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Thursday, Aug 11, 2

Published: Saturday, Jul. 30, 2011

Updated: Saturday, Jul. 30, 2011

## Commentary | McKechnie among best Florida State League parks

By JOHN LEMBO

There are plenty of perks to having a Florida State League team in your town.

You get to see future stars on the way up and current stars working their way back.

You get to see riveting games of musical chairs between innings. You get to gorge yourself on your beverage of choice every Thirsty Thursday.

My favorite part of the Florida State League is the ballparks, which is good, because the ballparks are my favorite part of spring training as well. And since most FSL clubs reside in their parent clubs' Grapefruit League digs, well, that's even better.

So here is a list of three FSL/spring training stadiums I love, and three others I'd love to see go the way of the spitball.

### Three up

1. Bright House Field, Clearwater -- What's great about this park, the spring home of the Philadelphia Phillies and summer home of the Clearwater Threshers, is it's modern to the core, full of bells and whistles, and yet still sparkles with intimacy and a breezy charm. What's not to like about a stadium that has a wide, 360-degree concourse, an outfield berm, a huge scoreboard complete with a screen in the outfield that shows Phillies games during rain delays, a tiki bar in left field, swaying palm trees that nearly make nearby U.S. 19 invisible, every sort of ballpark food you can imagine, comfy seats and plenty of shelter from those daily summertime thunderstorms?

2. McKechnie Field, Bradenton -- Call me a homer. But even if I lived and worked in the Pacific Northwest, didn't know Kent Tekulve from Clark Kent and visited McKechnie place only once, I would still love this simple jewel of a ballpark that has hosted the Pittsburgh Pirates since 1969 and the Bradenton Marauders for the past two summers. There's something special about having a baseball stadium right in the middle of a downtown, and while McKechnie is big enough to draw a crowd -- it seats more than 6,500 -- it's small enough to make you feel as if you're part of the game. Regardless of where you are sitting, whether it's a row above the dugout or with your back high above Ninth Street, you're right on top of the action. There isn't a bad seat to be had. Autographs are easy to get, and the grassy picnic area on the first-base side of the stadium is hard to beat on balmy spring afternoons.

3. Joker Marchant Stadium, Lakeland -- Maybe it's because every time I've been out, the stands have been packed, and there is at least one father playing catch with his son on the outfield berm. Or maybe it's that the high bleachers look majestic up against a pristine blue sky. Whatever the case, Joker Marchant Stadium, which looks so unassuming sitting back from Lakeland Hills Boulevard, is awesome. The Tigers have spent more than 70 seasons there, and after just one trip, it's easy to see why.

### Three down

1. Florida Auto Exchange Stadium, Dunedin -- Apparently, Sports Illustrated raved about this place, home to the Toronto Blue Jays and Dunedin Blue Jays, calling it a great place to see a game. Really? It's about as charming and picturesque as a cinder block. There are high school stadiums with more character and charm. Its redeeming quality? Banners hanging in the concourse paying homage to Blue Jays greats such as Roberto Alomar, Joe Carter and Dave Steib, some of whom are wearing the team's memorable 1980s uniforms.

2. George M. Steinbrenner Field, Tampa -- Full disclosure: I am the furthest thing from a Yankees hater. That being said, GMS, while gorgeous, is a bit much. Spring training and minor-league baseball are supposed to be quaint. The House That George Built, which seats roughly 11,000, is anything but. It's too big. You can't get too close to the field, and you can't park too close to the field, either. And for a field that sits in southwest Florida, there aren't many shady spots. The miniature Monument Park and massive Steinbrenner statue that sit near the

entrance are nice touches, as are all the photos of great Yankees teams of the past. The park itself, however, needs some downsizing.

3. Roger Dean Stadium, Jupiter -- Home to the St. Louis Cardinals and Florida Marlins during the spring and the Palm Beach Cardinals and Jupiter Hammerheads during the summer, this place isn't horrible, nor is it great. It's just ... there. Nothing special, nothing memorable. It serves its purpose, I guess: It has three bases, home plate, two dugouts and some seats. But that's about it. The Cardinals, one of baseball's most storied franchises, deserve better.

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