

Minor League *Baseball*

Community Building Through Hometown Sports



Rebecca S. Kraus, PhD

Minor League Baseball
Community Building
Through Hometown Sports

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For Mom and Dad
who encouraged my love of the game

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Susan Kraus received her PhD in sociology from The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Her research interests have focused on community sociology, sport sociology, and social movements. A member of the Washington-Baltimore chapter of the Society of American Baseball Research (SABR), Dr. Kraus assisted the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission in developing an exhibit on the Negro Leagues and sandlot baseball in Prince George County and is the historian for the YWCA of the National Capital Area. Her work has appeared in publications such as the *Sociology of Education* and the *Journal of Sport Sociology*.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

SAFE AT HOME

Tucked away safely in my suburban home on a warm summer night, I hear the rumbling begin. It is slow and distant at first, then it grows, becoming increasingly powerful. At the shopping center across the street, people stop to watch the bursts of light in the sky. It's another Saturday night postgame fireworks show. I smile, comforted by the fact that I live in a minor league town. Life is good.

A seasoned journalist and published author once gave me the following advice: "Don't write about Minor League Baseball." Short and to the point, the reasoning behind his words of wisdom was that not everyone cares as much about Minor League Baseball as I do. As a resident of a minor league town and an avid baseball fan, I still find it hard to believe that other people don't follow the fortunes of their team, or even know where the closest Major League Baseball team has minor league connections. Meanwhile, as a self-described baseball sociologist, I have noticed a trend toward the commercialization and marketing of Minor League Baseball since the 1990s. Surely, there has to be some effects from these recent changes in Minor League Baseball.

With the rise in popularity of Minor League Baseball in the 1990s, it became fashionable to attend games in towns such as Asheville, North Carolina; Salem, Oregon; and Frederick, Maryland. These towns were little known on the national scene, yet seemingly overnight became popular, at least among the baseball set. Box scores are often readily available in local newspapers, and are tracked with interest by residents and Major League Baseball fans alike. Tourism companies now offer convenient packages to tour both major and minor league stadiums and attend games in cities across the country. Other companies have published vacation guides to minor league cities (e.g., Fodor's).

Indeed, I have taken personal tours of major and minor league stadiums across the country. One summer I trekked from San Francisco to Seattle, seeing six games in eight days. While en route to a family reunion several summers later, I stopped at as many minor league stadiums as I could between Washington, DC, and Asheville, North Carolina. I was two days late for the weeklong reunion. Some call it an obsession; I call it my passion, and an intellectual pursuit.

Over the years, baseball scholars and others have witnessed the transformation of Minor League Baseball from a mere tool of Major League Baseball to a thriving industry with a life of its own. Minor League Baseball has become more than a pastime. It is a bona fide economic and community development tool. Many communities—and baseball fans—fervently believe, “If you build it, they will come.”

And people do come. Not just to watch, but to eat, shop, and even put down roots. When Minor League Baseball came to central Maryland, I hopped on the bandwagon along with many others, and took it one step further: I moved in. You see, I chose my home for the primary reason that it is located in a minor league town. Having studied the sociological phenomena of the minor leagues—and being a huge baseball fan—I wanted to live in a minor league town and experience the special relationship between town and team. Visions of the movie *Bull Durham* (1988) danced in my head as the thought of living in a minor league town completely enthralled me. I imagined lazy summer nights at Prince George’s Stadium and peaceful, moonlit walks back to my house. Of course, it’s not quite like that. A major highway and a lack of sidewalks separate me from the ballpark. Nonetheless, although Bowie, Maryland, is large compared to many minor league towns, it provides a unique opportunity to enjoy the impact of Minor League Baseball on the community.

