

Spring Flings

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Spring Training 1871

Who Boiled Out First?

By R. J. Lesch

When was the first spring training, and which team took it?

The answer to the question depends on how one defines spring training. The modern sense of the term describes the event where a baseball team participates in pre-season group activities for the following purposes:

- physical training designed to prepare players for the demands of the upcoming season;
- skills development (pitchers learning new pitches, batting practice, baserunning practice, strategy sessions);
- practice games, either intrasquad or against other ballclubs, which do not count in league championship standings;
- evaluation of prospects and roster selection;
- setting up a camp, away from hometown and family, for purposes of team-building (as differentiated from touring from city to city).

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Demise of Dodgertown

Last link to Brooklyn to soon disappear

By Dave Nemetz

According to the AP, in the middle of March, Frank McCourt, owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers, reiterated that the Dodgers move to Glendale, AZ in 2009 was on track. They will eventually share a \$77 million complex, including a 12,000 seat stadium, with the Chicago White Sox, provided both teams are able to settle their current leases. The Dodgers and the City of Vero Beach, Florida, where the team has trained since 1948, still need to come to an agreement regarding their lease at Dodgertown. Their current lease runs until 2021, and the Dodgers may have to pay the city \$15 million to cover bonds that are still outstanding.

The White Sox, however, have a stickier situation – they must either buy their way out of their own lease in Tucson, estimated at \$28 million, or they must find a team to replace them at Tucson Electric Park. Their lease with Pima County, AZ, runs through 2013. And to make matters even stickier, Pima County has an “ultimate right of refusal” over any team with whom the White Sox make a deal to replace them in Tucson.

Rumors are swirling, though, that the Cincinnati Reds may be interested in moving to Arizona since their Spring Training hosts, the city of Sarasota, have put on hold efforts to get private developers to make up the shortfall in funding for a new Reds complex. The gap comes from pending property tax cuts possibly affecting Sarasota’s budget. A Reds move to Arizona, should it materialize, would put them in the Cactus League with their interstate rivals, the Cleveland Indians, who have their own \$75 million complex in Goodyear scheduled to be ready for 2009 Spring training.

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It seems clear that the Chicago White Stockings' fabled 1886 trip to Hot Springs was a "spring training" trip, in that it met at least some of these criteria. If we were to require all five of these criteria, however, the 1886 trip might not pass. Later managers, notably John McGraw, used spring training to teach young players the fundamentals of the game. By 1910 or so this was still novel. Nineteenth-century spring training trips were primarily for veteran players getting into shape, rather than development of the youngsters who would replace those veterans. It seems reasonable, however, to regard the prospect development criterion as a later development in the evolution of spring training, rather than a necessary definition for what constitutes "spring training" itself.

At the other extreme is the Southern leg of the Cincinnati Red Stockings tour of 1869-70. During the late fall and early winter months, the Red Stockings played in Texas, Louisiana and other Southern stops. Game accounts make it clear that these were not training games. The Red Stockings were not playing themselves into shape; they were playing serious match games.

Where to draw the line? Consider the 1870 and 1871 Southern trips taken by the Chicago White Stockings. In both springs, Chicago played its first games in St. Louis and New Orleans. However, the circumstances are different between the two seasons. In my opinion, the 1871 sojourn is clearly a spring training trip, but the question is open whether the 1870 trip fits the same description.

"Season" was a still-evolving concept then, of course. In 1870, clubs primarily made their schedules on their own. In 1871, Chicago entered the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, and games between Association clubs were scheduled as "championship" games under the Association banner.

Various 1870 Chicago Tribune articles show that the White Stockings played two games in St. Louis in April, then played five games in New Orleans. These did not seem to be considered training games. The first St. Louis game on April 29 "inaugurated the match game season of 1870" (Chicago Tribune, April 30, 1870, page 4), and seems to have been treated as a serious game, not as training. The Chicago club had played a number of games against local amateur clubs in Chicago in April, for training purposes, so in that sense we could say that they trained at home.

