

Phillies have nomadic Spring Training history

Philadelphia has held camp in over 20 locations since 1883

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The Phillies called Jack Russell Memorial Stadium home from 1955 to 2004.

The history of the Phillies Spring Training is long, rich and extraordinary in many ways.

Before settling in Clearwater in 1947, 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 places, often spending a single spring at a site and never returning.

The club initially trained at Recreation Park, its home field in Philadelphia, in 1883. In their first Spring Training game, the Phillies defeated a semi-pro team from Manayunk, Pa., 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 to Jacksonville, Fla. Then, in 1901, manager Bill Shettsline decided the team would seek out a warmer climate every spring and took his squad to Charlotte, N.C.

After that, the Phillies 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 Beach, 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. One day in Leesburg 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, Pa., one year and Wilmington, Del., for two.

In 1947, the Phils held spring training in Clearwater, Fla., for the first time, playing in a dilapidated ballpark called Athletic Field, which had previously been used by the Cleveland Indians and Brooklyn Dodgers.

The field was enclosed by a wooden fence and a high wire screen. Wooden stands to accommodate close to 3,000 fans were behind home plate. It was 340 feet to left field and 290 to right.

"The ballpark is good and bad. The infield, although not tested, appears to be in fine shape. The outfield is a bucket of sand," Stan Baumgartner wrote in a Feb. 24 story in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

According to catcher Andy Seminick, who was in that first Clearwater Spring Training camp, "The field was nothing but sand and sea shells and it was brutal." He continued, "We had tough workouts that ended with everyone running 50 to 75 wind sprints."

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.

The new stadium, which had a capacity of 4,744, was built a block east of Athletic Field in Clearwater. The opening game was March 10, 1955, with Robin Roberts on the mound. The Phillies defeated the Detroit Tigers, 4-2, before 4,209 fans.

In a surprise announcement prior to the game, Clearwater Mayor Herbert M. Brown named the new park Jack Russell Stadium. Russell passed away in 1990, and the stadium was rededicated the following spring as Jack Russell Memorial Stadium.

The last game was played there in 2003, as a new home awaited the Phillies. The grandstand at Jack Russell Stadium was in bad shape and torn down.

Everything else remains: the field, outfield wall and the clubhouse and office in right field. Winning Inning, a baseball academy for youngsters owned and operated by Roy Silver, moved in and is still in business.

In 1967, the Phillies opened another site in Clearwater, several miles from Jack Russell Stadium, known as Carpenter Complex. It was primarily used by Phillies Minor League teams, which had been scattered throughout the region.

After 48 seasons at Jack Russell Stadium, the Phillies moved into a brand new Clearwater home in 2004, Bright House Field (formerly Bright House Networks Field), located adjacent to Carpenter Complex. The Phillies also opened a new home in Philadelphia, Citizens Bank Park, the same year. They became the first team to open two new parks in the same year.

Ground was broken for the 7,000-seat Bright House Field on October 16, 2002. The outfield dimensions and configuration are modeled after Citizens Bank Park, as is the 360-degree main concourse, open to the playing field. The grass berm beyond the outfield wall can accommodate as many as 2,000 fans.

Bright House Field has become a destination for Phillies fans every year, creating numerous sellouts.

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 its first Spring Training session.

Rich Westcott is the author of 23 books, including eight about the Phillies. He is the immediate past president of the Philadelphia Sports Writers' Association. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.
