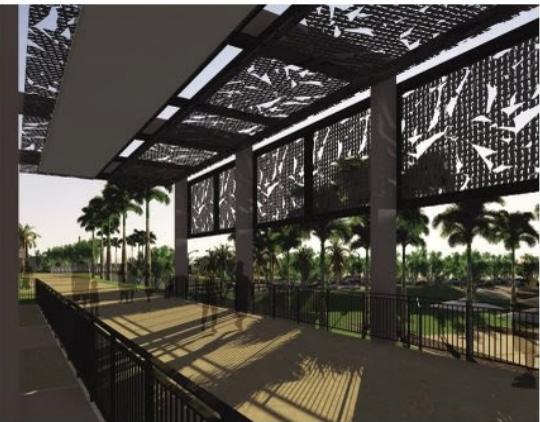


FEATURE // BALLPARKS





UP TO BAT

AS ANTICIPATION GROWS AROUND THE NEW BALLPARK OF THE PALM BEACHES, WE EXPLORE HOW WEST PALM'S SHINY NEW TOY WILL BENEFIT ITS NEIGHBORING TOWNS—JUPITER TO PORT ST. LUCIE—and turn Southeast Florida into a spring training hub.

By Lyssa Goldberg



SPRING TRAINING IS A GLORIOUS TIME FOR BASEBALL FANS. It means feeling the fresh springtime air against your face and listening to the repeated crack of a bat, rhythmic, like a backbeat. From their seats, fans can almost reach out and touch the players, or at least call on the star pitcher for an autograph and watch him jog over with a grin. There's a difference between the preseason and a game at a major league ballpark five times the size. It's easier, breezier. And even for those who don't know a lick about baseball, there's still something to be said for the sense of community built in such an intimate setting, where you're surrounded by die-hard fans who've flown in from out of town to spend their spring vacation road tripping across the state and cheering on their team.

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(top) Tradition Field in Port St. Lucie draws New Yorkers to the Treasure Coast for Mets spring training. (next page) Fans at Tradition Field watch a game from the grass berm, a seating option Ballpark of the Palm Beaches will also offer.

In March, the brand new Ballpark of the Palm Beaches will come alive with locals and out-of-towners flocking to a \$145 million, two-team facility that amplifies that fan-centric spring training experience. Once it opens in January 2017—as administrators and other staff begin to move in—five Major League Baseball teams will have a spring training home on Florida's east coast, all within an hour's drive of each other.

For the past 18 years, Roger Dean Stadium in Jupiter has been the only two-team spring training facility in Florida, hosting the Miami Marlins alongside the St. Louis Cardinals since 2003. Just 45 minutes up Interstate 95 from Palm Beach County's newest ballpark is also the New York Mets' spring training home Tradition Field in Port St. Lucie. With two new major league teams (and their out-of-state fan bases) moving into the area, the Palm Beaches and Treasure Coast look to become a true spring training destination for vacationing baseball fans.

"It makes it more conducive to people traveling down to this area and ballpark hopping to see the other facilities and other teams," says Paul Taglieri, the Mets' executive director of minor league facilities.

From February to March, the 8,000-person-capacity Ballpark of the Palm Beaches will host the Houston Astros and Washington Nationals for practice and preseason play. But outside of spring training, the multi-purpose facility will also host amateur-level tournaments in baseball and other sports, as well as cultural events for the community, like concerts and food festivals. All of this and more puts Ballpark of the Palm Beaches in the position to have a \$125 million annual economic impact, according to an Oxford Economics study commissioned by Palm Beach County.

KEEPING BASEBALL ON FLORIDA'S EAST COAST

The future looks bright for spring training in Southeast Florida. Just three short years ago, however, the fate of local springtime baseball was up in the air. The Marlins', Cardinals' and Mets' lease agreements state that, unless at least four major league teams hold spring training on the east coast, they could look to move stadiums, and the fourth team up in Viera, Florida—the Nationals—was looking to go elsewhere.

Lately, the trend has been to move to facilities on Florida's west coast or all the way out to Arizona. But the new Ballpark of the Palm Beaches has answered that problem. "We didn't want to lose the two teams that we had [the Marlins and Cardinals], which meant that we needed to bring some more here," says Palm Beach County commissioner Hal Valeche, who was instrumental in attracting the Nationals and Astros, and securing their new two-team facility in West Palm Beach.

