

Houston Baseball: A Brief History

By

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Picture it. April 21, 1867. Houston's first professional baseball game. The local Stonewalls defeated the New Orleans Robert E. Lees by 33 runs—35 to 2. Did anyone know that baseball would become our national sport?

It was a slow journey. Late 19th century Houstonians saw several teams come and go. These were the early years of the Texas League, begun in 1887. Houston's first official team in that league, the Houston Babies, later became known as the Houston Wanderers (see photo above 1904), and in 1905 became the Houston Buffaloes. The Texas League teams had names with local flavor. Think Galveston Sandcrabs and Austin Senators. Wichita Falls Spudders and Beaumont Exporters. Think about the times, when amusements were prohibited on Sundays, and the Waco Tigers' manager was arrested for scheduling games on the sabbath.

The Texas League grew to include teams from neighboring states: The Shreveport Sports, The Tulsa Drillers, The Oklahoma City Indians. The Buffs eventually became a farm team for the St. Louis Cardinals. They outgrew their West End Park, located in what we know today as downtown Houston—just before

it meets the Fourth Ward—on Andrews Street. In 1928, the new Buff Stadium opened on the other side of downtown, near the University of Houston. Complete with cooling fans and organ music, the \$400,000 structure seated 12,000. Imagine taking the trolley to the game, sipping five-cent sodas, and watching the infamous pitcher Dizzy Dean “chunking” the ball across the plate.

Moving ahead to 1941, the idea of an indoor stadium must have seemed like science fiction, but the need was apparent. Eight ball clubs in the Texas League had 85 games rained out that year. Yet Buff Stadium was not without modern updates. With the addition of electric lights, games could no longer be called “on account of darkness.”

Fast forward to 1962. Enter the newly-formed Houston Sports Association, the approval of a National League franchise, and a new team called the Colt .45s. They played at Colt Stadium; a temporary facility located in the parking area of what would soon be a domed sports arena for baseball, football, the rodeo, and other events. The Astrodome opened for the 1965 season, and the renamed Colt .45s made their debut as the Houston Astros, playing an exhibition game with the New York Yankees.

Today the Texas League continues with eight AA teams. The 2019 season champs are the Amarillo Sod Poodles. But let’s not forget the early days of the Texas League. By the time the Astrodome opened, more than 10,000 players had participated since the league’s inception in 1887, with 29 towns fielding teams. Five cent sodas are history, and maybe the Astrodome will be, too. We can wax nostalgic as we take the seventh inning stretch—along with the peanuts and cracker jacks.