

"Fans Flock to Baseball Spring Training"

By Dan Schlossberg

For nearly a century, baseball spring training was an isolated event centered in sleepy southern towns. But that was before hordes of vacationers discovered that watching well-honed athletes sweat and stretch was more exhilarating than shoveling snow.

Only weeks after Super Bowl frenzy has subsided, baseball begins a long march that lasts through September, or longer for the lucky few who advance beyond the 162-game regular season. Pitchers, who need more time to get ready, and catchers, on the receiving end, report 7-10 days before the full squad, with exhibition games between teams on tap for March.

During the six-week training period, Florida and Arizona become the capitals of the baseball world, with half of the 30 clubs comprising the Grapefruit League and the other half performing in the arid conditions of the Cactus League.

For Florida, spring training is a time-honored tradition that traces its roots through three centuries. It began in 1888, when the Washington Statesmen showed up in Jacksonville to work out their winter cobwebs, but took 26 more years before Florida gained a permanent foothold. In 1914, Branch Rickey brought his St. Louis Browns to a St. Petersburg park called Coffee Pot Field and three other big-league clubs followed. Since then, 35 Florida cities have hosted teams and all but six current clubs have trained there.

Arizona baseball is more recent; spring training migrated there only after the postwar advent of air-conditioning.

Baseball in the spring is still more sport than business — a game as gentle as the ocean breeze, a pageant whose participants are unhurried, unhassled, and often uninhibited. The late Hall of Famer Frankie Frisch wasn't far off the mark when he referred to spring training camps as "country clubs without dues."

Pitchers and catchers arrive in mid-February to loosen their valuable arms, with remaining players required to report by March 1. Workouts and intra-squad scrimmages prepare the athletes for action before "exhibition" games allow them to face token opposition in enemy uniforms.

Because exhibition game schedules are determined by geography rather than league membership, the meaningless scores and standings are listed by record-happy sports editors as "the Grapefruit League."

Cozy ballparks, all with natural grass, breed a casual, informal atmosphere that allows fans to reach out and touch their heroes at a fraction of the regular-season price (several parks charge \$5 for a spot on the grassy berm). Stadiums may resemble their regular-season counterparts in architecture but never in size; even the largest is built to one-fifth scale.

In spring training at least, bigger is not necessarily better. Small ballparks mean less competition for autographs, which are almost as plentiful as hot dogs and invariably cheaper (players never ask for money when signing in or around a stadium). But getting into a ballpark can be an adventure.

Because smaller fields mean more competition for premium tickets, advance planning is essential — especially for weekend games or contests involving such popular clubs as the Yankees, Mets, or Red Sox.

With few exceptions, games are played during day on natural grass in parks where stands are close to the action. Players pose willingly for cameras, managers disguised in sunglasses sit on folding chairs next to their dugouts, and teams stress conditioning over competition.

Unless they are recuperating from an injury, learning a new position, or experimenting with a new pitch, stars can relax. They know they'll have one of the 750 spots on major-league rosters when the 25-man limit becomes official on Opening Day. Top players rarely make road trips or work more than a few innings — preferring to spend their springs on the links, in the pools, or at the theme parks.

It's a different story for freshmen, especially those fighting for the final few spots. If they don't impress their managers and coaches during the spring, they'll be sent to the minors — and perhaps to baseball oblivion.

Older players face a similar fate — especially if a team decides a rookie's potential outweighs a veteran's experience. Since younger players are cheaper, salary considerations often tip the scales.

Money matters were also the main reasons for massive player movement during the winter months. Fans searching for favorites during spring training may face the same dilemma Casey Stengel

encountered when the Mets met for their first spring training in 1962. The manager surveyed the diamond, turned to a sportswriter, and said, "You can't tell the players without a scorecard."

There's a certain appeal to the half-work, half-play attitude of the athletes, who sometimes pause to converse with the fans in the front rows. Spectators pay half-hearted attention to the action on the field and more attention to each other. The array of baseball apparel in the stands ranges from creative hats to clingy halter tops, coupled with a constant in-game parade to and from concessions stands selling cool drinks.

The same fans who seem frenzied at every development during the regular season are as relaxed as the players during the spring. Nobody hurls invective at the umpires or at interlopers who dare to wear the insignia of the visiting team. All seem happy to flee the frozen north for a glimpse of their favorites and a sneak preview of the coming season.

