



Softball Magazine

After nine successful sessions in six years the word is out: Softball Magazine's Spring Training is a phenomenon, a force, and a lot of fun! In this year's two camps, a total of 140 players from 21 states and Canada validated what is becoming accepted as an indisputable fact: there is no better place to prepare for the upcoming season. The proof is in the numbers: 140 players, 15 current and former Major players serving as guest instructors, 100 test bats from seven manufacturers, 1200 Dudley softballs. Plus, 78... 78 degrees that is, the average daily high temperature in March in Cocoa Beach Florida, and 1/27. Only one day in the 27 days we've run the program has been affected by rain. But there is more to the success than just numbers.

Softball Spring Training is a comprehensive softball vacation. It is definitely a true Spring Training, but it is also part reunion and part fantasy camp, all in a spring break setting. The format is rock solid: On consecutive weeks in March in Cocoa Beach, the players have a Wednesday night "meet and greet" poolside party, a Thursday morning orientation breakfast, three full days on the fields, then a Saturday night banquet. The itinerary allows everyone to travel home on Sunday to return to work Monday morning, but it is opened on the frontside. Many players travel with friends or family. They come down early to enjoy the best of the Space Coast and Central Florida during the first part of the week. They attend Major League games, take batting practice with friends, visit NASA and the famous attractions, and hang out at the host hotel, the International Palms Resort and Conference Center, on the beach side of A1A. People definitely put their own spin on the start of the week before turning their focus to softball.

Oh yes, softball, and plenty of it, with exclusive use of the four-field complex at Stradley Park in





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Cocoa. Each morning, one immaculately-groomed field is ready for an hour of infield defensive drills then three consecutive scrimmage games. An adjacent field is loaded for live pitch batting practice and daily contests. The other two fields both have two fully-enclosed pitching machines and throw-down plates, which lets two batters hit full-field at the same time. Overall there are six hitting areas on four fields, so with 70 players, the "players per plate" ratio of about 12-to-one, and much lower than that on batting practice fields while a game or contest is in progress. That gave players ample opportunity to check out the new bats from Combat, DeMarini, Easton, Louisville Slugger, Miken, Reebok and Worth.

The batting practice fields are uncrowded because of that low ratio and the format. Each field has several bins of Dudley balls. Each lid can hold about 18 balls, which is how many a batter gets to hit each time up. It's fair, fast, and keeps practice moving. Three industrial-sized trash cans placed across the outfield make shagging balls a breeze. The Jugs pitching machines are enclosed, and the pitchers for live pitch batting practice and scrimmages are protected behind large screens. Whether a group on a field wants to actively shag in the outfield or hang out at the backstop until all the

balls are hit then shag en masse is up to them. Some groups agree to hit shorter rounds of five or 10 pitches to keep the line moving. If a group on a pitching machines field is small enough, it can easily switch to live pitching instead. There is plenty of flexibility within the format.

"I was expecting lots of hitting, but in a very regimented and supervised format," said Steve Steransak, a first-year Spring Trainer from Butler, New Jersey. "Here you can do what you want. It was an unbelievable experience. I'm probably two months ahead now, and I don't know how you get that anywhere else."

The live pitch BP field usually hosts the one-a-day contests, which are for fun, bragging rights, good-natured ribbing, side wagers, and also prizes at the banquet. The baserunning contest is a simple sprint around the bases against the stopwatch. The basehitting contest concisely measures ability to direct clean hits to different parts of the outfield. The home run contest is a pressure-cooker of power and pride, exciting for participants and spectators alike. These contests take about an hour each, and create memories that last much longer.

"The contests were great. If the goal was to have fun, I already won," said Doug Place of Wayland, Michigan, who placed first or second in all three events in Week One.

The scrimmages are very popular. Players who want to get ready for the season by actually playing have ample opportunity to do so. The lineups are filled first-come, first-served. Players are not assigned to teams or to games, but rather can sign up for what-



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ever defensive position and gametime is available. This increases the likelihood of playing the same position they'll play back home. Most of the scrimmages have an umpire. Batters can strike out but not walk, pitchers can pitch to any association's style, and if a team bats around the inning is over, which balances out the game experience for both teams. It is an effective set of rules.

