

Doubledays bring attention to Auburn

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AUBURN - Houston Astros star pitcher Roy Oswalt once called it home, as did current major-league players Kenny Lofton, Luis Gonzalez, and Billy Wagner. Other prominent alumni include New York Yankees pitching coach Mel Stottlemyre, former Baltimore Orioles catcher Rick Dempsey, and baseball legend Tug McGraw.

The place is Auburn, home of the Doubledays. The baseball team currently plays in the Class A short-season New York-Penn League and is an affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays. (The Syracuse SkyChiefs also are a Blue Jays affiliate.) Since its founding in 1888, the team also has been affiliated with the Houston Astros, Philadelphia Phillies, and the New York Mets and Yankees.

"[The team] certainly plays several roles in Auburn, one being that they add such an extra level of excitement to the summer," Auburn Mayor Melina Carnicelli says. "Baseball fans have a wonderful outlet in the city. It brings folks from outside of the city to watch baseball and pumps money into the economy."

The Doubledays are a not-for-profit organization owned and operated by Auburn Community Non-Profit Baseball (ACNPB), a division of the city. Falcon Park, the Doubledays' 2,800-seat home built in 1995, also is owned by ACNPB.

"Municipal-run teams and stadiums are a thing of the past," Doubledays General Manager Jason Smorol says. "It used to happen, but cities just can't afford to do it. [Auburn] couldn't afford to pay the workers... so they set up a non-profit organization."

Perhaps the most famous example of a city-owned team is the National Football League's Green Bay Packers. But there is a big difference in stadiums, budgets, and expenses between the NFL's most storied franchise and the Doubledays. Revenues and expenses for Auburn equal approximately \$600,000 each annually, according to Smorol. As a comparison, Packers' starting quarterback Brett Favre is scheduled to make about \$4.3 million next season.

A board of directors comprised of local residents runs ACNPB.

"They're from here. They know everybody, and they've been involved with the town," Smorol says. "They know how the city is and how the city likes to have things done. [When] they get a general manager, like myself, who's not from Auburn and hasn't been around, they can be very helpful."

Major-league atmosphere

The comparatively small budget does not hinder the Doubledays' daily operations. The team has a four-year affiliate agreement with the Blue Jays, signed in 2001. Unlike the National Hockey League and its affiliates (such as the Syracuse Crunch), Auburn does not pay the Blue Jays a fee. In fact, under the agreement between Major League Baseball clubs and their affiliates, the Blue Jays pay player salaries and a portion of the expenses, including 75 percent of the cost of bats and balls. The Doubleday's pay for the buses, hotel rooms, stadium maintenance, uniforms, and other related items.

"Some teams make it difficult, some teams make it easy on both sides the [major-league] side and the minor-league side," Smorol says. "The Blue Jays are fantastic to work with, and we try to be as accommodating as we can as a small organization. I think they understand that we're a small organization, too."

The team sometimes has to find creative Ways to boost revenue. For the upcoming season - which starts on June 17 against the Jamestown (N.Y.) Jammers - the Doubledays changed the team color, while keeping the logo and name constant. The new uniforms will cost the team \$10,000, and the Blue Jays are donating uniform pants to the Doubledays.

"The team's been around for such a long time that we needed to spruce it up a little bit and stay fresh in the people's minds," Smorol says. "So we want to [stress that people should not] take the Doubledays for granted. You've got a great opportunity here to entertain your family and go out for a night and all these things kind of tie in together... It's a rebranding campaign."

The Blue Jays and Doubledays have a close relationship geared towards the development of the players. The Doubledays hope that the current players, who have yet to be assigned for the upcoming season, will one day follow in the footsteps of famous alumni and develop into stars.

"The most important thing is [that] it's a place for players [to develop]," says Bob Nelson, the Blue Jays' director of minor-league operations. "Auburn is kept to major-league standards. They do a great job there, it's a great facility, and the fans are supportive."

Auburn is one of six Blue Jays affiliates, all of which are in the United States. According to Smorol, the team set an attendance record last year, attracting nearly 70,000 people to Falcon Park. Smorol says there are approximately 80,000 people in Cayuga County and 24,000 in Auburn.

"My responsibility, from Toronto's standpoint, is the safety of the players, that they have a clubhouse, that they have a good bus, that they get where they're going, [and] everybody's safe... and they have everything they need to develop their players - netting, a good field, a watered field, proper lights, a nice dugout, and things of that nature," Smorol says.

"In the New York-Penn League, Auburn is as good or better than what we've seen," Nelson says. "Jason does an outstanding job as general manager. He's very outgoing and interacts well with staff and players. We couldn't be more pleased."

Northeast focus

Smorol started his career in 1995, serving as an intern for Watertown and later serving as concession manager there. He subsequently served as assistant general manager and general manager with the Batavia Muckdogs (the team was called the Clippers when Smorol worked there) and then served as assistant general manager for the Staten Island Yankees. He left the Yankees after the 1999 season to teach sports management at SUNY Cortland, where he still works.

"It's an interesting business. As a short-season club, we're open 365 days a year, but we're really only open for business 38 days a year," Smorol says. "The SkyChiefs [are] open 365 days a year, but they've got 80 home games to sell tickets, hot dogs, hamburgers, merchandise, and advertisements. That stuff offsets the cost, and we make a Couple of bucks off it so we can pay the bills."

Any Surplus money that the Doubledays make either is used for improvements to Falcon Park or is returned to the city of Auburn. The team recently built a batting which will provide an added benefit to players who spend the summer in Auburn.

Community members and the players interact throughout the season. And some players even will live with a family for three months.

"There's a delightful group of young men who take residence here and become citizens of Auburn for the summer months," says Carnicelli, who has served as mayor for four years. "They pay living expenses and [bring] an infusion of dollars to the community."

"My personal philosophy is to take care of the clubhouse as much as possible, because the clubhouse will take care of us, [and] they'll want to be more active in the community," Smorol says. "If we are nice to them - and show them that the community is warm to them - then they're going to be warm back to the community."

That relationship also has brought attention to Auburn.

"We're on the front page of the sports section in Lowell, Mass., [and] Burlington, Vt.; we'll be on TV when we play the Staten Island Yankees and the Brooklyn Cyclones," Smorol says. "When we go on the road, people will want to know what goes on in Auburn. Well, we're the gateway to the Finger Lakes... By just us being here, the city of Auburn and Cayuga County are getting exposure through a variety of ways."