

LIFESTYLE TRAVEL

BY DAN SCHLOSSBERG



Night action at Champion Stadium, spring home of the Atlanta Braves, at Disney World

The Grapefruit League



The Atlanta Braves work out the winter cobwebs at Champion Stadium on the campus of Disney's Wide World of Sports in Lake Buena Vista

At spring training, getting up close and personal with your favorite baseball players is a cinch

Some observers suggest spring begins with the sighting of the first robin or the return of the swallows to Capistrano. USA TODAY sportswriter Paul White disagrees; he says spring begins when the average outdoor temperature is greater than the number of days left before baseball training camps open. Others insist the first day of spring coincides with one line from the newspaper sports section: "Pitchers and catchers report."

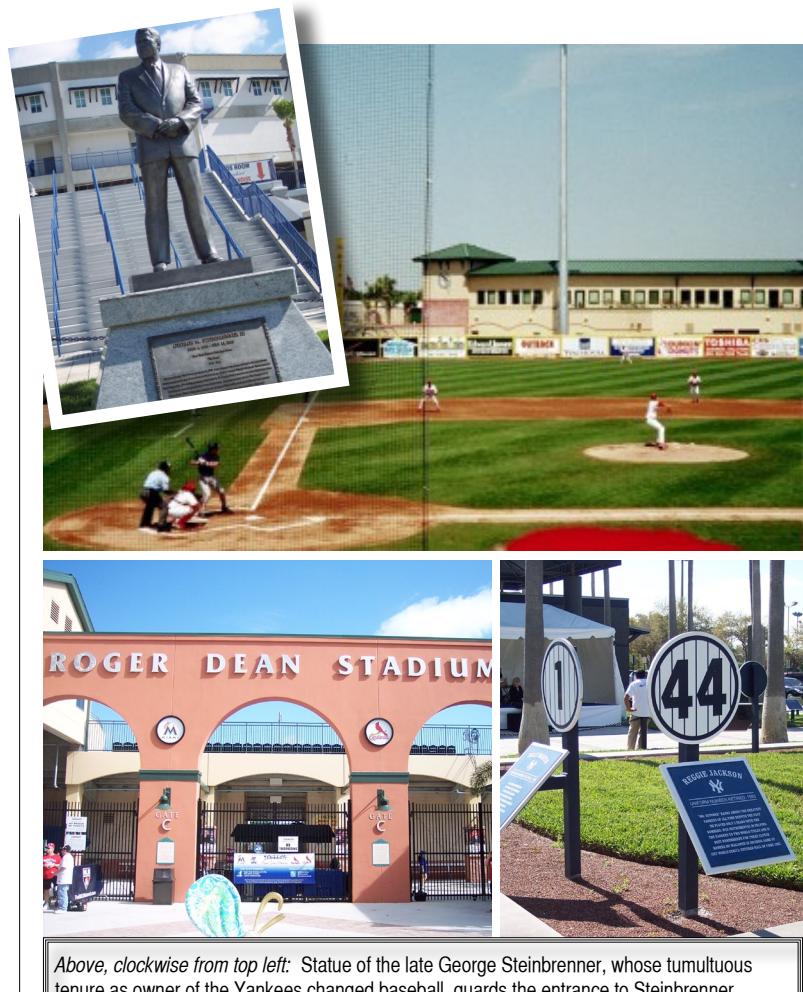
Only weeks after Super Bowl frenzy has subsided, baseball begins a long march that lasts through September, or longer for the lucky few teams that advance beyond the 162-game regular season. Pitchers, who need more time to get ready, and catchers, on the receiving end, report more than a week ahead of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

For New Jersey residents seeking to swap the snow of winter for the sun of spring in the south, the training period makes Florida the undisputed baseball capital of the world. Half of the 30 teams train there: eight on the Gulf Coast (Blue Jays, Phillies, Yankees, Rays, Orioles, Pirates, Twins, Red Sox); four in the center (Braves, Astros, Tigers, and Nationals); and three along the I-95 corridor in the southeast part of the state (Marlins, Cardinals, Mets).

Baseball's other half trains in Arizona, where the cacti outnumber the people. Although exhibition game results are simply tune-ups that don't count, media reports refer to Florida games as "the Grapefruit League" and Arizona action as "the Cactus League."

Fans itching to trade freezing temperatures for sneak previews of the baseball season don't seem to mind. There's a certain appeal to the half-work, half-play attitude of the athletes, who often pause to sign autographs and converse with fans. There's even more of an appeal, at least from the male perspective, to the endless parade of well-oiled female fans in halter and bikini tops.