That said, there is always an element of surprise on the game field. First of all, the pros like to jump into those games, one or two per team, which gives the Spring Trainers a

real jolt. For most of them, it is a rare opportunity to play with and against Major players, and helps create the fantasy camp experience. The pros give game tips, advice, encouragement, and even razzing, and seem to enjoy the games as much as the Spring Training players do. A truly unexpected vignette came from the second week. For the first time, a 16-inch softball made an appearance. Tom Pekic brought a ball from his suburban Chicago home. Just for kicks, the players tossed aside their gloves and played Chicago-style softball for a few innings. It was quite a sight! Pekic was among those who were amused.

"Several said, 'Really? What do I do with this?' People's reactions were great. They all wanted to hit it. It was a nice diversion," Pekic said.

The game field this year was renamed the JC Phelps Memorial Field, honoring Louisville Slugger's Major player who suffered a fatal heart attack last winter. JC loved playing in those games last year, and did so with an infectious level of enthusiasm. This year, the awards portion of the banquets honored two players with the JC Phelps Award for being the "ideal teammate" at Spring Training.

This year's crop of pros was the deepest ever: seven in the first week and eight in the second, and at least six of them have personalized model bats on the market. It is pretty impressive, if a bit surreal, to listen to advice from Brett Helmer while you are swinging a Brett Helmer Easton bat, for example.

"Corky (Pellien of Miken) worked with me to improve my swing," said Shawn Hawkins of Franklin, Tennessee. "I paced myself a bit, and I could have hit a lot more."

Each year there are tweaks, changes and surprises to make this event better and better. This year, for example, was the first-ever "Hit against the Pros" experience. The Major players took the field, while the campers batted a couple times each to get a taste





of the increased pressure and skills at that level, if just for a couple of innings. Instead of imaging what it is like to bat against Helmer, and see an infield

of Hank Garris, Dennis Turner, Brian Wegman, and B.J. Fulk, with roadrunner Ryan Robbins hauling in everything from the left field pole to deep center and Johnny McCraw in the other gap, these players actually did it. First-year Spring Training player Elliott Gonzalez will be telling his friends in Connecticut about hitting a home run off Helmer.

"It was phenomenal, the best at bat I've ever had in my life," he said.

Combat's Dal Beggs was also part of the Week Two crew. The Week One pros were Greg Connell, J.D. Genter, Jeff Hall, Chris Larsen, Brett McCollum, Pellien, and Turner. The pros freely answer all sorts of questions about life at the Major level, what it takes to get there, as well as generally encourage and socialize with the Spring Training players. This camaraderie is truly unique.

Once the spring trainers are at the park, all their needs are met. Huge coolers are stocked with water, Gatorade, and sodas on ice - all free, all day. Lunch is catered to the fields every day: barbecue, chicken fingers, and burgers/hot dogs, so the players do not have to leave the park to eat. A big Softball Magazine/Eastbay store is set up inside the complex. Thirty feet of tables are filled with all sorts of shirts, hats, batting gloves, cleats and gear, much of it at special discount prices. The softball experience is second to none, but that's not the only reason players come back year after year.

"This is my third year. The brotherhood is ridiculous," Place said. "Michigan leagues start in April, and I have a huge head start, plus a sunburn!"

Place wasn't the only northerner going home with a sunburn. This year, two-thirds of the players came from states that border one of the Great Lakes. Their dramatic change in climate amplifies their appreciation of the camps. The same was also true this year for those who live near cities that endured their snowiest winters on record, such as Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington DC.

"I haven't been hitting in DC, we were buried in the snow," said Jim Peerbolte of King George, Virginia. "Now I'm way ahead of the guys back home."

The event ends with a banquet at the host hotel, the International Palms Resort and Conference Center. Players enjoy a Happy Hour and a lavish meal. A video screen runs hundreds of photos taken during the three days, and sends a multi-camera video feed live to the internet! A huge array of awards is presented, some for contests, some in random drawings. One player in each session receives a "free pass" to next year's Spring Training, but there is good news for all, as every player goes home with a bat bag, a hat, a shirt, and a new bat.

"Some teammates back home have already seen the videos on the website," Bruce Davis of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania said at the Saturday night banquet. "They're on my cell phone, saying they want to come next year."

Peerbolte added, "The whole week was amazing. It is a softball vacation."

Registration opens in the fall, and this past spring's camps were booked solid in just a few weeks. For video, interviews and more information, see softballmag.com and softballspring-training.com.