No matter who plays where, the sight of a player in uniform is enough to excite the typical spectator. Crowds even come to watch calisthenics.

Autograph seekers swamp player parking lots and hotel lobbies, though stars with seven-figure salaries often opt for private accommodations. Finding them far from the ballfield requires research into popular player nightspots.

If spring training attendance serves as an accurate barometer, there's no doubt that the 30-game exhibition-game schedule has become a big-league vacation destination for legions of fans who can't wait for winter to end. To them, the first day of spring is not marked by the appearance of the first robin or the return of the swallows to Capistrano. It is marked by four little words from the sports pages: "pitchers and catchers report."

CENTRAL

Teams: Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Detroit Tigers, Houston Astros, Washington Nationals

Toughest ticket: Because of Disney's natural pull, Cracker Jack Stadium is filled with curious, often transient fans who don't necessarily pull for the Braves. With many New Yorkers in the area, tickets are hard to find for games against the Yankees or Mets.

Easiest ticket: Anyone willing to make the schlep to a Nationals game in Viera won't be turned away.

Best ballpark: Joker Marchant Stadium features an old-time pipe organ, between-innings promotions, ospreys nesting in its light-towers, and views of passing boats on Lake Parker. No wonder the Tigers have rejected all overtures to leave Lakeland, their spring home since 1934.

Best access to players: Players and broadcasters invariably hang out in the ESPN Club at Disney's Boardwalk resort, not far from Cracker Jack Stadium. Long-time Astros broadcaster Milo Hamilton, whose autobiography *Making Airwaves* was just published, brings in Houston players for live AstroLine shows on Wednesday nights. ESPN's *Baseball Tonight* often originates there during the spring.

Most pastoral setting: Fans and writers come early and stay late in Winter Haven, even though most have to park on uneven grassy knolls. They relish the smell of the orange blossoms and the sight of the red-clay field. Hall of Famer Bob Feller often signs autographs in the picnic patio down the left-field line.

Most convenient: Cracker Jack Stadium, at the Wide World of Sports Complex, keeps in character with everything else Disney – it's as spotless as the day it opened in 1998. It's also located right off the Osceola County Parkway and close to fine dining, nightlife, and hotels.

Shortest baseball drive: Winter Haven (Indians) is a half-hour from Lakeland (Tigers), the same time listed for the trek between the Kissimmee clubs (Braves and Astros).

Longest baseball drive: Space Coast Stadium in Viera is more than hour from each of its rivals.

Don't miss: Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral; Orlando's theme parks; Gatorland, the best natural attraction in Florida; and airboat rides through area marshes.

Best hotels: Hotels of every size, description, and price range can be found in or Disney, with the enormous Gaylord Palms just outside the gate. Alternate accommodations in Central Florida can be found through companies that rent furnished properties, including Premier Vacation Homes (800-396-2401, 407-396-2401, pr-vacation.com).

GULF COAST

Teams: Boston Red Sox, Cincinnati Reds, Minnesota Twins, New York Yankees, Philadelphia Phillies, Pittsburgh Pirates, Tampa Bay Devil Rays, Toronto Blue Jays.

Toughest ticket: Though the Yankees have the biggest ballpark, there's never a shortage of transplanted or visiting New Yorkers – only a shortage of premium ducats. Spring training sellouts, rare for other clubs, are common for both the Yanks and the Red Sox, arch-rival clubs with the most

partisan fans in the majors.

Easiest ticket: Because the Tampa Bay Devil Rays are the first team to train in their home territory since 1919, they're not a springtime novelty. Until their promising young players make names for themselves, Pirate tickets will be plentiful. Some fans say their old ballpark (McKechnie Field in Bradenton) has more appeal than their young team.

Best ballpark: The name is more than a mouthful, but Bright House Networks Field is a bandbox that hitters and offense-loving fans love but fielders hate (too many nooks and crannies). Legends Field is a scaled-down version of Yankee Stadium, down to its miniature Monument Park, replica facade, and scoreboard. The Minnesota Twins play in a Fort Myers ballpark that looks like Churchill Downs from the outside.

Best access to players: Pittsburgh hitters take batting practice at Pirate City, four miles from their Bradenton ballpark, and board a bus to the ballpark an hour before game time. Pirate BP is a goldmine for both autographs and souvenir baseballs.

