

Sox Storm Back Against Dodgers in Inaugural Game at Camelback Ranch

CBM president reports on the new spring training home of the Chicago White Sox

By Dr. David Fletcher

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Glendale, AZ - Well, it was a much better outcome for a White Sox inaugural stadium game than when Comiskey Park II opened up in 1991.

In stark contrast to the game I attended in Chicago on April 18, 1991 when the White Sox got drubbed by the Tigers 16-0, the Sox's first game in their new Cactus League home – Camelback Ranch in Glendale, Arizona (CBR-G) – on March 1, 2009 was a more pleasant outcome. The Sox rallied and scored three runs in the 9th to beat the Dodgers 3-2.

White Sox 2008 1st round prospect Gordon Beckham homered to lead off the ninth. Chicago added two more runs in the inning on fielder's choices to break a 17-inning spring training stretch of no runs.

It was appropriate that the first game in their new spring training home featured their facility co-partner the Los Angeles Dodgers, managed by Joe Torre and assisted by a uniformed Tommy Lasorda.

The White Sox and Dodger players lined the base paths for the inaugural game that included a fly-over, fireworks and "American Idol" star Jordin Sparks, sporting a Dodgers hat, singing the Star Spangled Banner.



Jordin Sparks leaves the field after singing the national anthem for the White Sox/Dodgers inaugural spring training game at Camelback Ranch Stadium.

Boasting the largest capacity in the Cactus League with 10,000-plus stadium seats and 3,000-plus lawn seats, Camelback Ranch is a work in progress as construction on the facility is still on-

going. The park is about one and a half miles west of Arizona 101. Two years ago, before construction began on the 141-acre baseball campus, the area was a virtual desert.

From my experience, I can say there are two key problems that need to be addressed as development continues: parking and access to and from the facility. It took 45 minutes from the time I exited the Agua Fria Fwy. (101) and traveled one and half miles in bumper to bumper traffic to park my rental car. The parking lot has yet to be paved and Enterprise Rental Car will wonder if I went off-roading with the caked desert dirt all over my car.

Fans that travel to Arizona to see the White Sox in spring training can stay near the up and coming Westgate area in Glendale, close to the Arizona Cardinals University of Phoenix stadium, two miles from the Camelback Ranch Stadium. The four star Renaissance Hotel and Convention Center recently opened in Westgate and should become a spring training fixture for White Sox fans for years to come.

As more business and entertainment venues develop around the Glendale spring training facility it will emerge as the crown jewel of the Cactus League. The new complex has similarities to the facility in Surprise, Arizona that the Royals and Ranger share.

The playing dimensions at Camelback Ranch are spacious – 410' to center, 380' in the power alleys, and 345' down the foul lines. The White Sox locker-room and administrative offices are in the right field corner. The campus blends in well with the desert and the mountains in the background. The architecture is unique in the Cactus League and features rust-colored facing, coppery-brown support poles, and pale-stone walls. The batter's eye above the 410' wall in center field is a rather small green screen and I heard several players complain that it was difficult to pick up the ball. Eventually, trees are supposed to grow up in center field and provide green leafy vegetation to help the hitters see the ball.



Camelback Ranch Stadium in Glendale, AZ.

The White Sox have put together spring training packages to entice fans out of the lingering Chicago winter. But there will need to be more creative efforts in future years to entice White Sox fans out to Glendale. The crowd for the inaugural game was more than 10-to-1 Dodgers fans (keep in mind that this is no longer Dodgertown in Vero Beach, Fla., the legendary spring training home of the Dodgers for 50+ years). Surprisingly, the inaugural game at Camelback Ranch Stadium wasn't a sell out with an announced crowd just over 11,000.

While the new stadium has the potential to be the second edition of Dodgertown, the White Sox will have to adjust to competing against another team in the same market like they do with the Cubs and their strong national following. But I always believe the White Sox perform best with their backs against the wall (how can White Sox baseball top beating three separate teams in three straight elimination games the last week of the 2008 season). Being the "second team" at Camelback Ranch Stadium may actually turn out to be a blessing, helping the White Sox prepare for the coming regular season campaign.

The locker room facilities are located in the right field corner. I got an opportunity to check out the facility including the medical facility courtesy of White Sox trainer Herm Schneider. Schneider and the Chicago Baseball Museum plan to launch an advocacy project to get the National Baseball Hall of Fame to recognize and induct pioneers in sports medicine to the Hall. I was a bit surprised the new stadium didn't have an x-ray unit which means injured White Sox players will have to go to the local hospital if they get hurt.

While I was in the training facility, lefty pitcher John Danks (watching NASCAR on TV) talked to me about his 1-0 win against Minnesota. He said he still gets goose bumps when he thinks about looking out from the pitcher's mound and seeing "The Blackout Crowd." I told him that most White Sox fans believe the 1-0 win against the Twins was one of the most exciting home wins, even more so than either of the two 2005 World Series. Danks was sad his parents could not attend the game on September 30, 2008 but he did fly them in for his game against Tampa Bay, the only playoff win for Chicago baseball in 2008. Danks loves Chicago and would love to move there but says it is too cold. He really likes the new White Sox spring training home at Camelback Ranch Stadium.

I was happy to represent the Chicago Baseball Museum at another historic Chicago baseball moment. I found it ironic and fitting that the 50th anniversary of the White Sox/Dodgers World Series featured the two historic rivals sharing a brand new spring training home in the desert.

Sox marketing director Brooks Boyer was all smiles when I said hello to him upon his return from witnessing the pregame festivities (the White Sox occupy the 1st base dugout). I told him this was a major upgrade from Tucson (where the White Sox trained from 1998 through 2008) and the rivalry between the White Sox and Cubs should be fueled by the 25-mile proximity of their spring training facilities. For the first time, the White Sox and Cubs will play each other five times this spring.