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Naturals debut at Arvest Park

Arkansas Business, April 7, 2008 by Chris Bahn

A BOTTLE OF ANTACID AND A hard hat are positioned side by side on a shelf inside what is currently the construction headquarters of the Northwest Arkansas Naturals operation.

With weeks remaining until opening day for this Kansas City Royals' AA minor-league affiliate, it's hard to imagine a more appropriate example of what team officials are enduring. From the general manager's office to the general contractor's temporary office, these are exciting yet stressful times. Every one of 16 full-time employees for the Springdale-based franchise, and a group of construction workers who at one point totaled upwards of 500, are feeling the pressure to perform.

Northwest Arkansas begins its inaugural season in the Texas League on April 3. Fortunately for the folks getting the home field ready, Naturals regular-season games begin out of town, buying officials a little extra time to perfect things in preparation for the April 10 home opener against the San Antonio Missions.

There's a lot riding on the success of the Naturals. Plenty of folks in the region have something invested, including the city of Springdale, which asked voters to fund the \$33 million Arvest Ballpark, where games will be played.

A recent report in the Northwest Arkansas Business Journal detailed some \$322 million will be pumped into the economy because of the Naturals over the course of their 20-year lease with the city of Springdale.

Getting off on the wrong foot is not an option.

"We know the public eye is upon us," Eric Edelstein, the Naturals' general manager, said. "There is a high level of scrutiny and we know the devil is in the details."

Rising Up From Pasture

It's those last-minute details that lead to 16-hour workdays.

No major tasks were left in the weeks that preceded the opening of the 6,500-seat ballpark, situated at 56th Avenue and Watkins Street. Still, crews were scheduled to work more or less until the first pitch is thrown out at 6 p.m. April 10. That's not unusual when taking into account the facility was nothing more than a pasture some 13 months ago.

Those on hand for a groundbreaking at the stadium site were treated to the sounds of roosters crowing and cows mooing in the distance.

"We consider the process a minor miracle," team president Jonathan Dandes said.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

It's nothing short of miraculous that a minor league affiliate is up and running in Northwest Arkansas. Springdale, whose residents approved a sales tax extension in 2006 to fund stadium construction, is home to fewer than 75,000 people. Even combining the population of the nearby towns such as Fayetteville, Bentonville and Rogers that will make up the team's fan base, the numbers pale in comparison to the half-million people in the Wichita area, where the team spent the last 18 seasons as the Wranglers.

Other cities and metropolitan statistical areas that play host to Texas League teams--like North Little Rock--are larger. Even so, it's hard to imagine a better fit geographically. Northwest Arkansas will compete in a division that includes Tulsa, Okla., Springfield, Mo., and North Little Rock's Arkansas Travelers. Road games won't be hard for players and fans to get to, considering the longest trip for a divisional game will be in-state.

Northwest Arkansas and Arkansas are slated to play each other 32 times over the course of a 140-game season. That should only add to the rivalry that exists between the two regions of the state.

The Naturals and Travelers will first meet April 17-21 at North Little Rock's Dickey-Stephens Park. They'll meet again April 25-28 in Springdale.

While winning games will be important, it's the overall experience of fans that team officials are most worried about. Many of the tasks being completed in the days leading up to the home opener were geared toward improving amenities for fans.

"We want to blow everybody away," said Frank Novak, public relations and marketing director for the club.

Attracting fans has been the focus for much of the last year.

In addition to print and radio campaigns, other marketing tools have been used. Stadium lights were turned on from 6 to 10 each night and 6 to 9 each morning in the month leading up to the season. It's an effective bit of advertising aimed at the thousands who travel Interstate 540 each day.

Nearly 2,000 season ticket packages have been sold. A sellout is expected for the opening weekend.

Once the crowds come, though, it's all about getting them back. That's why opening day is so important.

"There are varying levels of expectations as to what we're all about," Edelstein said. "We want to take the highest levels of expectation that exist and take it beyond that."

BY THE NUMBERS

6,500 Capacity

25 Luxury Suites

\$33M Stadium Cost

13 Months for construction

0 tickets remaining for April 10 home opener

600 Construction workers on-site at once

70 Regular-season games scheduled for the park

32 Games scheduled between Naturals and Arkansas Travelers

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Daniel Cortes, 21, RHP

The top pitcher in the Royals' farm system and the 57th best talent in all the minors according to Baseball America, Cortes will start the season with the Naturals thanks to the tremendous growth he showed last year. The 6-foot-6, 225-pound starter added a few miles per hour to his fastball, which now sits between 93 and 96, and some extra bite to his 12-6 curve in 2007. Cortes' changeup could still use some polish, and keeping his delivery consistent should be another area of focus this year. Still, expect plenty of strikeouts and low-scoring games when Cortes takes the mound this summer.