

Softball Magazine's Adult Spring Training 2011

By Jim Ramsey

It's time to register for Softball Magazine's Adult Spring Training for March 2011! The event and its reputation have been growing every year. Demand is high for a limited number of spots. Why should you go? Is it worth it? What is it really all about? There was a four-page recap in the previous issue. However, that article underplayed a "major secret," and that's the focus here.

Just to recap: at Spring Training, adults from across the country (mostly snow-covered states) come to Cocoa Beach, Florida in March to get the rust off their games. For three full days on a four-field complex, everyone is "one team" for a flexible itinerary of batting practice, defensive drills, scrimmages and contests. Every extra need is accounted for: 100 demo bats, 1200+ softballs, free water and Gatorade, catered lunches, tons of gear for sale, and an awesome wrap-up banquet. All that helps create fantastic camaraderie, quickly integrating new players with returning ones in a fun and productive atmosphere.

Spring Training is a "softball vacation." The event is contained in one work-week. The fields are reserved Thursday through Saturday, with Sunday as an assumed travel day. That opens up the first half of the week to come early to enjoy some pure Florida vacation before the orientation breakfast Thursday morning.

Spring Training, this "softball vacation," is also part "fantasy camp." Several current and former major level players serve as instructors. Spring Training attracts the biggest stars... nearly every "Long Haul Bomber" has Spring Training experience, and at least six pros there last March have personalized model bats on the market now.

So, what is the "major secret" that electrifies Spring Training? The pros love it as much as the players do! They have these March dates marked on their schedules far in advance, and shuffle their commitments so they can attend. Sure, they love hitting in the Florida sun in March... who doesn't? But they also love teaching and mingling with the players... players of all skill levels and ages.

Jeff Hall, now with Bass, was one of the first pros to come to the event, and has returned two other years. "I love to get in the cages and grind with them. I pitch to them too, they like that. I love it. It's a blessing for me to give back, and one way is going to this camp," he said.

Another returning pro, JD Genter of Louisville Slugger, agrees. "I love hanging out. Everyone's like a family here. We learn from them and we give pointers, and hopefully we're making a lot of the guys better."

Chris Larsen of DeMarini, a first-year Spring Training Pro, picked up on that vibe right away. "There're smiles all over the place. Balls flying everywhere, people having fun. In March, you can't beat this place."

Part of that "fun" is over on the game field. It is common for one or more pros to play on each team in the daily scrimmages. The late JC Phelps enjoyed it so much in 2009, a field was dedicated in his honor in 2010. For many players, it's a tell-our-buddies-back-home chance to play with and against elite players. It is exciting and fun, but again, with an undercurrent of improving your game.

"With tips on fielding and defense, it's a great time with a lot of learning and people are definitely getting better," Genter said.

Of course, the nerve center of softball practice is the batting cages, where the pros offer top-level advice, much of it in one-on-one tutorials. True, some tips are delivered in jaw-dropping show-and-tell fashion, but the pros help each player improve what he/she does well, to maximize his/her own style and approach to hitting.

Dennis Turner of Worth Sports has been on hand four years. "The pro players can look at a player's swing and just tweak one little thing

that will make a huge difference in the performance of his swing, the batted-ball speed, and the distance," he said.

Corky Pellien of Miken agrees.

"To make a slight improvement, a little tweak that we can see, if they can make that change it can make an immediate difference in their next one or two swings, and then working on it makes a difference in their games," he said.

Brett McCollum of Louisville Slugger, at his first Spring Training, saw right away what Pellien was talking about. "Seeing someone take advice you gave them and turn it into performance, it's kinda cool."

Greg Connell of Worth is on board. "Any time I get a chance to help people, it's great. I've been there, and to work with the guys, it's great. Anything they can take home, they listen. What we tell them. They do. Getting that swing help, and you can get all the swings you want here."

All those swings help the pros, too. They represent bat companies that have new bats at Spring Training. This is Turner's primary focus with Worth.

"We are able to get the bats that are just starting to hit the market to the campers to swing, and they'll notice in the next few weeks those bats will start arriving in stores. Then any tips and comments we get here, we take back to our Research and Development departments and it is well-received from us, and we try to better our product line based on the campers," Turner said.

Other pros who have attended have been instrumental in the event's success, and have also proven they are real down-to-earth guys despite their lofty resumes. Andy Purcell, Brett Helmer, Larry Carter, Rusty Baumgardner, and Hank Garris, to name a few. Purcell helped young pitchers learn his devilish knuckleball, and even let batters try to hit it. Helmer has pitched tirelessly, and banded out grounders in hour-long defensive clinics. Carter's laughter rang out as loudly as his hits. Baumgardner taught hitting for hours on end sitting in a metal folding chair, and looked as comfortable as if he was in a leather recliner. Garris was always inside a backstop, and is a terrific one-on-one hitting instructor. The point is, they all love it, and are unselfish with their time and expertise.

"It's a good opportunity, you couldn't ask for anything better than this," Connell said.

"I enjoy it and it's a great bunch of guys out here to be with," Pellien said.

Pro Jeff Hall summarizes it this way: "When I see (camper) Bill Waterman out here, who's 67 years old, I get a big smile on my face, because I might come in another 27 years too," the 40-year-old Hall said. "It's well worth the trip for anybody. If you've never been, I advise you to sign up early."

To follow Hall's advice, check out the websites softballspring-training.com and softballmag.com, or call the office for more information. But as Hall said, don't put it off... both sessions will probably be filled before the next issue of Softball Magazine comes out!

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