

Spring Training: Port Charlotte preparing for Rays' move in 2009

By SCOTT HOTARD

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PORT CHARLOTTE — Jeff Brunderman turns the wheel to the left and the ATV circles around. Piles upon piles of dirt — and the shell of one baseball stadium — appear in the distance.

The structure up ahead, rising from the dirt, will be a jewel by next February, when Charlotte Sports Park welcomes spring training baseball back to town.

But as the countdown board in front of the park's entrance says, the Tampa Bay Rays won't be here until more than 10 months from now.

So equipment hums. Work goes on.

And on.

"This ain't no paint job," Brunderman, the general superintendent of the massive renovation, says, as he cruises up the hill in a hard hat and sunglasses.

No, it's a \$27.2-million makeover.

The fans who last watched a big-league game here — in 2002, before the Texas Rangers bolted for Surprise, Ariz. — might have a hard time recognizing the place.

By the time the countdown board clicks to zero, the 5,400-seat stadium on State Road 766 will be what Rays officials envision as a Grapefruit League gem.

All new seats. A 43,000-square-foot, two-story building in right field with clubhouses and administrative offices. A new gift shop at the entrance of the stadium. A remade press box. A new field. Renovated batting cages. Renovated practice fields.

A 20,000-square-foot boardwalk will provide 360-degree circulation of the park. A berm down each foul line will accommodate fans who wish to watch from the grass.

"It's gonna be freaking awesome, man," Brunderman says. "Awesome."

Texas who?

To be sure, the Rangers, the park's original spring tenant, left a line of memories as long as seasonal Florida traffic.

It was here that Nolan Ryan filmed Advil commercials and, in February 1993, announced his retirement from the game. It was here that Michael Jordan sold the place out as a 1994 long shot with the Chicago White Sox. It was here that Alex Rodriguez, in 2001, arrived to a throng of media after signing a record \$252 million contract.

But Texas jolted the community when it left after spending 16 springs in Charlotte County, heading west for what it saw as greener pastures.

Now, the Rays are coming.

About 18 months ago, Charlotte County still wasn't looking for baseball. But the people listened when the Rays drove 80 miles south to knock on their door.

To help pay for the renovation, the county commissioners voted unanimously to add a one-fifth of a cent to the county's tourism tax. Every other dime will be covered by the Rays or the state, including a \$15-million grant.

"We're trying to expand our fan base," says Michael Kalt, the Rays' senior vice president of development and business affairs. "We see Port Charlotte as an outpost to expand our Southwest Florida presence all the way to Fort Myers and beyond."

It's why they came. Why they chose Charlotte County, anyway.

The Rays have held spring training in St. Petersburg, a few miles from Tropicana Field, since the club's inception 10 years ago. It's been a selling point for attracting free-agent talent — come play here and live at home for spring training.

No one else offers that.

But the Rays, who removed the "Devil" from their nickname, changed their colors and tweaked their logo during the offseason, are looking to put more home team fans in the Tropicana Field seats. They figure their friends to the south can help.

"It was really a smart move on their part," says Caryn Lytle, who is managing the project for Charlotte County Facilities. "They've made a great effort here to reach out to the community. It's been great. They've already got a strong presence here."

You can bet Lytle is a fan.

On a shelf above her desk, she has the Rays hard hat she wore in August during the groundbreaking ceremony, where a contingent of Rays, including owner Stuart Sternberg and manager Joe Maddon, joined locals at the stadium. The wallpaper on the computer monitor in Lytle's office is a rendering of the new Charlotte Sports Park.

She remembers, too, how the Rays brought their caravan through town early last month. Pitchers James Shields, Edwin Jackson and James Houser introduced themselves to youngsters at a local middle school before heading to a steakhouse for a luncheon. They finished the tour with a trip to the future, posing for pictures in front of the countdown board.

It must have paid off.

Fans can visit the Rays on the Web to put down a \$50 deposit to secure season tickets for next year's spring training. Kalt said roughly 1,500 pledges have already been made.

The Minnesota Twins, who play their spring games at Hammond Stadium in Fort Myers, have 2,038 paid season ticket holders, and their attendance figures — they drew 70,199 through nine games — are among the Grapefruit League's best.

"Expanding our footprint, man," Maddon said earlier this month, as he waited for the Rays to face the Twins in Fort Myers. "Just getting down here and having people see who we are and how we are and what we believe. That's attractive."

But the move makes sense from a mere baseball perspective, too. The Rays will have their minor-league complex on the same site as big-league camp, part of the setup for the Rangers in years past. Back in St. Pete, relocating to the minor-league complex required a 15-minute drive. Clubs prefer to have everyone

together.

"You're always trying to homogenize your efforts," Maddon says. "Everything needs to be the same — your instruction, your program — and when you have a minor-league complex over here and the big-league complex over there, it's tough to get that stuff together. When you get this one spot in Port Charlotte where on a daily basis we have the minor-league guys with us, it's so much easier to get your message across."

Not just the Rays will benefit, though.

The Twins have a training partner in the Boston Red Sox, who play just seven miles up the road at City of Palms Park in downtown Fort Myers. Other than that, the shortest drive for either team is Sarasota, about 75 miles away, to face the Cincinnati Reds.

This will change that. Port Charlotte, for the first time since the Rangers left, will be back on the spring training map.

"It's been on the map," Twins manager Ron Gardenhire cracks. "We've driven by it — going up and down. That ought to tell you a little bit about how we feel about stopping there. We've driven by the son of a (gun) about 15 thousand times the last couple of springs. That's just fine. Those trips up there are 45, 50 minutes. We can bring them down here and back and forth. That really cuts our trips back to the Tampa area and across Alligator Alley. We don't mind a left turn there."

So the countdown continues.

The Rays have one more game to play in their old digs. They'll meet the Reds at Al Lang Field on Friday, then say goodbye.

Brunderman & Co. will keep busy getting the new place ready. The sign outside the park will keep the locals anxious.

"They're well on their way," Shields says. "I looked at the whole project when I was there. It looks like it's going to be a pretty good stadium."

Even awesome, perhaps.

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