

# For Phoenix-area ballparks, spring training is only the beginning

Andrea Galyean, Special for the Republic 9:03 a.m. MT April 1, 2017



(Photo: Goodyear)

For the past five weeks, spring training has filled Phoenix-area ballparks from Mesa to Maryvale with the crack of bats and the scent of sunscreen. But with Major League Baseball's regular season starting Sunday, the 15 teams that make up the Cactus League are scattering across the country.

So what happens to the stadiums they leave behind?

"People have this impression that after spring training we go in a cubby hole and hibernate," said Blake Englert, superintendent of the Peoria Sports Complex, spring home to the Seattle Mariners and San Diego Padres. "But it's pretty much the opposite."

In fact, the 10 Cactus League stadiums, most of which are owned and managed by their host cities, stay busy all year with a combination of community events, private rentals, and even — yes — baseball.

## Community events

Festivals and civic events bring people into the ballparks to celebrate holidays, to raise funds for charity and just to have fun.

"It's not just good business, it's being a good neighbor," Englert explained. "If you use taxpayer money to build a stadium, you have to make sure the citizens have access to it."

To bring residents into his stadium, Englert works with Peoria's special-events department to put on signature events like the Dolly Sanchez Easter Egg Hunt on April 15, during which thousands of children will race around the field collecting candy.

Peoria's stadium also hosts a Fourth of July festival so big that it spills over onto the Mariners' practice field — and a fireworks show that, Englert reported, "some people say may be possibly the best display in the whole Valley."



The annual All-American Festival, held July 4 at the Peoria Sports Complex, attracts more than 30,000 people and concludes with one of the Phoenix-area's largest fireworks displays. (Photo: Peoria)

Not to be outshone, another West Valley stadium has leveraged its own Independence Day celebrations to set two Guinness World Records.

Goodyear Ballpark, which hosts the Cleveland Indians and Cincinnati Reds, set a record for "Largest Gathering of People Wearing False Mustaches" when 1,957 participants stuck the accessories on their faces during the Star-Spangled 4th in 2013; and another for the "Largest Soul Train Dance," after 426 people boogied their way down center field in July 2014.

Debbie Diveney, the ballpark's marketing and business-operations coordinator, explained that the stunts were dreamed up by staff members who wanted a playful activity that would involve a lot of people.

"We like to do things that are different," she said, "and we like to be fan-friendly."

That fan-friendly attitude also inspires other seasonal festivities at the ballpark, including Goodyear's Christmas-tree lighting and free monthly movie nights with seating on the outfield lawn.

Over at Scottsdale Stadium, however, people can do more than just sit on the lawn: they can pitch tents there. The annual Stadium Sleepover coming up on April 8 is just one of many community-based events that take over the field after the Giants take off for San Francisco, said stadium supervisor Jeff Cesaretti.

"We've had everything from beer festivals to police K-9 trials here," he said. Scottsdale employees even use the empty team store for yoga classes.

"It's a municipal facility," said Cesaretti, "so it's here for citizens to use."

The stadiums also team up with Valley charities for fundraising events throughout the year, such as the Larry Fitzgerald Celebrity Softball Tournament at Salt River Fields at Talking Stick on April 22 and the Down syndrome walk at Tempe Diablo Stadium on Sept. 16.

But they also attract for-profit groups that organize color runs and other themed events, and outdoor concerts with big-name performers.

"We welcome other uses on a case-by-case basis," said Shaun Northup, director of ticketing and special events for Salt River Fields near Scottsdale, where the Arizona Diamondback and Colorado Rockies train.

"Sometimes there's some jockeying of facilities and schedules, but we try to make it work whenever possible."

## Private rentals



Estrella Mountain Community College graduates line up at Goodyear Ballpark in 2015. (Photo: Goodyear)

Although many ballpark events are public, private rentals are also an important source of revenue, and Cesaretti estimates they make up half of Scottsdale Stadium's bookings during the year.

Such events range from company picnics to trade shows, birthday parties and even proms — held both on the fields and on patios and concourses. Weddings are also popular during the off-season — although pre-game nuptials may be possible if you're planning ahead for next spring.

In late spring, many of the stadiums also serve as the marching ground for new high school and college graduates.

Some schools use the fields only when their own facilities are being renovated, but others have made it a tradition.

The East Valley Institute of Technology holds its annual completion ceremonies at Tempe Diablo Stadium, while Estrella Mountain Community College uses Goodyear Ballpark, as do several West Valley high schools.

"Our community graduates here," said Diveney, "then they come back for other events, which makes a nice connection. Different things bring them out."

## More baseball

But, even with all the other uses, the thing that brings most people to the ballparks is baseball.

"We have baseball use at Salt River Fields 360 days a year," Northup said.

Some of that use is behind the scenes, where many spring-training facilities include year-round player development and rehabilitation for the resident clubs. And even now, spring training is sliding into extended spring training, where players still not ready for the regular season can get in a few more weeks of practice.

But with most of the pros off the main fields, youth and amateur adult ballplayers can enjoy the thrill of running the same bases as their big-league idols.

