




Introduction



IN BASEBALL, above all else, players are supposed to follow the signs. When the third-base coach throws up his hands to stop a runner, the runner is supposed to stop. When a catcher gives the pitcher the sign for a fastball, the pitcher is supposed to throw a fastball. When the manager signals to the bullpen to bring in the hard-throwing right-handed relief pitcher, he wants the right-hander.

San Antonio got a sign about professional baseball the first week of its existence in the city, in 1888. An unidentified reporter for the *Daily Express* newspaper, dispatched to the Government Hill diamond to cover the Texas Base Ball League game between teams from San Antonio and Dallas, had a little mishap on the trolley conveying him back to the newspaper's downtown office. The deed was reported in the game story the next morning: "The Express regrets that some miscreant stole the full score from the reporter while coming to town on a street car." Oh, the times that San Antonio baseball fans wish that miscreant had discouraged the city from following baseball at all.

In the last 115 years, the local nine—be they nicknamed Bullets or Bears, Aces or Indians, Missions or Mustangs—have broken a million hearts. San Antonio has had more than its share of truly awful ballgames, hapless last-place clubs, mediocre players, and inept owners. San Antonio has finished with the worst record in the Texas League fourteen times and been on the wrong end of no-hitters twenty times.





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Sometimes the near misses were just as painful. The club nearly was purchased by baseball legend Ty Cobb in 1928. Instead, controlling interest was sold to the team's secretary-treasurer, who had the double misfortune of buying the team just before the stock market crash and at a time when it was truly awful.

Thirty-one years later, a long-armed power-hitting kid from Alabama named Billy Williams showed up with the club from spring training. Williams got off to a fast start, but on a trip through some of Texas' less-enlightened locales, he became disenchanted with the travel and the racism and left the team. Officials of the parent club, the Chicago Cubs, finally talked him into rejoining the Missions. He played four more games with San Antonio, then was promoted to Triple A, where he hit .670 the first week. Baseball immortals Carl Warwick (a .248 hitter in the majors), Howie Bedell (.193 in the big leagues), and Al Nagel (who never made the majors) dominated the Texas League's statistics instead, and San Antonio finished 10½ games out of first place. Williams went on to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Still, San Antonio embraced its team for years. In the early days, opening day was a cause for parades to the ballpark—for both white and black teams. (Those black teams, by the way, were for a time more successful than their white counterparts, and one of them produced another Hall of Famer, pitcher "Smokey" Joe Williams.) The newspapers were splashed with opening-day photos of the players and filled with opening-day-related advertising.

For decades—especially before the advent of football, both professional and college—baseball was the dominant sports theme in the papers. Winter, spring, summer, or fall, there rarely was a day in the years before World War II when there was not some kind of baseball story in the *Express*, the *News*, or the *Light*.

Of course, those papers were fighting a pitched battle for circulation, especially the afternoon papers, the *Light* and the *News* (the *News* had been started by the Express Publishing Company to compete head-to-head with the *Light*). As baseball reporting became more sophisticated through the 1930s, the sports pages grew. From just running the line scores of local games, to carrying detailed box scores, to eventually carrying results from every Texas League and Major League



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game, the newspapers evolved along with—and because of—baseball.

Minor-league baseball boomed briefly in the years after World War II, with attendance soaring as the teams returned from their self-imposed wartime hibernation and players returned from the war. The integration of baseball also helped the boom, with thousands of African American fans flowing into ballparks to see the likes of Jackie Robinson and Don Newcombe.

The Texas League was slower to integrate—it took five years after Robinson's debut in 1947 for a club to sign the first black player—but some of the teams, including San Antonio, integrated with gusto. After years of struggling, the Missions would take anybody who could play. The first two black players in San Antonio were welcomed by the city in 1953, and both were showered with gifts on their “nights,” sponsored by the African American chamber of commerce and radio station.

Still, baseball could not overcome three factors that sent the game into a rapid decline in the 1950s—air conditioning, television, and football. Air conditioning in the home meant fans did not have to go out to the ballparks, which had been built to catch the prevailing evening breezes. Television meant they did not have to go to the ballpark to see a game anymore. And finally football caught sports fans' fancy, evolving into a juggernaut in Texas that supplanted baseball for year-round coverage and overwhelmed it in the media. San Antonio's fan base dwindled as interest in baseball sank nationwide. One of the best teams in local baseball history, the 1964 Bullets, finished last in the league in attendance, prompting the ownership to move the franchise to Amarillo.

The ownership? The parent club, the Houston Colt .45s, which became the Astros in 1965. When the Texas League left town following the 1964 season, it marked the end of a long era of big-league teams owning the local franchise.

