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Spring Training in Florida: Renewal and History

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
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There is no other time like it in sport.

Spring training in Florida is a dream, a fantasy, and a time of eternal optimism. It is a dream for all those caught in the endless winter trying to become spring. And it is a dream for all those players at every level of the game trying to start or consummate the march to the majors.

It is a fantasy for those who sit in the snow and imagine themselves in the warm sun, hearing the familiar sounds of a ball being caressed into the pocket of a glove, or the crack of the bat--those marvelous sounds of baseball.

It is the time of renewal, a spring ritual tied to the rural rhythms of an earlier age, a time when everyone is young, everyone has hope. The dreams of pennants will ultimately be crushed in the passage of time, but for the moment everyone is in first place, everyone an optimist.

Is there any other sport in which dreams are so tied to the simple rituals of practice?

For over a century now spring training has been taking place in Florida and the relationship between the sunshine state and baseball has been one of reciprocal impact. It is generally accepted that the first spring training took place in 1886 and the first spring training in Florida was two years later when the Washington Statesmen of the National League came to Jacksonville. Connie Mack, a skinny second-string catcher on that team, recalled some years later that it was a long and difficult trip to Florida by train. Room and board for the players was a dollar a night.

Not until the arrival of Al Lang in St.Petersburg in 1911 did spring training take firm hold in Florida. Lang worked hard to persuade teams to train in his adopted city, and to convince the city to offer incentives to attract major league teams.

The first year of significant spring training activity in the state came in 1918 when the Philadelphia Phillies trained in St.Petersburg. The Braves were in Miami, and the Pirates and Athletics in Jacksonville. The war slowed these developments, but by 1923 Florida was firmly established as the home of spring training.

In the early Twenties as Florida's real estate market began to percolate, interest in spring training as a promotional tool grew. This relationship can be seen in the work of Joe Tinker in Orlando. Tinker had become a baseball legend as the third baseman in the Cub's infield, and was immortalized by Franklin P. Adams in "Baseball's Sad Lexicon" with its recurring tag line, Tinker to Evers to Chance.

Tinker was president and manager of the Orlando entry in the Florida State League. He was deeply involved in real estate and as the boom developed he forsook his baseball interests to devote more time to speculation. He combined these interests when he was able to convince Cincinnati Reds owner Garry Herrmann to bring his team to Orlando to train in the new Tinker Field. The Reds arrived in 1923 and stayed for seven years, and more than coincidentally Joe Tinker became a major figure in Orlando real estate.

Although only a few hundred fans were in attendance at most spring games, Babe Ruth was a huge attraction. When the Yankees arrived in St. Petersburg people followed the Babe through the streets of the city hoping for an autograph or a word from the most famous baseball hero of this century.

In the 1930s thousands of the unemployed came to spring training camps, young men looking to find work in the game of their dreams. The hopes of the hopeless nearly overwhelmed the capability of Florida communities to respond as the hungry and desperate arrived in large numbers, some without shoes carrying only a glove and the clothes on their backs.

After another wartime lull spring training returned to Florida. In 1946 Jackie Robinson arrived for his first spring training in Daytona Beach. He was not welcomed by many as he began his quest to end segregation in baseball. Florida would be a difficult test for large numbers of black players trying to fulfill their baseball dreams. It was not until the 1960s that spring training sites were finally desegregated and then only at the insistence of black players like Bill White and Bob Gibson.

In subsequent years spring training evolved into big business. New Florida communities started giving away massive amounts of real estate to attract teams, and older sites like Orlando were abandoned. The crowds have grown as well and some of the quiet intimacy of spring training is in danger of being lost.

But in the end it remains a wonderful time of hope and renewal,
of dreams and fantasies. A time to play ball in an eternal
spring.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you
don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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