Compact, cozy ballparks, all with natural grass, breed a



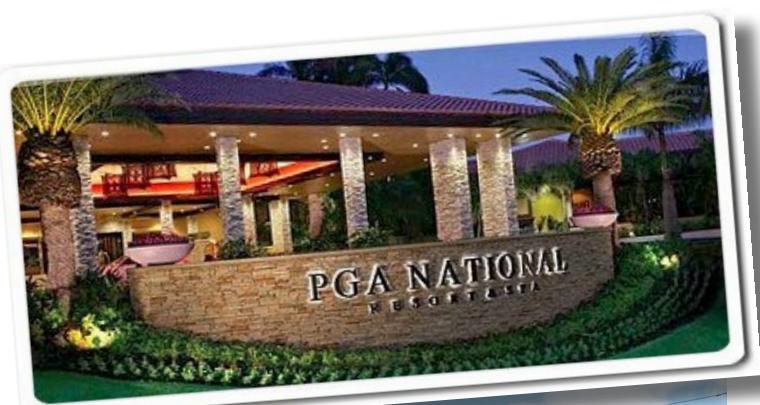
Above, clockwise from top left: Statue of the late George Steinbrenner, whose tumultuous tenure as owner of the Yankees changed baseball, guards the entrance to Steinbrenner Stadium in Tampa; Roger Dean Stadium, spring home of the Cards and Marlins where there's a game virtually every day; Easy-to-reach Roger Dean Stadium in Jupiter is the only Florida spring training venue that hosts two teams, the Miami Marlins and the St. Louis Cardinals; Although adversarial in life, Reggie Jackson (44) and Billy Martin (1) stand together again outside Steinbrenner Stadium, where the Yankees train, in Tampa. *Below, from top:* PGA National Resort & Spa; Ed Smith Stadium in Sarasota plays host to the Baltimore Orioles of the American League East.

casual, informal atmosphere that allows fans to reach out and touch their heroes at a fraction of the regular-season price. Like a wedding, spring training is the perfect place to find something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue. Old is new in Florida, where snowbirds are more likely to be human than aviary and ballparks may also be survivors of another age.

The Boston Braves established the first Florida spring training site in St. Petersburg in 1922. Al Lang Field, where several teams trained over the years, was a fan favorite for its soaring pelicans, harmonica-playing vendors, and white sails in the bay beyond the outfield fences.

McKechnie Field, the Bradenton base of the Pittsburgh Pirates, remains the granddaddy of spring training parks. Originally opened in 1923, it was remodeled in 1993. But it still looks ancient, with the 6,562 seats virtually on top of the players and 17th Avenue West so close that foul balls are a health hazard for passing cars. Like the older Fenway Park and Wrigley Field, this stadium looks like it was squeezed into the neighborhood with a giant shoehorn.

When the Detroit Tigers started training in Lakeland in 1934, Hank Greenberg was their first baseman and Henley Field was their ballpark. Though Greenberg is long deceased, Henley still stands a mile away from the team's current facility, Joker



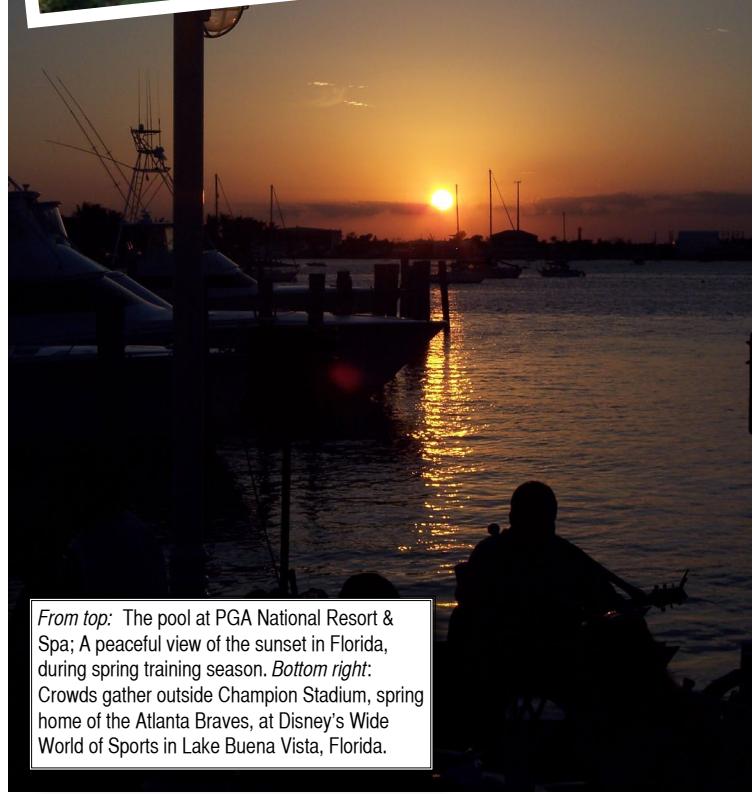
Marchant Stadium. It's close enough to Lake Parker that players keep fishing poles in their lockers.

Looking for something new? Try teams and stars in new locations, new players hoping to win promotion from the minors, and even new names for existing parks (while the Braves still train at Disney's Wide World of Sports, their field is now called Champion Stadium).

