

Winter Haven Carries On Without Indians

Written by {ga=consigliere}

Thursday, March 11 2010 12:05 AM - Last Updated Saturday, March 27 2010 3:08 PM



The Indians are now well into their second year of operations in their new state of the art Player Development Complex located in Goodyear, Arizona. But while they are enjoying the comforts of their new digs in Arizona these days, how are things these days at the facility and city they once called home in Winter Haven, FL during the spring for 16 years from 1993-2008?

Those who don't recall or may not know, the Indians were set to leave their spring training home in Tucson, Arizona of 46 years and move into their new state of the art spring training facility in Homestead, Florida back in 1993 until Hurricane Andrew wiped the \$18 million facility to a pile of debris in August of 1992. Because of the excessive damage and the need to have a spring facility they could train at six months later, the Indians had to move quickly and find a temporary spring training site. The Boston Red Sox had just moved out of Winter Haven that year, and while the facility was very much out of date, the Indians were homeless and did not have the luxury to be picky, so they made an agreement with the city of Winter Haven to temporarily move their spring training operations there.

That temporary agreement turned into a 16 year marriage between the city and team. From the time the Indians arrived in Winter Haven they were always looking for a better facility to move to or another city they could convince to put up the funding required to build them a new complex like Homestead had done and Goodyear in later years would do. Several times they appeared to be leaving Winter Haven, but every time could never find the right match so they stayed. For 16 years.

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Winter Haven had long been a Red Sox town before the Indians arrived as the Red Sox had just moved out the year prior to the Indians arrival. But the local people really took well to the Indians and they quickly and openly adopted the Indians as their new favorite son's. Also, over the years many Ohioans found the 17-hour drive to Winter Haven for spring training quite bearable, and some people even moved to or retired to the Winter Haven area. As a result a religious following was born. But that all came to an end in 2007 when the Indians announced their intentions to leave Winter Haven after spring training in 2008 and move into a new state of the art facility in Goodyear.

The new facility in Goodyear provided a complex the organization was in dire need of, which was a facility in operation 365 days a year and that had all the technology and equipment needed to help their players train, rehab, and develop throughout the year. This new facility would not only be in operation during spring training from late February to early April, but it would become a year round home to the Indians' Player Development system for everything from extended spring training (April to June), rookie league ball (June to August), Instructional League (September to October), as well as all rehab and workout programs during the season and in the offseason. The only time any structured practices or games are not being conducted are from November to January, though during that time many players filter in and out of the complex for various reasons and participate in voluntary workouts on the field. Most of those things were available at the old Winter Haven complex, but now things are much more efficient with travel as a dozen or so other team sites are all within 30 minutes of each other in Goodyear whereas in Winter Haven almost every team was a few hours away.

Having a facility such as the one in Goodyear that is operational year round is a big reason the Indians left Winter Haven, FL for the greener....errr...browner pastures of the desert in Arizona. While the home office is in Cleveland, Ohio at Progressive Field, in Arizona the Indians now have their sister site located in the heart of a booming area in Phoenix, Arizona where more and more people are moving by the day, and more importantly more and more players are locating to. Having a facility such as the one the Indians now have in Arizona is a big benefit to them not only because of how new it is and all the amenities it has, but also because of its location where many players may find it attractive to workout there in the offseason rather than the previous option that was located several thousands of miles away in Winter Haven, Florida.

Meanwhile, back in Winter Haven, they are still assessing what to do with the old, decrepit facility. It still stands today, though is much quieter these days during the spring. The fields and complex are still maintained daily by the city, but it is not the bustling site it once used to be in February and March like it was from the early 1960s when the Red Sox arrived there and then the Indians after that.

Winter Haven is still considering their options with what to do with the facility, and ultimately it will probably be torn down for retail or housing development though no plans have been finalized for either at this moment. For now, the facility is mostly used in the January to March months as a spring training facility for several northern colleges to come for practice and get out of the cold and snow in the northern United States. This year and last year small colleges such as the College of Mount St. Joseph (OH), Northeastern University, Augustana College (IL), Illinois State University, State University of New York Institute of Technology, and others have

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made their way to the complex.

In May, the city hosts an annual baseball tournament with a lot of small local colleges such as Central Florida CC, Palm Beach CC, St. Petersburg College, Chipola College, and others at the Chain O'Lakes Stadium. They also have other infrequent events there throughout the year, but from June to January the complex is mostly dormant.

I actually visited Winter Haven about two months ago around New Year's Day, and in some cases you would never know the Indians had ever left. All of the signage in regard to the Indians located throughout the complex has been taken down, but the Chief Wahoo logo is still on the big water tower that can be seen for miles.

In talking with several of the grounds crew there who got to know a lot of the Indians staff and players over the years, they mentioned how much they miss the Indians being there. Some of the local businesses, like Andy's, miss the Indians as well. Home to the best shakes in the world, Andy's still sports their Indians banner near the front entrance of the restaurant showing their support of the Tribe.

The Indians may have moved on for the better to the warm desert sun in Arizona, but they also left behind a lot of warm hearts in Winter Haven who dearly loved them. A city that offered the team a place of refuge in a time of need after the disaster in 1992, which ultimately turned into a long-lasting connection between the team and city.

Here are some photos, including the one above, from my recent visit to Winter Haven two and a half months ago:

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