

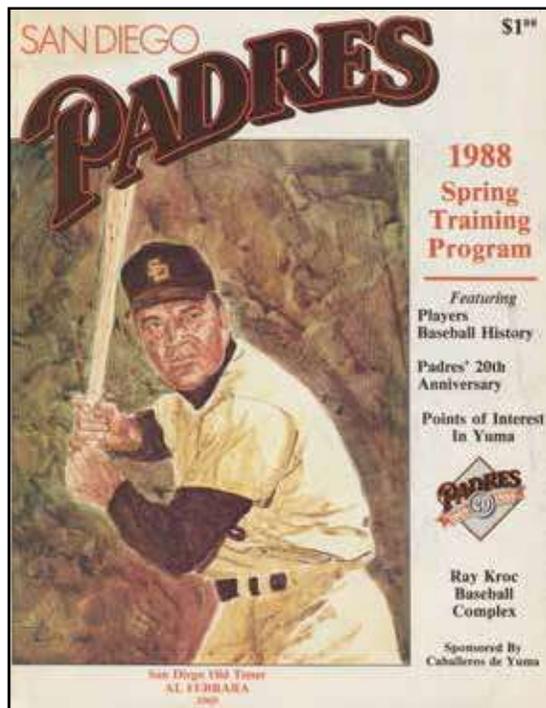


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# SPRING TRAINING IN YUMA, 1969-1993

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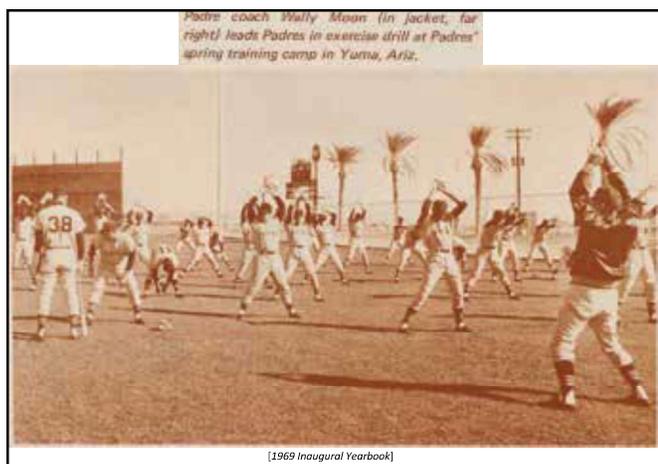
BY JIM PATRICK



On July 2, 1968, San Diego Padres vice president/general manager Eddie Leishman announced that the new National League franchise had chosen Yuma, Arizona, as its spring-training base.

This was cause for celebration in Yuma, since the community had been trying to attract another major-league club ever since the Baltimore Orioles reluctantly trained at Yuma's Municipal Stadium in 1954.<sup>1</sup> Yuma's city officials and baseball boosters were thrilled that the town had been given a second chance to host a big-league club, but they also realized that much work needed to be done in a short time to get Yuma ready for major-league baseball – particularly since Municipal Stadium was no longer a viable location for big leaguers; after neighboring 1st Avenue had been widened in 1965, the right-field fence at the ballpark was only 280 feet from home plate. As this article will illustrate, Keegan Field, the Padres' temporary facility in 1969, was certainly no field of dreams, but thanks to hard-working volunteers, generous local businesses, and enthusiastic community support, Yuma and the Padres successfully completed the first year of their mutually beneficial 25-year spring-training partnership.

