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J. Roy Stockton



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SPRING TRAINING IN FLORIDA

by J. ROY STOCKTON

SPRING TRAINING serves many purposes for the great American game and business of baseball. The primary objective, of course, is to get the players into the best possible physical condition for the arduous, 154-game pennant races during which the championships of the two major leagues are decided. During this conditioning process young players and others who may have been obtained in trades are inspected and tested in practice sessions, squad games, and exhibition contests.

During the off-season each major league club is permitted to carry a maximum of 40 players on its roster. There are modifications to this rule. For instance, returning service men may be carried for a specific period without counting as members of the 40-man squad. By the time the season opens, in mid-April, each squad must be reduced to 28 players and 30 days later the legal limit is 25 athletes. This prevails through the playing season, except that during the last month of play more than 25 may be carried, so that promising prospects may be summoned from minor league affiliates for late-season inspection.

Thus, during spring training, usually lasting six weeks or more, the manager must test, sort, discard, and finally select the squad of 28 and later 25 players who are to represent his club in the pennant race.

Instruction is another important phase of spring training. Long hours are devoted to batting and fielding practice, base running, sliding, bunting, and other things that are considered and described as fundamentals. The manager always has a staff of assistants or coaches, usually experts in their fields. One coach will take charge of the outfielders, another will demonstrate the fine points of tagging runners and making the double play for the in-field candidates. The pitching coach, usually a big-name veteran, will be in charge of the pitchers and the catcher candidates also will have a special instructor. Although it is conceded generally that hitters are born and not made, most clubs will add a batting instructor to the staff if they can find a Rogers Hornsby, a Dixie Walker, or a Paul Waner available.

An important by-product of spring training is the free advertising it gets for the major league club-and for the minors, too-back in their home cities. Each newspaper in a major league city will send a reporter and perhaps a columnist or feature writer to the spring training camp. Most sports writers are optimists; it is easy to look through rose-colored glasses in the bright Florida sunshine, and so most of the stories telling of the spring camp activities are hope-inspiring. Certainly the thousands of words sent back home by the sports writers make the fans in the major league cities extremely baseball conscious, thus stimulating the very essential business of selling tickets.

And while the baseball clubs are getting this valuable publicity back home and throughout the country, Florida is beneficiary of invaluable advertising, and in what the advertising industry considers the most effective form.

The average newspaper or magazine reader, when he sees a display advertisement about beautiful scenery, balmy breezes, plush golf courses, excellent fishing, and so forth, is inclined to take the blurbs with a large grain of salt. He knows that it is a paid advertisement. Somebody is try to sell him something. The advertisement becomes suspect and the reader develops resistance.

Back in the early days of our newspaper career there was a gimmick called a Business Office Must. In effect it was institution-payola, to borrow a word that recently made many disk jockeys unhappy. In those early days advertisers realized that de reading notice was much more effective as a medium than the display advertisement. And so some newspapers, in order to get the paid advertising, would guarantee the advertiser proportionate space in the reading or so-called news columns of the publication.

These reading notices, frequently written by bright young things in the advertising agencies, so they would be sure to say just what the advertisers wanted, would be dropped on the copy desk stamped in large letters: B.O.M.

That meant Business Office Must, and no matter how crowded the department space might be, those B.O.M.'s had to ride intact and uncut through all editions or somebody would be fired promptly the next day.

Advertisers still value the reading notice highly and even the great newspapers, some of outstanding integrity, still bow to the necessity of participating in the institutional payola. Just look at

any special section - Food Section, Automobile Section, Real Estate Section - and you'll see the payola. In the food section the markets will advertise their wares and the Food Editor will have a lead column on how tasty goody-good wieners broiled outdoors are on a tangy evening in the back yard or by the sea shore. And in a display advertisement nearby you can find just where you can buy the best goody-good wieners, and so forth.

But the point is that Florida gets a tremendous volume of these reading notices, without the necessity of having to bargain with publishers by buying display advertisements.

After the St. Louis Cardinals and the New York Yankees had trained in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1960, E. C. Robison, chairman of the city's baseball committee, made a revealing report to the governors of the Greater St. Petersburg Chamber of Commerce. Robison disclosed that 1,145,000 words had been filed by sports writers during the major league training season and that there had been 3,922 hours of time on baseball radio networks devoted to the baseball activity in St. Petersburg. There also was one live telecast witnessed by 2,500,000 persons in the New York area.