The Cincinnati Red Stockings made a similar trip that spring, and perhaps this 1870 trip was also a spring training trip. Paul Wendt made these comments in response to my observations on SABR Spring, the Spring

Relying on the Wright game logs [for 1870], Cincinnati played five games in six days [in New Orleans] 4/25 to 4/30, preceded and followed by games played in Louisville KY and Memphis TN. Chicago played four games in six days, 5/06 to 5/11, preceded and followed by games in St. Louis MO and Memphis TN. Cincinnati's off day was the day before the Algiers game; Chicago played first in Algiers then in N.O. on the 8-9-11th with off days 7 and 10. Perhaps Chicago set up "camp" in a sense Cincinnati did not, by practicing on one of those two days (or on the morning of a game day).

Paul also attempts to address the question of whether the 1870 games, according to Marshall Wright's research, were match games or practice games, but concludes that Wright does not differentiate between the two.

T.Z. Cowles, the sports editor of the Chicago Tribune, accompanied the Chicago club on the 1870 trip, and in a 1918 article referred to the 1870 trip as a "training" trip. Jimmy Wood, captain of the Chicago club, gave an interview around the same time in which he called the 1870 trip a training trip. However, these retrospectives might have been influenced by later practice.

It's also notable that the Chicago club picked the first St. Louis game to unveil their sharp new uniforms. In an article recapping the Southern tour, Cowles writes: "St. Louis was selected as the site for the opening of the campaign, and it was here that the White Stockings received their christening. The name was selected by the distinctive peculiarities of the new uniform, which was here donned for the first time, and the neatest and most notable features of which were the snow-white leg coverings. A bare-footed urchin in the crowd exclaimed: 'Oh, look at the White Stockings!' The boy's choice of an appellation has since been uniformly endorsed throughout the country." (Chicago Tribune, May 19, 1870, p4).

By contrast, the 1871 schedule seems to have distinguished clearly between championship games and non-championship games. The Chicago Tribune clearly describes the May 8 game against Cleveland as

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“The White Stockings’ First Contest for the Championship”. In 1871, of course, the championship was that of the National Association. Prior to this, the Southern games take on a different tone. From the Chicago Tribune, March 22, 1871:

The White Stockings, who are now on their way to New Orleans, where they will play the Lone Stars, the Sputherners and the R.F. Lees, 'just for practice sake', will follow next to the Washingtonians and proceed as follows: [schedule then is given].

They're in New Orleans a month and a half earlier than in 1870, and declaring that the games are for practice purposes. The White Stockings play a series of morning practice games, and then play a match game against the Lone Star Club, of New Orleans. “It will be a creditable thing if, under these circumstances, the White Stockings win by a moderate majority even, though the practice games have shown that they ‘open up’ well for the season.” (Chicago Tribune, March 26, 1871).

Three of the five criteria laid out in the beginning of this article are met for this to be considered a spring training trip: physical training, practice games, team-building. We don't know whether skills development was practiced, and it's pretty clear that there was no evaluation of prospects; the team was set before leaving Chicago. Still, 1871 is clearly a spring training trip.

We also learn, in the March 22 article above, that:

The New York Mutuals will start on their Southern trip on the 16th of April. The White Stockings will thus have a month's advantage in practice of their most formidable opponents, and no one doubts that they will hold this advantage through the season.

Again, more detailed research is needed, but the Mutuals' trip to Savannah seems to be in the same class as the Chicagos' trip to New Orleans.

It's possible by the above to make the case that the 1870 tour was a planned series of match games while the 1871 tour was a planned spring training tour, not to be taken seriously in the overall record. However, it's possible that there was some spin going on in 1871, too.

Richard Smiley, who is conducting pioneering research into the early history of Chicago professional baseball, notes that the 1870 club was Chicago's first full-fledged entry into professional baseball, and as such, was part of the intercity rivalry building between Chicago and Cincinnati, two Midwestern cities battling for economic and social status. The Chicago ballclub's efforts were

research into the early history of Chicago professional baseball, notes that the 1870 club was Chicago's first full-fledged entry into professional baseball, and as such, was part of the intercity rivalry building between Chicago and Cincinnati, two Midwestern cities battling for economic and social status. The Chicago ballclub's efforts were naturally going to be compared to the efforts of the Cincinnati Red Stockings. As the Tribune put it on March 7, 1871:

Last year this [Southern] tour was looked forward to with intense interest as showing what the new professionals could do; and some estimates based on the record made during that trip were afterward slightly altered, especially those which showed that the Whites were inferior to the Reds because they did not show as good an average during the entire trip.

So, the Chicago club and newspaper might have been deliberately positioning the 1871 trip as a training trip in advance, to forestall the sort of criticism leveled at the White Stockings for their showing in 1870.