To keep all 15 teams in Florida, Gov. Rick Scott helped initiate a state program that provides more than \$3 million in funding for spring training facilities annu-



Miami Marlins players line up before their spring training opening game against the St. Louis Cardinals at Roger Dean Stadium last March.

ally. A combination of this state money, significant financial commitments from the Nationals and Astros, and local funding from the county bed tax (a hotel lodging fee imposed on tourists to bring in government revenue without taxing locals) is being used to pay for the \$145 million Ballpark of the Palm Beaches.

Now as the Nationals, who have spent the last 13 years in Viera on Florida's Space Coast, and Astros, who've been playing in Kissimmee since 1985, become the fourth and fifth teams in the vicinity, spring training can remain an east coast staple for at least the next 30 years. It's a move that has helped cement the local role of baseball, according to the Mets' Taglieri. "With this happening down in Palm Beach, it puts MLB spring training in a good place on the east coast," he says. "I think it will become a destination." The Mets are in the process of discussing a 25-year lease renewal with Tradition Field now.



“IT’S PEOPLE THROWING A BLANKET DOWN, PEOPLE KICKING BACK, GETTING SOME SUN, THEIR LEGS ARE CROSSED, THE KIDS ARE ROLLING DOWN THE HILL. IT’S KIND OF THE EPITOME OF SPRING TRAINING TO BE BACK OUTSIDE AGAIN IN THE FRESHNESS.”

- BRADY BALLARD

AN INTERACTIVE, FAN-FRIENDLY BALLPARK

Since its groundbreaking last November, up to 400 construction workers have been on-site at the 160-acre West Palm Beach lot between Haverhill Road and Military Trail, working around the clock to complete Ballpark of the Palm Beaches in time for the 2017 season. Ballpark staff are set to move in this January, followed by the major league teams, which report to spring training in mid-February before the games get underway in March. That's when the real fun begins.

“It’s people throwing a blanket down, people kicking back, getting some sun, their legs are crossed, the kids are rolling down the hill. It’s kind of the epitome of spring training to be back outside again in the freshness,” says Brady Ballard, Ballpark of the Palm Beaches general manager.

From the moment fans emerge from their cars and leave the parking lot, they’ll notice the way firm HKS Architects (which has designed other modern spring training sites in Arizona) created an immersive environment for the fans. “Because of where the parking is structured ... you’re going to walk right up this pathway and you’re going to go right between the Nationals’ practice fields leading over to the stadium. You’re kind of going to get a feel of the rest of the facility by default, just by making your trek up into the stadium,” Ballard says.

Once fans approach the new 6,500-seat stadium, they’ll be greeted by two 30-foot-tall Astros and Nationals logo sculptures, and a Grand Plaza with steps leading into a state-of-the-art stadium designed to give fans the most comfortable experience they could ask for. Game attendees can bring a blanket or lawn chair and watch from the “cheap seats” in the outfield—the grassy lawn berm that makes for the classic spring training experience Ballard described—or opt for a more luxurious arrangement in the on-field loge box. Offering premium cushioned seating and waiter service, there they can watch the players up-close and personal as if they’re at a trendy dine-in movie theater.

Plus, there will be six 20-person suites with an “indoor-outdoor Florida appeal”—balconies set up like an open patio, with chairs that can be moved around instead of fixed stadium seats—and two additional all-you-can-eat party decks with a personal bar that can host up to 100 people for special group or business events.

Need to make a trip to the concession stands? From the wraparound concourse, fans can walk the continuous loop and still have a view of the game, even when stopping to grab a drink at the bar. Discerning guests may also notice the way concourse shade structures double as public artwork, with cutout silhouettes of baseball players in various positions of play. And, very important in South Florida, at least 40 percent of the seating will

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Until now, Roger Dean Stadium in Jupiter has been Florida's only two-team facility, hosting the Miami Marlins and St. Louis Cardinals for spring training along with their minor league teams, the Jupiter Hammerheads and Palm Beach Cardinals.

naturally be in the shade, with that percentage increasing as the sun's position changes later in the day.

Sound impressive? The main stadium is only the start. In addition to the Astros and Nationals' modernized clubhouses, agility fields, rehabilitation lap pools and six practice fields each (including baseball diamonds that are dimensional replicas of their ballparks in Houston and D.C., respectively), the site also encompasses a 1.8-mile walking trail and new 12-acre city park, complete with a playground, green space, lighted basketball courts and pavilions. In total, seven multi-purpose fields for sports such as soccer, lacrosse and football will make Ballpark of the Palm Beaches both a community destination and an ideal spot for amateur tournaments.