In fact, the first thing I show people when I give them a tour of Bowie is Prince George’s Stadium. My friends, knowing how obsessed I am with baseball, smile appreciatively as I point to the clump of trees beyond the orange façade of Home Depot, toward the ballpark that is not visible from the highway. I ignore their patronizing nods and babble on about Double A baseball, the Eastern League, and the location of Oriole affiliates past and present. I explain to them the history of the farm system and how Minor League Baseball came to be in its present form. When my less-obsessive friends nod politely

and ask if it's time to go home yet, I show them the new housing and retail development that has occurred subsequent to the team moving to town in 1993, and I in 1995.

This book represents my enthusiasm for the great game of baseball, my passion for the minors, and my love of minor league towns. Much has been written about the dichotomy between Major and Minor League Baseball. Minor League Baseball has been called the purist form of baseball, where the players play hard, work hard, and don't act like a bunch of overpaid teenagers. But there is so much more to the minor leagues.

MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL THROUGH TIME

Minor League Baseball celebrated its 100th season in 2001. Although the minors have been in existence since the 1800s, prior to 1999 the present configuration operated under the name National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues (NAPBL). The NAPBL established its relationship with Major League Baseball in 1901, and in 1963 reorganized to the present format of leagues and levels of play (see Chapter 3 for a detailed history).

Truly the national pastime at one point, minor league ball was played in cities as small as Brewster, Texas (population 6,434 in 1960), and as large as Los Angeles, California. Minor League Baseball once inhabited close to 500 cities in the United States. But as the nation progressed, the minor leagues soon had to contend with competitors for entertainment time and money, such as television and interstate travel, made easier by improved air and rail options as well as the interstate highway system. It also saw many of its more profitable cities be overtaken by Major League Baseball as it expanded, adding more major league teams across the country, particularly in places such as Los Angeles and Seattle.

By the 1970s, interest in the minors had waned due to scant investment in the teams by owners and major league affiliates. Teams were operated solely as major league training grounds, with little attention paid to attracting fans or turning a profit.¹ During this time, fewer Major League Baseball teams owned minor league teams than had in the 1950s and 1960s, and many of the remaining owners operated minor league teams merely as hobbies. Attendance dropped off consid-

erably as the number of leagues and teams diminished. By 1975, only 106 teams were fielded. According to one sports historian, throughout this time Minor League Baseball was “as fashionable as the Edsel.”² The lowest point came in the late 1970s when the Reading Phillies were sold for just \$1.³

However, in the 1980s, a minor league renaissance began that continues to this day. Investors and communities began to realize the financial and communal benefits that could be reaped from obtaining a Minor League Baseball team. Thus, business-minded owners began to buy out the “mom and pop” operations that until the 1980s had been the norm in Minor League Baseball. Marketing professionals were hired to sell the minor league product to the fans, and state and local governments began to partner with team owners to turn Minor League Baseball into a profitable enterprise for investors and municipalities alike.⁴ This business model for operating minor league franchises has continued into the twenty-first century. Cities now compete with one another to lure teams away and win the honor of bringing a team into the city limits to earn its place in minor league history.

What city wouldn’t want to play host to an organization that brings us “Morganna, the Kissing Bandit,” the nightly “Dirtiest Car in the Parking Lot” award, and “the toilet toss” contest (in which a fan attempts to toss plungers into a toilet that has been brought onto the field in order to win prizes)? Minor League Baseball goes beyond mere sport. It’s a source of local pride and family entertainment. But most of all, it’s a part of the fabric of the nation that is shared by many communities in the United States, as well as Canada and Mexico.

MINOR LEAGUE BASICS

The minor leagues serve as a training ground for players with aspirations of playing in the major leagues. Although Minor League Baseball teams are professional teams, the skill level of the players improves as players move up through a major league team’s farm system. Today, Minor League Baseball is comprised of many leagues at varying levels of play (see Figure 1.1).