The 1870 trip also certainly offered the Chicago club the opportunity to work into shape and jell as an outfit. “Our boys are feeling finely, are every day getting better acquainted with each other, and are steadily advancing toward that thorough understanding and thorough club organization which are essential to constitute them something more than a picked nine. During this trip they have been rigidly subjected to strict rules and regulations affecting personal habits, and the result is that every man is in thoroughly good physical condition. Sharp work may be expected of them here.” (Chicago Tribune, May 4, 1870, p 4)

In that case, perhaps the retroactive recollections of Wood and Cowles were accurate. Perhaps the 1870 trip should be considered a spring training trip as well. Certainly the 1870 trips by Chicago and Cincinnati, and perhaps other clubs, warrant further study.

What about earlier years? Avowed all-professional baseball clubs started in 1869, and the nation was still in upheaval following the Civil War. It seems unlikely that clubs prior to this, which would have consisted of at least some amateur players, would be able to justify the time and expense of a spring training trip. Still, it's worth exploring what the Knickerbockers and Excelsiors might have done to prepare for baseball season.

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Build It And They Will Come

By Dave Nemetz

Spring Training 2007 will go down in the books as showing record-breaking attendance in both Arizona and Florida. In the Cactus League, over 1.2 million fans went through the turnstiles this year, with a league attendance record of 12,917 at Mesa's HoHoKam park on March 28 for a game between the Chicago Cubs and Colorado Rockies. The total attendance reflected an increase of 14 percent over attendance from 2003, according to the Arizona Office of Tourism.

In Florida, Grapefruit League attendance of 1,605,263 (as of April 28) shattered the record set just last year of 1,604,333. The new record was set in 258 games, 18 games fewer than the previous record. The Atlanta Braves drew over 143,000 fans to the Disney Complex for their games, topping Grapefruit League teams in attendance. Six other teams passed the 100,000 mark for attendance, and the Pittsburgh Pirates set an attendance record, drawing 82,000 fans. Lights will be installed at McKechnie Field in time for 2008 Spring Training, and attendance could very well go even higher in Bradenton.

Tradition Gone

It was a sight, that when you saw it, you knew it was a new year. Players running in the outfield along the warning track during Spring Training games. That tradition is sadly going the way of Sunday double-headers and pre-game infield. And you can thank George Steinbrenner for it.

At Legends Field in Tampa, players are strictly forbidden from running on the field during games, instead being ordered to do their running on a practice field. And that's if they choose to run at all. According to a story in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, Greg Maddux is glad the tradition is disappearing. "We're baseball players, not Olympians," Maddux told AP reporter Ben Walker.

Spring Training still has some charm left, though. Sitting in the sun watching baseball in March will always be a sign of Spring, although with teams building new facilities, night baseball in Florida and Arizona is becoming more commonplace. And you still have the young player being called up to the parent team roster to fill a spot in a meaningless game in March, and watching

Notes from the Chair

The Spring Training Committee has enjoyed great growth over the course of the last year. We currently stand at 149 members. We have added Dave Nemetz as the editor of our newsletter "Spring Flings". We have several projects that are progressing nicely and a few that will need a little extra help. We are also expecting a few other projects to get off the ground. We do not anticipate the need for any funds from the SABR office in the coming year.

A tentative schedule for the national convention in St. Louis has been announced. I will not be in attendance again this year. I will once again need someone to step up and agree to chair our meeting. At this point in time we do have some leeway as to changing the time and day of our meeting, if we need to do so. That adjustment would have to be done soon. We are now scheduled for 8:30 AM on Thursday morning for 30 minutes. We can get that changed to 8:00 if we want an hour. We also have the option to opt for Sunday morning at 8 or 8:30 as well.

Kevin M. Saldana, Chair

that player hustle his guts out to impress the brass will always be a rite of Spring Training.

Dave Nemetz, Newsletter Editor

Dodgertown, continued from page 1

But, in the complex world of MLB Spring Training, the Reds couldn't make the move to Arizona without a team moving from Arizona to Florida. The Milwaukee Brewers have been rumored to be eyeing Dodgertown once their lease in Maryvale, AZ ends in 2012. The Brewers deny the rumors, and the rumor may be coming straight from Vero Beach, where city officials are desperately looking for a team to replace the Dodgers.

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