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Commentary

127 springs - and counting

Phillies preseason memories encompass some sharp pitching and shooting.

By Rich Westcott

Today marks the start of the Phillies' 64th year of spring training in Clearwater, Fla. Only one major-league team - the Detroit Tigers, who have trained in Lakeland, Fla., since 1934 - has spent more years training in one town.

The history of Phillies spring training is long, rich, and extraordinary in many other ways.

Before settling in Clearwater, the Phillies had a nomadic spring-training existence, sampling locations throughout the South. Since the team was formed in 1883, it has trained in more than 20 different places, often spending a single spring at a site and never returning.

The club initially trained at its home field in Philadelphia, Recreation Park. In their first spring-training game, the Phillies defeated a semipro team from Manayunk, with John Coleman pitching a no-hitter. Coleman would go on to lose 48 games during the regular season.

The Phillies practiced mostly at Recreation Park throughout the late 19th century, although they left town a few times, once traveling as far south as Jacksonville, Fla. Then, in 1901, manager Bill Shettsline decided the team should seek out a warmer climate every spring, and he took his squad to Charlotte, N.C.

After that, the Phils became one of the first teams to head south for the preseason on a regular basis. Over the years, they trained in such places as Richmond, Va.; Savannah and Augusta, Ga.; Birmingham, Ala.; Hot Springs, Ark.; Wilmington, N.C.; New Braunfels, Texas; Biloxi, Miss.; and St. Petersburg, Leesburg, Winter Haven, Bradenton, and Miami, Fla.

Some of the team's temporary homes yielded memorable moments. At St. Petersburg, the players lunched on oranges they had picked from a grove next to the field and fish they had caught in a nearby creek. In Leesburg one day in 1923, legendary sharpshooter Annie Oakley visited the ballpark and exhibited her skills as the players watched from the stands.

During World War II, the federal government banned unnecessary travel, forcing the Phillies to stay close to home. They trained in Hershey one year and in Wilmington for two.

In 1947, the Phils had spring training in Clearwater for the first time, playing in a dilapidated wooden ballpark called Athletic Field, which had previously been used by the Cleveland Indians and Brooklyn Dodgers. With a field so rocky that it was sometimes called "Iwo Jima," the park was hardly suitable, and eventually the Phillies had to find another site.

Fortunately, Jack Russell, a local businessman and city commissioner, came to the rescue. Russell, who had been a big-league pitcher for 15 years, pushed hard for a new ballpark. His work finally paid off in 1955, when a new park opened in Clearwater. Recognizing his efforts, the town fathers named it Jack Russell Stadium.

Over the years, Clearwater has grown from a sleepy little fishing village with 15,000 residents to a thriving resort town with a population that reaches 200,000 in the winter. The Phillies' players and staff no longer stay in little cottages or in the Fort Harrison Hotel - the lobby of which once hosted a sliding contest between general manager Paul Owens and minor-league manager Andy Seminick - but in fancy beachfront condos and hotels.

In 1967, the Phillies opened another site in Clearwater, several miles from Jack Russell Stadium. Known as Carpenter Complex, it had four baseball fields surrounding a large building containing a clubhouse and offices. It was used primarily by the minor-league teams, which had been scattered throughout the region.

Jack Russell Stadium, with a final capacity of 6,917 and a media section at field level called "Whale Beach," was vacated after spring training in 2003. The following year, the Phillies moved into a new stadium called Bright House Field. Located next to Carpenter Complex, the 7,300-seat park has all the modern conveniences and is regarded as one of the top Grapefruit League sites. The original building at Carpenter Complex has also been replaced by a two-story structure that will be used for the first time this year.

The team has come a long way from the rocky turf of Athletic Field - as well as from that day, early in the spring of 1883, when it held the first of what will soon be 128 spring-training sessions.

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