Major League Baseball teams assign players to minor league teams that are affiliated with the big league club. For example, my team—the Baltimore Orioles—had the following farm system in 2002:

- AAA affiliate: Rochester Red Wings, International League
- AA affiliate: Bowie Baysox, Eastern League
- A (advanced) affiliate: Frederick Keys, Carolina League
- A affiliate: Delmarva Shorebirds, South Atlantic League
- Short Season A affiliate: Aberdeen IronBirds, New York-Penn League
- Rookie (advanced) affiliate: Bluefield Orioles, Appalachian League
- Rookie affiliate: Sarasota Orioles, Gulf Coast League

Major League Baseball also operates or is associated with several fall and winter leagues in places such as Florida, Arizona, Venezuela, and Puerto Rico. There are other leagues as well, leagues that are not affiliated with Minor League Baseball or Major League Baseball. These independent leagues harken back to a time when few teams had ties to major league teams and operated independent of major league rules. Since 1993, there have been several successful independent leagues (see Figure 1.2).

The independent leagues do not carry a particular classification, but leagues associated with Major League Baseball are classified into

<i>Class AAA:</i> International League Mexican League Pacific Coast League	<i>Short Season Class A:</i> New York-Penn League Northwest League
<i>Class AA:</i> Eastern League Southern League Texas League	<i>Advanced Rookie:</i> Appalachian League Pioneer League
<i>Class A Advanced:</i> California League Carolina League Florida State League	<i>Rookie:</i> Arizona League Gulf Coast League
<i>Class A:</i> Midwest League South Atlantic League	

FIGURE 1.1. Minor League Divisions, 2002

Northern League (active since 1993) Frontier League (active since 1993) Central League (active since 1994) Western League (active since 1995) Atlantic League (active since 1998)

FIGURE 1.2. Independent Leagues, 2002

different levels. Typically, a player moves up through the leagues from the lowest level, the Rookie level, to Triple A (or AAA), which is the highest level of play (see Table 1.1). Theoretically, the next stop for a player that has proven himself at the AAA level is the big leagues. Over the years, the classifications have changed.

The leagues were restructured in 1963 by the NAPBL in conjunction with Major League Baseball. Prior to that, Class A was the highest league, followed by levels B through E. Class A was the highest classification from 1902 to 1911. In 1912, Class AA was established. That year, the American Association, the Eastern League, and the Pacific Coast League moved up from Class A to Class AA. In addition, from 1936 to 1945, there was a Class A1, which was in between A and AA. Class AAA was established in 1946. Leagues that had been Class AA in 1945, the highest league until that point, were reclassified as Class AAA.⁵

Below Class A were Classes B through D, with Class D being the lowest classification from 1902 through 1962. In 1937, Class E was added, which was restricted to players with no experience in higher leagues. However, only one league was ever classified as Class E—the Twin Ports League in 1943. In the restructuring of the leagues in 1963, all Class B, C, and D leagues were reclassified as Class A and leagues that had been in Class A and AA were moved into the new Class AA.⁶

The minors differ from the major leagues in many ways. For example, because the players are affiliated with the major league club, they can be moved up and down the leagues with little notice. Therefore, a minor league owner cannot depend on player recognition or team quality to sell tickets. Further, in the minors, not only are the stadiums smaller, so are the salaries. All minor leaguers start at a salary of \$850 per month for the first year of their contract. After that, salaries vary

TABLE 1.1. Minor League Classifications, 2002

Classification	Definition	Years in Use
AAA	The highest level in the minor leagues	1946 to present
AA	An intermediate level	1912 to present
A	Entry level	1902 to present
Rookie	Primarily for first-year players	1963 to present
Independent	Leagues not affiliated with the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues or Major League Baseball	

Source: Lloyd Johnson and Miles Wolff, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Minor League Baseball*, Second Edition (Durham, NC: Baseball America, Inc., 1997), p. 11.

according to the contract negotiated between the player and the major league team with which he signed and by league to which the player is assigned. The minimum salary for players assigned to short-season Class A teams is \$850 per month. Full season Class A players can expect no less than \$1,050 per month. Double A players receive a minimum of \$1,500 per month, while AAA players receive at least \$1,500 per month.⁷ According to Judith Blahnik and Phillip S. Schulz in their guide to the minor leagues, *Mud Hens and Mavericks*,