"I think one of the best days that we can anticipate is to have people playing at the park, activities in the stadium and on the practice fields," Ballard says. "... Hopefully there's a day where it's soccer and football on one side of the facility, and baseball on another. At Dodgertown, where I [worked] before, we literally had a day with four sports going on at once."

SPRING TRAINING DESTINATION AND BEYOND

Every March, the hotels surrounding Roger Dean Stadium, such as the Courtyard Marriott, Homewood Suites and Jupiter Beach Resort, are packed with St. Louis Cardinals fans who come down en masse. Their conspicuous team color takes over the town. "We literally joke that it's a sea of red throughout spring training," says Mike Bauer, Roger Dean Stadium's general manager.

Some St. Louis fans spend a few nights to a week in town, whereas others might stay for the entire month. While they're in the area, these baseball fans are not only watching games, but they're also shopping, dining out and enjoying all that the Palm Beaches have to offer. In fact, in 2016, spring training generated an estimated \$52 million in visitor spending for the county, according to the Palm Beach County Sports Commission.

Starting next season, the Ballpark of the Palm Beaches' opening could have a "domino effect," Ballard says, as its proximity to Roger Dean and Tradition Field will keep fans in the area. Fans will be able to watch their team play at three different ballparks—without having to road trip to Florida's west coast. "Now that 'road trip' is 15 to 20 minutes down the road," he says, suggesting this could turn into longer hotel stays.

For reasons like this, "Major League Baseball has been a major economic driver for the Palm Beaches," says George Linley, executive director of the Sports Commission. Roger Dean Stadium brings in roughly 160,000 attendees during spring training, 60 percent of whom Bauer estimates are from out of the county. Up in St. Lucie County, Tradition Field's attendance breakdown follows the same 60/40 split, according to Taglieri. Historically, as Port St. Lucie area hotels turn a familiar New York Mets blue, March brings in the highest monthly tourism tax dollars for the county.

What's more, Ballpark of the Palm Beaches will also attract out-of-towners traveling for baseball tournaments it can host in the off-season. (With Roger Dean Stadium alone, the county hosted 20 last year.) This could easily bring in another \$15 million in revenue and more than 20,000 hotel rooms booked—the amount drawn in by amateur tournaments at Roger Dean in 2016, according to the Sports Commission.

THE FUTURE OF EAST COAST BASEBALL

Ballpark of the Palm Beaches might be the shiny new toy, but Roger Dean Stadium and Tradition Field have no intention of falling behind. This off-season, Jupiter's ballpark is hoping to expand its team store and put new shade structures in place,





while Tradition Field is looking to carry out a multimillion-dollar renovation once the facility's lease renewal with the Mets is finalized. "We're all here to make sure that baseball is strong in the area and that the fans have a great experience when they're here," Bauer says.

Having five teams in the area is a sign of progress, but five is not an even number, Bauer notes. Since they play in pairs, this means one of the teams is always the odd man out and will end up traveling to games in Central Florida or on the Gulf Coast. "If we were able to get a sixth team, that would be big," he says.

A fourth National League East team—the Atlanta Braves—could be it. Palm Beach County has had inquiries from the Braves, whose lease at Disney's ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex in Orlando is set to expire. The team is looking to be in a new ballpark by 2019, and according to Tom McNicholas, a rep for the Braves, they're focusing their search on Palm Beach County—an area where the team has a rich history. The Braves held spring training in West Palm Beach for more than three decades before leaving in 1998, meaning they could return to an area where Braves Nation is already strong.

Between Roger Dean in northern Palm Beach County and centrally located Ballpark of the Palm Beaches, a stadium located in the southern part of the county would round things out, McNicholas suggested. He says the Braves are strongly considering Lake Worth's John Prince Park.

And why wouldn't they want to be here? Commissioner Valeche poses the question. With our beaches, cultural offerings, attractive real estate and overall lifestyle, it's a draw for team owners and players. "If we're going to be in Florida, let's be in the best place in Florida, which I believe is Palm Beach County," he says. ■

Can't wait for preseason? Get your baseball fix now at the Historical Society of Palm Beach County's special exhibition: *"For the Love of the Game: Baseball in the Palm Beaches."*

Explore 120 years of baseball history in Palm Beach County—from the games initiated by Henry Flagler as a way to entertain his hotel guests, to the future

Ballpark of the Palm Beaches now underway.

Richard and Pat Johnson Palm Beach County History Museum; 300 N. Dixie Highway, West Palm Beach; free admission; on display through July 1