The perennially inept St. Louis Browns owned the team from the 1930s to the 1950s, with mixed results. The Browns seemed to be able to find good players—San Antonio made the playoffs in seven of the first nine seasons of the affiliation—but the Browns always seemed to trade away potential stars (for example, Bob Turley, who won the Cy Young Award in 1959 while pitching for the New York Yankees, came up through the Browns' farm system, including San Antonio). When



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the Browns became the Baltimore Orioles for the 1954 season, the relationship began to sour. The new owners of the Orioles wanted out of the business of running minor-league teams, but when they could not find a buyer, they threatened to fold the Missions entirely. San Antonians bought the franchise and fielded an unaffiliated team (at least officially unaffiliated—the American League forced the Orioles into sending some players to the Missions) in 1958, then signed on with the Cubs.

There have been years when being unaffiliated with a big-league team might not have been a bad idea, though. In 1973 the parent Cleveland Indians told management to use an untested rookie instead of a proven veteran in the deciding game of the Texas League Championship Series. San Antonio lost. In 1980 the Dodgers promoted Fernando Valenzuela to the majors amid the championship series. San Antonio lost that series too.

But being a Dodgers affiliate did boost San Antonio in a number of ways. After racing through four affiliates in nine years, the local ownership and the Dodgers formed a long-term bond, one that lasted from 1977 to 2000. Some of the greatest Dodgers players of the era came through San Antonio, including Valenzuela, Steve Sax, Orel Hershiser, Eric Karros, and Mike Piazza. For much of the period, the Dodgers were considered one of the elite organizations in all of baseball, and the big-league club made nine playoff appearances while affiliated with San Antonio.

Fan interest in San Antonio—and throughout the minor leagues—also began to pick up during this time. In the late 1980s a series of nostalgic movies about the game (including *Field of Dreams* and *The Natural*) sparked fans' interest. In addition, a new set of requirements for stadiums and facilities came down from the National Association (the governing body of the minors), setting off a stadium-building boom that resulted in dozens of new ballparks around the country, including one in San Antonio.

Community leaders had used some clever dealing and a considerable amount of scrounging to bring baseball back to the city in 1968. With Astros owner Roy Hofheinz refusing to let anyone use Mission Stadium (which had sat idle since he moved the team following the



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1964 season), San Antonians worked out a deal to expand a small stadium on the campus of St. Mary's University. Collecting bits and pieces from several ballparks around the state, they soon turned V. J. Keefe Field into a cozy, fan-friendly park that served as the minor-league team's home from 1968 to 1993.

Politics and business always have been part of the game in San Antonio. Mayors perennially threw out first pitches, as did more than one governor. Local business leaders stepped up to buy the team at critical times through the years. Morris Block purchased the franchise in 1905, the last year it was in the South Texas League. Harry J. Benson took over from Block in 1915 and ran the team out of his downtown tobacco shop, fighting an uphill battle against the Fort Worth dynasty of the postwar era. In 1958 a group led by Dan Sullivan took over the team and kept it in San Antonio. Another group of businessmen, led by attorney Henry Christopher and including Nelson Wolff, brought baseball back in 1968. Convenience store magnate Tom Turner bought the team in the late 1970s and brought cheerleaders (the Dodger Dollies) and barbeque grills to Keefe Field.

But Keefe Field was outdated by the late 1980s, leading to an ultimatum from the National Association—get a new stadium or lose the team. City Councilman—and subsequently mayor—Nelson Wolff used much of his considerable business and political skill and will to get a stadium built and keep the team. Between his efforts and the ownership of minor-league-sports entrepreneur Dave Elmore, the city got its new ballpark in 1994—and immediately set the Texas League record for single-season attendance. San Antonio's new stadium, which was named for Wolff in 1995, got the city into the minor-league baseball boom.

But there was still one thing missing—a championship. San Antonio had come close three times since the Bullets' pennant in 1964, but it took a collection of young prospects, players on the way back up, and an ambitious young manager to break a thirty-two-year drought. Just one player from the 1997 Missions went on to be an all-star in the major leagues (catcher Paul LoDuca), but with good timing, solid pitching, and the stable leadership of manager Ron Roenicke, San Antonio got its pennant in 1997. And while it was not celebrated like some in




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the past—by this time the NBA's Spurs were the city's favorite franchise—the pennant did serve as a fitting finale for the Dodgers era.

The latest affiliation for the Missions, with the Seattle Mariners, has produced three of the most successful seasons in local baseball history. San Antonio lost in the final game of the Western Division playoffs in 2001, then won the pennant in 2002 with a team that finished last in the first half of the season. In 2003 the Missions recorded their best first-half record ever, won both halves of the season, and clinched a spot in the postseason for the third year in a row—just the fourth time in franchise history the team has made it three consecutive years or more. They then topped off the season by beating Frisco four games to one in the Texas League Championship Series, marking the first time San Antonio has won back-to-back titles.

Baseball has come a long way from those early days of 1888, indeed. Perhaps it is a good thing that San Antonio did not heed that initial sign after all.

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