

SPRING TRAINING: The HISTORY, the *Draw*

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LIFESTYLE | Spring Training: The History, the Draw



Major League Baseball legend Rogers Hornsby once said, “People ask me what I do in winter when there’s no baseball. I’ll tell you what I do. I stare out the window and wait for spring.” Although some Michiganders embrace snow views and activities, many linger by the window, rooting on the arrival of springtime.

Spring not only brings melting snow and the promise of warmer days, but also the reemergence of baseball during Spring Training. Spring Training bridges winter and spring seasons and serves as the appetizer ahead of a warm summer of baseball.

The tradition of Spring Training is nearly as old as the game itself. It involves not only practices and exhibition games, but also opportunities for new and young players to grab attention and potentially earn a roster spot. Bloomfield Hills resident and Tigers fan Sue Westman attended Spring Training in 2016 and “had the time of my life, and can’t wait to go back.” While Spring Training helps players and provides opportunities, its cachet is drawn from fan response. Westman raved about her experience, saying, “It was great watching players having fun and cheering on younger teammates.” Fans across the country travel to warm locations to cheer on teams, observe players up close, and symbolically say goodbye to winter. As Chris Pulliam, Dodger fan and Maryland resident, notes, “The atmosphere around Spring Training is different from regular season baseball; players are accessible, and it’s easy to get autographs and pictures. Everyone is relaxed.” The exhibition season begins in mid-February and ends before Opening Day at the beginning of April.

The history of Spring Training is a bit inconclusive. Some historians believe its inception goes back to 1879, when organized baseball camps emerged in New Orleans. Others identify a four-day camp held by the Washington Capitals, in Jacksonville in 1888, as being a catalyst.

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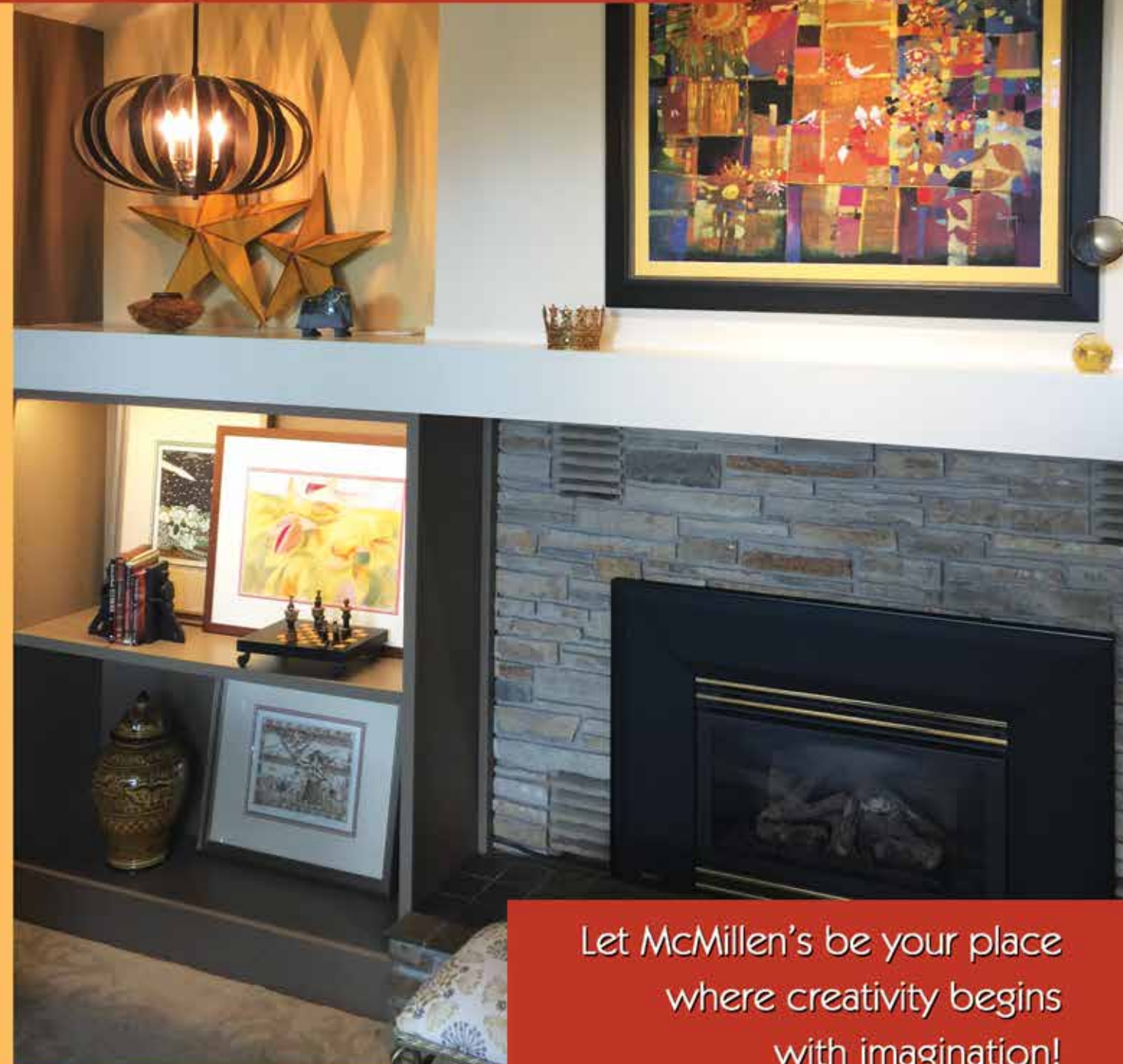
A 2015 documentary entitled *The First Boys of Spring* examines what most call the original “birthplace” of Spring Training in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Games from this period contain their own impressive history, as over 130 Hall of Fame players participated. Legends linked to Hot Springs include Cy Young, Babe Ruth, and Tigers great Ty Cobb. Ruth, in fact, played an emergency game at first base in 1918 in Hot Springs, which marked the first time he ever played a position in the field. By 1910, Spring Training became a standing tradition for most teams, and the Grapefruit League formally began at that time.

