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The Changing Face of Spring Training in Florida

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As another baseball season begins and the optimism of spring training is quickly overtaken by reality, it occurs to me that spring training here in Florida has undergone vast changes over the past two decades and more may be on the way. I have now been going to spring training for thirty years, another reality with which I must deal, and it remains a special time for me and for the sport.

The first spring training games I saw were on a visit to Orlando. As a Minnesota Twins fan I was most fortunate to be able to see them play in both Orlando and Winter Haven. As a child in Minnesota spring training in Florida seemed a faraway and magical place. Anywhere that featured warmth and sunshine in February and March could be nothing other than magical.

I remember listening to games on the radio from Florida in March. Snow was usually piled outside the windows, icicles hanging from the roof, and frost was painted on the windows. Incredibly at the same moment men in baseball gear were playing the summer game while we wondered if the car would start the next morning. Now what seems incredible is that anyone must face snow and cold during this the most wonderful time of year in Florida.

What I remember most from spring training in the 1970s was the informality and relaxed character of it all. Morning workouts at Tinker Field in Orlando were open to the fans who could wander in and watch the routines of the spring training day. On any given day you might see Harmon Killebrew cranking up his home run swing, Rod Carew waving his bat like a magician's wand to direct the ball to whatever part of the field he wished it to go, or Larry Hise going through fifty repetitions going back on a fly ball. Pitchers covered first over and over again, infielders took ground ball after ground ball, and always there was the sound of the bats hitting balls in the batting cages.

Through it all players would exchange greetings with the fans and one another, while small boys and old men took it all in with a combination of awe and pure pleasure. At times you were often within a few feet of your heroes. It was a time before autograph dealers and card collectors, a

time before players and fans had developed an adversarial relationship.

As the Grapefruit League games began you could assess the future of your favorite team while prospects and suspects played the middle and late innings and pitchers ran in the outfield. As opening day approached the games took on a bit more urgency of purpose. In early April the teams packed up and went north and those of us who stayed behind knew that the heat and humidity of a tropical summer would soon be upon us.

Sometime in the 1980s all of this began to change. Small upstart cities in Florida began to compete to become spring training sites. Teams were drawn to new venues by the promise of new and improved facilities and by the lure of Florida real estate. Large land grants were given to teams by cities seeking to have their names in Northern media outlets to attract the ever more lucrative tourist dollar. Land could be converted to housing developments or malls and the lure was enough to draw teams to newly reclaimed swampland.

The newer facilities are too often less fan-friendly than the old. Intimacy has been lost, as fans are required to keep their distance from players. This trend has become most pronounced in the last decade. Large crowds and even sellouts of spring training games are now common. Spring season ticket sales have jumped. Travel agencies grab up the best seats to include as part of spring training package deals. New and larger stadia with air-conditioned luxury boxes underline the loss of intimacy. There are even scalpers on the scene.

There remains at least one place in Florida where spring training maintains much of feel of the past. When the Dodgers built their facility on the outskirts of Vero Beach in the late Forties they built a self-contained facility to avoid the unpleasantness of a segregated society. The result was a wonderful small community where fans could wander from practice field to practice field, loiter among the batting cages, and walk among players, coaches and umpires before and after the game. It is undoubtedly the most fan friendly venue in all of sport.

I was reminded of that after a game this spring when fans walked along with the umpires back toward their locker room

exchanging pleasantries, when Orel Hershiser jogged past having just come off the mound, and Tommy Lasorda could be seen wandering the grounds and signing autographs. No security people pushed you away. It was Dodgertown and there we were at the corner of Jackie Robinson Way and Sandy Koufax Boulevard.

This might be the last spring training in Dodgertown as Las Vegas has ambitions of becoming the new Mecca of spring baseball. Indeed this could bring spring training to an end in all of Florida as the Vegas authorities make enticing offers to owners with no sense of the past.

A new glitzy spring training in Las Vegas, now billing itself as the center of family entertainment in America, could be the future. No doubt it will all be marketed quite efficiently and the crowds at the games will be bigger than ever. The bottom line will certainly be enhanced but one can only wonder if all of this represents progress.

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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