Most pastoral setting: The first team to train at home since 1919, Tampa Bay plays its spring games in a ballpark noted for soaring pelicans, harmonica-playing vendors, and white sails in the bay beyond the outfield fences. 'Nuff said.

Shortest baseball drive: Bright House Networks Field, the Phillies' two-year-old ballpark in Clearwater, is five miles south of Toronto's Dunedin headquarters. The two ballparks in Fort Myers are 20 minutes apart.

Longest baseball drive: The 130-mile route from Fort Myers to Dunedin usually takes three hours each way.

Don't miss: The adjacent Fort Myers homes of Thomas Edison and Henry Ford; the 117-year-old St. Petersburg Pier, a long wharf with an aquarium, food court, and observation deck; the 10-block ballpark-to-ballpark walk along Baseball Boulevard in St. Pete; Ybor City, home to Tampa's Cuban expatriates; Bem's Steakhouse, a Tampa tradition that shows off its kitchens as an after-dinner treat; and the new streetcar system that makes Tampa transit more fun.

Best hotels: The Renaissance Vinoy, a long-time St. Pete landmark, is a pink Art Deco structure that overlooks the bay and the surrounding town. More modern accommodations, many with bay views, are on the Tampa side of the causeway.

ATLANTIC COAST

Teams: Baltimore Orioles, Florida Marlins, Los Angeles Dodgers, New York Mets, St. Louis Cardinals

Toughest ticket: Tickets are also hard to find in Jupiter when the Cardinals are home, especially for weekend games or for the two-game visit by the Braves, who formerly trained in nearby West Palm Beach.

Easiest ticket: A bad ballpark means a good bargain in Fort Lauderdale, where the Orioles play in an antiquated facility. Oriole tickets are harder to find when the visiting team is the Yankees, the Red Sox, or the close-to-home Florida Marlins.

Best ballpark: It wasn't long ago that Holman Stadium in Vero Beach had no outfield fences, just an incline warning outfielders they were about to make contact with a ring of palm trees planted at the top of the rise. The field still lacks dugouts, forcing players to sit on open benches in the hot sun with wet towels on their heads. Former Dodger manager Tommy Lasorda, a spring training instructor, often watches games from the stands while still in uniform. Though other spring sites have morphed into their urban surroundings, Dodgertown remains a peaceful preserve at the edge of Vero Beach, a tiny, citrus-producing community. The Dodgers, Brooklyn-based when they arrived in 1948, like it so much that they're the only West Coast club that trains in Florida.

Best access to players: Vero. When Dodger players walk from their workout fields to the stadium, they share the walkways with spectators. Lasorda and others use golf carts but stop to sign autographs often. Fans on the third-base side in Fort Lauderdale can lean down to chat with players or take pictures as they move from the clubhouse to the field.

Most pastoral setting: Beyond its 70-acre orange grove, 27-hole golf course, and handsome country club, the 58-year-old Dodgertown facility in Vero features two-and-a-half practice fields and a well-groomed, 110-acre baseball facility. Fans at exhibition games feel like they're watching two pickup teams playing country hardball.

Most convenient: There's always a game in Jupiter, one of three Florida towns with two spring training teams (Marlins and Cardinals) but the only one where they play in the same ballpark.

Shortest baseball drive: The Mets (Port St. Lucie) and Dodgers (Vero) are less than 30 minutes apart. Smart fans who want to save gas money – not to mention high levels of stress – will stay in Jupiter and buy both Cardinals and Marlins tickets.

Longest baseball drive: On a good day, the run from Ft. Lauderdale to Vero will consume two hours. It's safer to allow three, especially if one of the frequent spring thunderstorms dampens the road surface.

Don't miss: The canals, water taxis, and beaches of Fort Lauderdale; the glitz and glitter of CityPlace

and the Kravitz Center for the Performing Arts in West Palm Beach; the exclusive shops and millionaire's homes in Palm Beach, just south of Jupiter; and the tony enclave of Boca Raton, between the Palm Beaches and Fort Lauderdale.

Best hotels: To learn how the other half lives, opt for a few days at the Breakers (if budget allows). Palm Beach also has other expensive properties, including a Four Seasons and Ritz-Carlton, but the Jupiter Beach Resort is a more convenient option for fans seeking short hops to Roger Dean Stadium. The PGA National Resort in Palm Beach Gardens is ideal for golfers or anyone seeking a quiet stay, though it is not located on the ocean.

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