Spring Training baseball consists of two leagues, the Grapefruit League and the Cactus League, each containing 15 of the 30 professional teams. Florida is home to the Grapefruit League, with 12 of their 15 teams playing along the coastline and all but 2 owning their own stadium. It draws large crowds during the waning weeks of winter and takes advantage of family and student vacations. By contrast, most teams in the Cactus League share stadiums; only 5 of the 15 teams own their own. This Arizona League is uniquely accessible to fans, as all 15 of its teams play within a 47-mile radius of Phoenix. According to the *Arizona Republic*, the Cactus League contributes over \$300 million a year to the Phoenix economy.

The newest Spring Training stadium is Sloan Park in Mesa Arizona (Cubs), which opened in February 2014. The longest-standing relationship between a major league team and a city exists between Joker Marchant Stadium in Lakeland, Florida, and the Detroit Tigers. This ballpark was built in 1966 and named for Lakeland’s former parks and recreation director. Many of the Spring Training parks bring a unique flavor to fans, such as Surprise Stadium in Arizona (Royals and Rangers), which has a merry-go-round in the right field concourse. Salt River Fields at Talking Stick in Arizona (Rockies) is located on an Indian reservation, and the Phoenix Municipal Stadium (Athletics) utilizes foul poles originally used at Polo Grounds. The Atlanta Braves’ Spring Training facility in Florida is actually located within Walt Disney World. “Spring Training stadiums are much like minor league stadiums, as every seat is close to the action; you can hear the crack of the bat and players communicating with one another. It’s an intimate experience,” noted Pulliam.

Just as Opening Day is treated as a holiday for Detroit Tiger fans, Spring Training is the yearly reminder for all baseball fans that hope does “spring” eternal. As Westman noted of her Spring Training adventure, “We spent four days watching baseball and enjoying the picture-perfect weather. I highly recommend it for all baseball fans.” □

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