

Only when Croke, 54, and her meteorological minions spy walls of wind, rain or lightning on the far-off horizon do the Royals know whether to call for their tarps, postpone a game or play on. And when Croke sees a stretch of 100-degree heat, the Royals know exactly how to tend the field and when to water the grass.

Problem is, the thing Croke's team now sees on its radar:

Rain!

Perhaps it won't be a lot. And with seven days to go, perhaps it won't happen at all.

But Croke said there is a slight, slight chance of rain, maybe Monday or Monday night, drying out by game time Tuesday.

That may sound like a good thing to people as the city broils in a heat wave. Break the pattern.

Please, bring the cool, refreshing rain. People like it. Grass loves it.

But it's not that simple in the baseball world.

If rain is predicted, Kauffman's groundskeepers may need to pull the giant blue tarp over the diamond in stifling heat. That could damage or even kill the grass, leaving a marred playing surface and an unsightly vista for everyone, including millions of television viewers.

Rolling a tarp on the field in intense heat is never healthy for the grass, Vance said, even for a couple of hours.

"Like I tell homeowners," he said, "how many times have you set out a bag of trash or a slip-and-slide on the grass for only one day and you lift it and the grass is toasted?"



Photograph by Fred Blocher

If groundskeepers don't cover the diamond for a cloudburst, the infield clay could get wet, creating soggy playing difficulties.

Should it rain just a bit — not enough to tarp the field or drench the clay — the result is likely to be a soaking from an entirely different source: humidity, and the sweat that comes with it.

"I don't want to say it wouldn't be pleasant," Croke said diplomatically. "Let's say it would be balmy."

She explained:

"Everybody is waiting for this high-pressure system to break down. The first hint of that comes somewhere around the 9th or 10th (Monday or Tuesday). What I mean by that is that we would get temperatures in the low- to mid-90s versus 100 or better. It would also mean that the atmosphere could have enough moisture that we could have rain or thunderstorms."

Batting practice and the Home Run Derby are scheduled for Monday. The All-Star Game is scheduled to start at 7 p.m. Tuesday.

Regarding a thunderstorm, Croke quickly added, "It's not a guarantee. It's not the guarantee of like a cold front coming through."

Vance said Croke made him aware of the rain chance for Monday or Tuesday, "which is Murphy's Law."

"Lord knows that the plants would love to get some rain right now," he said. "But you have to keep the dirt dry."

Before game time Tuesday, he said, there's much to do on the field.

"Painting logos, putting up temporary fencing for the softball game. There are all kinds of media stages out there," he said. "We're going to move forward. As groundskeepers we always prepare for the worst."

Certainly, the Royals have reasons to trust Croke, who began helping the Royals with tailored forecasts during the 1985 season. It was the year that the team, under then-manager Dick Howser, went on to win its only World Series.

Croke loves sports, having grown up in Boston as the daughter of a coach and athletic director.

As a 27-year-old forecaster for KMBC, Channel 9, she struck up a friendship with the Royals and later famed groundskeeper George Toma and volunteered to provide early and up-to-the-minute weather forecasts to Toma and his crew.

"Sara is probably one of the best weather people I've run across," Toma, 83, said. Already inducted in the NFL Hall of Fame, Toma is slated in August to join the Royals Hall of Fame as well.

"I've been away from the Royals now for years," Toma said, "but whenever we wanted to know something, we called Sara. Even when I was at the Super Bowl, I called Sara. What is the weather going to be like in Pasadena or in Texas?"

Toma recalled one instance, during a storm when radar was inoperable, that Croke got in her car and tracked a storm as it swept up to Kauffman Stadium.

"She went out to Jackson and Johnson counties and followed the weather into the ball park," Toma said. "There are a lot of good weathermen out there, but when you're going with a lineup, and she is hitting pretty good for you, you keep her in the lineup. She was our cleanup hitter."

Croke was so specific, in fact, that she was able to predict within minutes when rain would hit the ballpark, how heavy it would be, whether a game probably would be postponed or canceled, and, in many cases, when the rain would end.

In 1986, when Croke's television contract was not renewed, Toma suggested she open her own business. She began Weather Or Not inside her home, later moving it to radio station KMBZ. The first paying client was Kansas City International Airport.

The company now operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week out of offices in Shawnee with, depending on the season, up to 12 employees, including six full-time and two part-time meteorologists.

Clients beyond the Royals now include airports, construction companies and parks and public works departments, including those in Wyandotte County and Johnson County.

“We use her all year round,” said Gerard Slay, senior deputy director of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport.

Croke’s company, he said, provides forecasts at least three times a day and more frequently in bad weather.

“She is very valuable when predicting snowfalls,” he said. “When we call snow crews out, it costs about \$12,000 an hour.”

Knowing when to call in crews, how many workers to use and when to let them go, he said, is a delicate business.

“When you let crews go,” he said, “you don’t want to let them go too early.”

Nor do you want to put them on the clock too early.

In February 2011, some media forecasters were predicting a massive blizzard would blanket the St. Louis area with up to 18 inches of snow.

“We told them the air is never going to get cold enough,” Croke recalled. “This is going to be sleet.

You’ll push some slush, but in no way do you need to gear up for 14 to 18 inches of snow. We got calls from every client. Are you sure? Are you sure?”

The correct forecast saved the airport an estimated \$250,000.

Now comes the prediction for the All-Star Game on Tuesday.

“The game is on the 10th,” Croke said. “Right now, between now and the 9th, it is 98 to 100 degrees for high temperatures and bone dry. Around the 9th or the 10th is the first hint — it is just the first hint — when the high pressure ridge gets broken down a little bit...

“It could hold off.”

The temperature at game time, she said, could be in the 80s.

And after the game?

“Let the sky open up on Wednesday,” she said.