Attendance at games at Al Lang Field totaled 86,817, and \$116,061 was paid at the gate. The city was not without a share, collecting for itself \$10,923 and \$9,745 more as its share of concession receipts.

In a survey arranged by Robison, 71 per cent of the persons interviewed at the ball park gave the major league as their number one reason for wintering in St. Petersburg. And 19 per cent gave baseball as the secondary reason.

At about the same time Robison was stressing the value of baseball and spring training to St. Petersburg and Florida, there was evidence in New York, the country's largest metropolitan center, that a big city, too, placed a high valuation on major league baseball. The late lamented Continental League was striving to be born at that time, and Mayor Robert Wagner of New York announced that the city's Board of Estimate would vote in favor of construction of a \$15,000,000 stadium in Queens. After losing the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the city decided it would be wise to pay \$15,000,000 to persuade a club, that hoped some day to be major league, to settle in New York.

There have been refinements in the spring training operation since the early days of baseball. In the faraway old days the baseball players probably were more careless about their physical condition than are the businessmen-athletes of today. The old-timers were inclined to loaf and take on excess poundage. Their extra-curricular activities in several obvious fields were not conducive to trim waist-lines and supple muscles. And in the early days when a ball club went south the squad was pretty well set. The manager's only task was to work off the excess pounds that had been taken on during a winter of high and careless living. A baseball field in those days was not as important as mountains to run up and down and perhaps hot baths and reducing paraphernalia.

Gradually, however, baseball personnel changed. Men like Branch Rickey introduced sliding pits, batting cages, blackboard instruction, and lectures. Players were recruited from the colleges, instead of the sand lots. They reported, with rare exceptions, in excellent physical condition, especially as far as weight was concerned. More time, therefore, was available for instruction, for drilling on strategic plays.

Enclosed parks took the place of mere practice fields and the exhibition games and the income possible from them grew in importance. Back in the 1920's an exhibition game of the Browns, at Mobile, Alabama, rarely drew more than a few hundred paying spectators. And during spring training only a few games would be scheduled at the training base. In contrast, attendance at the 1960 exhibition games of the Cardinals and Yankees, training at St. Petersburg, went as high as 6,000, and an open date was a rarity.

Whereas make-shift fields were common in the earlier years of spring training, except when the training site was in a baseball city with a park designed for the purpose, many of the fields now available are well-designed, well equipped and excellently maintained, virtually matching what the ball clubs have in their home cities. Outstanding examples are the baseball plants at St. Petersburg, Tampa, Clearwater, and Miami.

The cost of the spring training operation has increased tremendously. A comparison of what the Cardinals paid for services in 1930 at Bradenton, Florida, and what they had to pay in St.

Petersburg during the 1960 operation shows the change in the economic picture.

At Bradenton the Cardinal athletes were housed at the Dixie Grande Hotel for \$1.50 a day each, two men to a room. They ate at a coffee shop in the hotel building for \$1.50 a day each. Each player was allowed \$1.50 a week for laundry. Those were days of thrift and the Cardinals were thrifty. The St. Louis squad, including manager and coaches, probably did not exceed 30 persons.

The 1960 Cardinals spent a minimum of 39 days at their St. Petersburg base and the party, players and officials, numbered more than 60. The hotel rate was \$4.50 a day a man, two to a room. The hotel bill amounted to approximately \$10,530. Each man was given \$8 a day for meals, the cost for the squad reaching a total of \$18,720. Each man was given \$25 a week for expenses, a total of \$9,300. Thus, without any incidentals such as transportation for the squad and rental cars for the executives, the sum for the three items alone totalled \$38,550.

Twelve clubs trained in Florida the same spring, and assuming that each spent as lavishly, that made the sizeable contribution of almost half a million dollars to the state's economy. And that figure does not take into account the considerable additional money that more than 700 baseball players, wives, officials and visiting friends would spend casually for entertainment, clothing, and incidental sundries.

One of the most popular changes in spring training practices, as far as the ball players are concerned, involved meal money. The custom years ago was to arrange for the players to eat in the dining room of the hotel where the club was staying. The club would make a deal with the dining room to feed the men for so much a day and the players would sign the meal check each time they ate.

On a stay of six weeks or more in a hotel any individual can tire of the fare regularly offered. The Cardinals had such an arrangement with a Florida hotel one spring about 20 years ago and the menu, designed primarily for thriftier spring visitors, didn't include big juicy steaks to please the sturdy athletes of the diamond. Early in the stay there were many complaints. The club secretary, sympathizing with the players because he had to eat

at the same table too, or dine elsewhere at his own expense, appealed to the late Sam Breadon, owner of the Cardinals.