Even teams that won last year are willing to try something new. Managers juggle furiously during exhibition-game play, often playing regulars three innings before giving youngsters a chance to win the few open spots on the developing 25-man roster (teams often audition twice as many players during the spring).

For something borrowed, fans don't have to look far: teams invite over-the-hill veterans hoping for one last shot, as well as untested youngsters drafted from other organizations. Draftees who don't pass muster are offered back to the original clubs at half the original price, baseball's version of Filene's Basement.

As for something blue, consider the Florida sky dotted by



From top: The pool at PGA National Resort & Spa; A peaceful view of the sunset in Florida, during spring training season. Bottom right: Crowds gather outside Champion Stadium, spring home of the Atlanta Braves, at Disney's Wide World of Sports in Lake Buena Vista, Florida.

puffy cumulus clouds, the primary color of team uniforms, or the shade on the face of a kid who's just been told he's going back to the minors. Dodger blue — reputed to be the color of Tommy Lasorda's blood — was a Grapefruit League spectacle for 60 years before new ownership yanked the rug from rustic Vero Beach, ending a 60-year run for Dodgertown.

No matter where they are, sharp-eyed fans can spot greats of the past, including Yogi Berra and Whitey Ford of the Yankees, in the camps of their former clubs. The Atlanta Braves not only import two former stars per week as special instructors, but send them up to home plate to deliver the lineup cards to the umpires. The fans love it.

Because ballparks are small, it's not easy to get tickets — especially for weekend games or those involving the Boston Red Sox or the two New York teams. The Sox occupy the newest park on the Grapefruit League circuit, the one-year-old jetBlue Stadium. It has almost as many bells and whistles as one of its sponsor's cockpits.

For fans following their favorite franchise, keeping track of training locations sometimes requires training. Though only one team has changed its regular-season venue since 1972, the spring training configuration continues to pulsate like a dying quasar.

This spring, for example, the Houston Astros start their second half-century with new uniforms, new owners, and a new league affiliation. After years of playing with separate sizes and separate rules, the National and American League now have three five-team divisions for the first time — though debate over the designated hitter rule (used only by the AL) remains.

The New York Yankees spent years in Fort Lauderdale before moving to Tampa, home of the late owner George Steinbrenner. A bronze statue in his honor guards the team's 10,000-seat spring ballpark, renamed Steinbrenner Field in his honor.

The Miami Marlins, the only team to go *north* for spring training, once switched Florida sites with the Montreal Expos, who morphed into the Washington Nationals. The Fish now frolic in closer-to-home Jupiter while the Nats spend the spring in Viera.

The one-time Florida Marlins now identify with their host city, Miami, after moving into a new downtown ballpark last April. But their new digs did not dissuade them from maintaining a reputation for being more tight-fisted than Jack



Benny. They shed a half-dozen high-priced stars, plus their manager, after a disappointing 2012 campaign. This spring, they will do their best to live down to the old Casey Stengel adage, "You can't tell the players without a scorecard."

At least the Philadelphia Phillies, one of the 16 "original" major league teams, offer stability: they still train in Clearwater, sandwiched between the Gulf of Mexico and Tampa Bay, but not in old Jack Russell Stadium. In 2004, it gave way to a \$22 million complex that strongly suggests a smaller version of Philadelphia's Citizens Bank Park. The lease will keep the Phils in Clearwater for through 2024, giving them 77 straight seasons in the same community. Even Cal Ripken, Jr. couldn't break that streak.

Families planning spring stays of a week or more will make maximum mileage on their money by renting a vacation home, especially in the Central Florida area around Disney World. Contact All Star Vacation Homes, 7822 W. Irlo Bronson Memorial Highway, Kissimmee FL 34747, tel. 407-997-0733, www.allstarvacationhomes.com.

In South Florida, the PGA National Resort & Spa features five golf courses, nine restaurants and lounges, a European spa that embraces 40,000 square feet, a "Waters of the World" complex that embraces three outdoor mineral pools, plus proximity to Roger Dean Stadium. Contact PGA National Resort, 400 Avenue of the Champions, Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33418, tel. 855-809-5297, www.pgaresort.com.

Getting to the Grapefruit League from New Jersey takes less than three hours. JetBlue, which combines first-class service with unrestricted fares, flies from Newark Liberty to Orlando, Palm Beach International, Fort Lauderdale, and other Florida hotspots. See www.jetblue.com or call 1-800-JET-BLUE for details.

A word of advice: baseball fans should plan early because they will be competing for airline seats with college kids on spring break. ■

Former AP sportswriter Dan Schlossberg, a Grapefruit League regular since 1971, covers baseball and travel for newspapers, magazines, internet outlets, and broadcast venues. A popular after-dinner speaker, he has also authored 35 baseball books. E-mail him at ballauthor@gmail.com.



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