Life in the minors is no bed of roses. Players come to town on one day's notice from spring training with a couple suitcases in hand. The hometown booster club is critical to a player's well-being. Boosters will take players into their homes if need be, and if a player is in financial trouble, they'll try to help out. . . . Most kids are grateful to be taken in by the locals, even if it means getting unsolicited advice. And boosters do love to give advice, be they owners of the local hardware store or farmers from out over the hill. They know a lot about the game, and the players do well to listen. When "their boys" move on to the Show, they're so proud they could bust.⁸

Indeed, it is that special, personal connection between the town and its team that is part of the lure of Minor League Baseball. Although a major league team can represent us and bring us together, it is Minor League Baseball that is played in our own backyard, by folks such as us, who are just trying to make it in this world.

MINOR LEAGUE REVIEWS

Since the early 1990s, several authors have given the minors rave reviews:

The appeal is obvious. Minor league ball, played largely in small and mid-sized cities and towns, retains a purity of spirit which the majors no longer possess. There are no mega-salaries, no enormous stadia. It is baseball in its simplest form—just balls, bats, gloves and lifelong dreams.⁹

Bruce Adelson, Rod Beaton
Bill Koenig, and Lisa Winston
The Minor League Baseball Book

Having spent most of my time in the United States in major league cities, I had never even been to a minor league game, but I knew the marriage was perfect: America and the minor leagues, each a metaphor for each other. It was a road that led through what for me would be virgin territory, and back into the mist of my fondest childhood memory: a love affair with a team that no longer existed, the Milwaukee Braves.¹⁰

David Lamb
*Stolen Season: A Journey Through
America and Baseball's Minor Leagues*

... if baseball is America, then Minor League baseball is grass-roots America in its purest form. The diamond is, after all, American youth's genuine field of dreams, and those dreams that begin on the sandlots and schoolyards of this great land take real shape and gain honest purpose and unequivocal focus on the fields of the minor leagues.¹¹

Mike Blake
*The Minor Leagues:
A Celebration of the Little Show*

Minor-league parks are as comfortable as a favorite chair. Beer costs a buck. Seats are close to the field. . . . Entire neighbor-

hoods sit together. People know the team's owner by his first name. Everybody knows the words to the national anthem.¹²

Bruce Chadwick
*Baseball's Hometown Teams:
The Story of the Minor Leagues*

The Minor Leagues play a secondary role in professional baseball that unfortunately hides the richness of their game. Such teams as the Albuquerque Dukes, the Toledo Mud Hens, and the Pawtucket Red Sox entertain their fans and communities, but their more significant purpose is usually thought to be a training ground for future major leaguers.¹³

Neil J. Sullivan
*The Minors: The Struggles and the Triumph
of Baseball's Poor Relation from 1876 to the Present*

There is a homey yet exuberant atmosphere of celebration in most minor league stands—a touch of Americana, straight out of the late 1940s.¹⁴

Judith Blahnik and Phillip S. Schulz
Mud Hens and Mavericks

The relationship between the minor leagues and their communities will undoubtedly reveal something more about the minors as their story unfolds. Minor league baseball will continue to entertain its fans, unite the community, and carry on the traditions of the national pastime.¹⁵

Rebecca Kraus
“Sport and the Community:
The Case of Minor League Baseball, 1950s-1990s”

PLAY BALL!

This book is more than an academic inquiry into the hold Minor League Baseball has on the American people. It is also a journey to

the places near and far that have welcomed the national pastime into their communities, and the story of how town and team become one, for better or worse. It shows how the past, present, and future of both a minor league team and its community are often intertwined.

So, now that a brief introduction to Minor League Baseball has been given, read on. Then, grab your glove and get out to a stadium near you to check out all the excitement. Until then, if you happen to be driving through Bowie, Maryland, around 9:30 on a Thursday or Saturday summer night, don't be alarmed by the booming noises and flashes of light in the sky over Routes 301 and 50. It's just life in a twenty-first century Minor League Baseball town.