The going rate for meal money then was \$3.50 a day for each man, and Breadon, who enjoyed good food and what went with it, told the secretary, Leo Ward, to give the boys meal money, so they could eat where they wished. This pleased the squad immensely and the dining room saw little of the Cardinals thereafter, except for one player, a young catcher named Arnold "Mickey" Owen. Mickey continued to take his three meals a day in the hotel eatery and when companions asked him why he wasn't taking advantage of the new dining freedom he explained.

It happened that when Mickey motored to the training base he and Mrs. Owen couldn't stand to be parted from their dog, a huge, heavy-eating Boxer. And the hotel had been feeding the Boxer with scraps left on the plates by the ball players.

"They've been feeding my dog," Mickey elaborated. "And what's good enough for my dog is good enough for me."

Baseball also can be educational for ball players, with the travel through the season to cities the athletes probably never expected to visit, and travel to beautiful sunny Florida in the spring. Mickey Owen figured in a yarn about baseball travel's educational values.

Mickey's first spring training trip of consequence was to Daytona Beach, when the Cardinals trained there in 1937. The late Dr. Harrison J. Weaver, the beloved trainer of the Cardinals in those days, took the green rookie Owen under his wing. On the first day in the Daytona Beach camp, after the training session had ended, Dr. Weaver took Mickey for a ride. Straight to the lovely beach the Doctor drove Mickey and when they reached the beautiful blue water, Mickey gasped in amazement.

"Doctor," he asked, "what in the world is that big body of water?"

"That, Mickey," said the Doctor, with relish, "is the Atlantic Ocean."

"The Atlantic Ocean," the amazed rookie repeated. "Gosh, Doc, I didn't know it came down this far."

Cash payments to clubs to persuade them to select a city as a training site were not uncommon in the early days of spring training, when few clubs had anything like a permanent spring base. For instance, in 1927, after the Cardinals of 1926 had won their

first National League pennant and world championship, the City of Avon Park, Florida, guaranteed the St. Louis club \$15,000 a year to train there. The late Sam Breadon signed a three-year contract with Avon Park and the club trained there in 1927, 1928, and 1929. The \$15,000 guarantee was paid for the 1927 season, but the Florida real estate boom ran into what might be called difficulties about that time and Breadon, keeping his contract, waived the guarantee the second and third years and took only the meager gate receipts.

Other cities have made financial concessions from time to time, but the situation has changed. The major league club is satisfied now to have a good ball park, preferably in a community where there are enough baseball-minded residents and tourists to make attendance at the exhibition games substantial. However, the cost of the operation has become so great that no club expects to approximate breaking even during the training season.

It's impossible to put a dollar value figure on the importance of baseball in Florida, but the amount would be tremendous, and if you started to figure what it would cost the various Florida Chambers of Commerce to purchase display advertisements equivalent to the space devoted to the reading notices in metropolitan newspapers and national magazines, the totals would be astronomical.

And, to repeat, there is nothing like the reading notice. When you read a display advertisement complete with splashing surf and pretty girls, you know it's just another advertisement. But if you are a baseball fan and you read that the Cardinals and Yankees played an exciting game at Al Lang field yesterday in bright sunshine, that description of the weather will hold your attention. In your home city of Portland, Maine; Altoona, Pennsylvania; Montreal, Toronto, or Winnipeg, Canada; you look out the window and see snow. Your furnace is going full blast, But down in St. Petersburg the sun is shining and people in shirt sleeves are enjoying a baseball game. It must be good weather for golf, too, and for sun bathing. Probably the fishing is good.

Advertising men will tell you, too, that the repetition of an idea is essential. Keep on mentioning a product, keep repeating a slogan, keep playing a singing commercial. People will become familiar with that product, children will be singing the commercials.

Well, consider what baseball spring training does for the products that Florida has to sell. Starting with the first day of Spring training, usually late in February, and continuing through all of March and part of April, newspapers throughout the country will carry the St. Petersburg dateline, the Bradenton, Sarasota, Miami, or Tampa dateline, with stories about baseball, baseball coupled with sunny days. Day after day the papers tell of the Florida weather, spring and summer sunshine. The fact that Florida is a great place to play and live becomes common knowledge in every sports page reading household in the land. Could advertising like that be bought with money at the display advertisement counter?