In May, young athletes will fill Salt River Fields and other stadiums for youth baseball clinics. Peoria Sports Complex draws high-school players for both the Wilson Premier League West championship and USSSA state championships in early June.

Then adult amateurs from across the country descend on the stadiums in Peoria, Glendale and Goodyear for the USA baseball tournament in late June and July. With these and other tournaments, Diveney estimated that Goodyear Ballpark alone hosts 1,500 games a year.

Although the most competitive tournaments can draw players from across the U.S. and beyond, local athletes also compete almost year-round with adult leagues.

Many play on high school fields during the winter, but in the summer, the Men's Senior Baseball League (MSBL) and National Adult Baseball Association (NABA) teams move into Cactus League stadiums across the Valley. And in September and October, Tempe Diablo Stadium — spring home to the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim — holds championships for both leagues.

## And even more baseball



Scottsdale Scorpions outfielder Tim Tebow takes batting practice in October 2016 at the Arizona Fall League. (Photo: Rob Schumacher/azcentral sports)

For sports lovers who'd rather watch from the stands, one of the great secrets of Arizona baseball is the Rookie League, which runs June through August and includes new recruits from all of the Cactus League teams except the Rockies.

Most of the players are straight out of high school. Although only a tiny percentage of them will reach the major leagues, all are braving a near-literal trial by fire as they sweat through hot summer evenings on the Cactus League fields.

Attendance at Rookie League games is free. Because so few people attend, the ballparks don't open concessions, but most allow fans to bring their own food and non-alcoholic beverages, making for an inexpensive evening at the ballpark.

"We only get maybe 25 or 50 people for each game," admitted Jerry Hall, manager of Tempe Diablo Stadium, "but the ones who come can get so close to the players. It's a great experience for a real baseball fan."

October brings another opportunity to get close with the Arizona Fall League, which runs through mid-November. A consortium of 30 major-league clubs sends minor leaguers to the six affiliated teams, which play at Peoria Sports Complex, Surprise Stadium, Scottsdale Stadium, Salt River Fields, Camelback Ranch Glendale in west Phoenix and Sloan Park in Mesa.

In 2016, the Fall League drew extra attention when former NFL star Tim Tebow suited up with the Scottsdale Scorpions, but most of the players are still unknown.

"This is a real hidden gem for true baseball fans because you could be watching the next stars," said Peoria's Englert. "If you're interested in seeing a player before they hit the big league, it's a great place to come."

Only a few hundred fans attend most Fall League games and admission still hovers around \$5. The relaxed atmosphere makes it easier to meet the players and get autographs, and the day games offer great weather — while leaving evenings strategically free to watch the major league playoffs.

By Thanksgiving, most U.S. players are on holiday break and community events take over the stadiums again. But in early February, international teams from Korea and Japan sometimes migrate to Phoenix-area parks for a pre-spring spring training.

And then, by late February, Cactus League itself will be filling the stadiums again.

## Find an event near you

Check stadium schedules for Rookie League and Arizona Fall League games and other events.

**Camelback Ranch Glendale, Phoenix:** [www.camelbackranchbaseball.com](http://www.camelbackranchbaseball.com) (<http://web.camelbackranchbaseball.com/index.jsp>) or 623-302-5000.

**Goodyear Ballpark:** [www.goodyearbp.com](http://www.goodyearbp.com) (<http://www.goodyearbp.com/>) or 623-882-3130.

**Hohokam Stadium, Mesa:** [www.mesaaz.gov/things-to-do/hohokam-stadium](http://www.mesaaz.gov/things-to-do/hohokam-stadium) (<http://www.mesaaz.gov/things-to-do/hohokam-stadium>) or 480-644-4451.

**Maryvale Baseball Park, Phoenix:** [www.phoenix.gov/parks/sports/professional-sports/maryvale-baseball-park](http://www.phoenix.gov/parks/sports/professional-sports/maryvale-baseball-park) (<https://www.phoenix.gov/parks/sports/professional-sports/maryvale-baseball-park>) or 623-245-5500.

**Peoria Sports Complex:** [www.peoriasportscomplex.com](http://www.peoriasportscomplex.com) (<https://www.peoriasportscomplex.com/>) or 623-773-8700.

**Salt River Fields at Talking Stick, Salt River Reservation:** [www.saltriverfields.com](http://saltriverfields.com) (<http://saltriverfields.com/>) or 480-270-5000.

**Scottsdale Stadium:** [www.scottsdaleaz.gov/scottsdale-stadium](http://www.scottsdaleaz.gov/scottsdale-stadium) (<http://www.scottsdaleaz.gov/scottsdale-stadium>) or 480-312-2586.

**Sloan Park, Mesa:** [www.sloanpark.com](http://www.sloanpark.com) (<http://cubs.mlb.com/chc/sloan-park/>) or 480-668-0500.

**Surprise Stadium:** [www.surprisespringtraining.com](http://www.surprisespringtraining.com) (<https://www.surprisespringtraining.com/>) or 623-222-2222.

**Tempe Diablo Stadium:** [www.tempe.gov/diablo](http://www.tempe.gov/diablo) (<http://www.tempe.gov/city-hall/community-services/community-recreation-centers/diablo-stadium>) or 480-350-5265.

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