The latest Florida community to become a baseball training site is Homestead. Few people in the North knew about Homestead, 20 miles south of Miami. But the St. Louis Cardinals, seeking a training camp for their minor league clubs, were invited to inspect Homestead. Adequate ground for playing fields was available. Civic-minded men agreed to arrange financing of the needed clubhouse and field improvements, including stands for spectators.

Young ball players assigned to Cardinal farm teams - Rochester, Memphis, Tulsa, Winston-Salem, Winnipeg, Billings, Keokuk, Daytona Beach, and Dothan - were ordered to Homestead. Reporters started sending back dispatches about the baseball activity. Papers in all those cities and cities of the same league affiliations began carrying daily stories about baseball under a Homestead dateline. Next year the Cardinals probably will play another major league club in an exhibition game at Homestead. And so baseball fans, sports page readers in major league cities will hear and learn about Homestead. The community never could have raised enough display advertising money to get even a fraction of the value of those reading notices about Homestead.

There's no question about a baseball training site being a magnet for tourists. We knew of a couple from Portland, Maine, who for years spent winter months at Daytona Beach. They became acquainted with the Cardinals there while the club trained on the East Coast in 1937. The next year the Cardinals moved to St. Petersburg and the Portland, Maine, couple never went back to Daytona Beach. They wintered each year thereafter at St. Petersburg.

Spring training gives the Florida resident or visitor the same chance to see major league baseball teams that people in the cities in the leagues enjoy. An elderly St. Petersburg resident who spent his pre-retirement life in North Carolina carefully purchased tickets for the exhibition games so that he would see each of the 12 clubs training in the state. Television had made him a baseball fan.

There is tangible evidence that communities recognize the value of a major league baseball club. City administrations in Milwaukee, Baltimore, Kansas City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles offered amazing financial inducements to attract major league clubs. Ready-to-use stadia were offered, or ground for a baseball plant and parking lots. San Francisco has built a new ball park for the transplanted Giants and the Dodgers eventually will have one in Los Angeles.

There is no way of checking the number of visitors to Florida who picked a vacation area in which they could be entertained for a month by their favorite major league ball club and then decided to make that community their retirement home. But there is tangible evidence that many of the baseball players who came to the State for spring training fell in love permanently with the sunshine, flowers, and attractions of Florida.

Several years ago St. Petersburg began presenting an annual Old-Timers' baseball game to raise funds for the March of Dimes campaign. Lists compiled by the committee in charge of the benefit game showed that approximately 200 former and still active professional baseball players were residents of Florida. And the list included impressive names of diamond stars-Tommy Leach, Dazzy Vance, Paul Waner, Eddie Roush, Fred Hutchinson, Johnny VanderMeer, Spud Chandler and Early Wynn, just to name a few. These men, playing in the major and minor leagues, had travelled the country over. They liked Florida best. And for each ball player who came to Florida to train, many thousands of winter tourists came to see major league baseball.

If a brief personal reference will be pardoned, the writer is one of many newspapermen who thoroughly enjoyed annual trips to Florida and then decided to make their retirement home in the state. Our first glimpse of Florida sunshine and orange blossoms was back in 1915 as a baseball writer covering the Havana, Cuba,

spring training camp of the St. Louis club in the old Federal League.

We journeyed by train from St. Louis to Key West, with a stopover in Jacksonville. Leaving February snow and slush in St. Louis, it was amazing to see the orange groves and the flowers in the Sunshine State.

That was only a brief glimpse, but starting in Avon Park in 1927, we spent at least six weeks every spring in Florida. We saw much of the state, the inland lake region, and communities on the East and West coasts - Palm Beach, Miami Beach, Daytona Beach, Bradenton, and finally St. Petersburg, where we now make our home.

Looking back over a long and pleasant career in the newspaper beat, including 41 years on the staff of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, we can recall many pleasant and exciting assignments. We covered golf tournaments, tennis tournaments, took in the Kentucky Derby for several years and didn't miss a world series time at bat from 1924 through 1957.

But in retrospect, the trip to Florida was the bright spot in each year. When weather in the middle west, where we lived, was at its worst, we would motor or fly away from it all and live six delightful weeks in sunny Florida. We would sun-bathe on the beach, play golf, go deep-sea fishing. No skid chains, no snow plows, no need for overcoats. How quickly those six weeks would pass!

Yes, we were sold on Florida long before we ever thought about retiring or what we would do when the time came. And we feel we owe a great debt to baseball. For it brought us to Florida.