Why Yuma? The city began officially courting major-league teams in 1950 when the Chamber of Commerce established a baseball committee. News stories in that decade occasionally mentioned teams that were "considering Yuma" for spring training, including not only the St. Louis Browns [Baltimore Orioles], but also the Pirates, Giants, and Dodgers. While none of the latter three clubs conducted serious negotiations with Yuma, a



positive result of the city's outreach efforts was the friendship established between Dodgers general manager Buzzie Bavasi and newspaper publisher Don Soldwedel, a member of Yuma's baseball committee. Bavasi resigned as Dodgers GM in June 1968 to become president and part-owner of the new San Diego ballclub. In a 1984 article Soldwedel recalled, "[I]n 1968, before the Padre franchise came about, Buzzie called and told me that he was going to be involved in a new franchise. He said if it was granted, Yuma would get a team. About a month later he called back and said the franchise had been okayed."<sup>2</sup> Yuma's selection may not have been quite as automatic as Soldwedel remembered. John "Doc" Mattei, the Padres team trainer and traveling secretary, described being sent by Bavasi to scout several potential spring-training sites. According to Mattei, Apache Junction, Arizona, was eliminated from consideration when he walked into the clubhouse and found it "crawling with rattlesnakes."<sup>3</sup> Mattei also recalled visiting Borrego Springs, California, but he sensed that "Yuma was much more gung-ho," adding, "I said to Buzzie, 'The people really want us there.'"<sup>4</sup>

Much of Yuma's "gung-ho" attitude could be attributed to the Caballeros de Yuma, a civic group formed in 1962 as the official greeting organization for the city. The Caballeros signed on as the sponsoring organization for the 1969 Padres spring-training season, a role that they maintained for all 25 years of the Padres' tenure in Yuma. During the first year, an ad hoc group called the Community Baseball Boosters complemented the efforts of the Caballeros by holding a fundraising barbecue, a dance, and a golf tournament. They also sold thousands of "Be a CBB" bumper stickers for a dollar each.<sup>5</sup>

In 1968 Keegan Field was an unadorned youth-baseball facility located near Kennedy Park and Kennedy Swimming Pool. The field's dimensions were adequate for professional baseball, but nearly everything else needed by the Padres at Keegan would have to be cobbled together – largely by volunteer labor using donated materials. Bleachers, fences, dugouts, locker rooms, showers, batting cages, sliding pits, concession stands, a press

box, and a PA system were all absent. The field needed to be leveled and the pitching mound had to be raised to professional standards. Doc Mattei described the impressive community effort: "The Marines built the lockers. The electric company took light poles and made a batting cage. Tanner Construction leveled the field. We raised \$3,000 from a raffle, \$3,000 from a barbecue, another \$3,000 selling bumper stickers."<sup>6</sup> Some of the bleachers were purchased at "going out of business" prices from a Las Vegas racetrack.<sup>7</sup>

The Padres held their first workout in Yuma on Saturday, February 22, 1969. The high temperature that day was a brisk 52 degrees, making the temporary outdoor shower facilities less than comfortable. The Padres used the locker rooms at Kennedy Swimming Pool while training at Keegan Field, but the additional outdoor showers were also needed. Another amusing Doc Mattei story concerns the need for a telephone at the training facility so that the players could call their wives and girlfriends. "If we put in a free one," Mattei reasoned, "the bills will be outrageous. So I had a pay phone installed. Put a roll of dimes on top of it. Worked very smoothly."<sup>8</sup>

The Padres played 14 games at Keegan Field in 1969. The total attendance was 14,987, a per-game average of 1,070. In the opening game, on March 7, the recently unretired Johnny Podres led the Padres to a win over the California Angels before 2,500 fans. An even larger crowd of 2,604 saw Juan Marichal and the San Francisco Giants defeat the Padres on March 21. Only 530 fans attended the midweek 1:00 P.M. Padres-Seattle Pilots game on March 27, but since former Yankees pitcher Jim Bouton happened to be a member of the Pilots squad, the game and its host city garnered an unflattering description in one of the best-selling sports books ever published. In *Ball Four*, his classic tell-all baseball diary, Bouton did not remember his Keegan Field experience fondly. He described the teams playing in front of "about twelve people ... at a place that doesn't even have a visiting clubhouse, so that we had to dress on the back of an equipment truck."<sup>9</sup>

When Yuma officials signed their initial five-year spring-training contract with the Padres, they agreed to have a multi-field baseball facility ready for the opening of spring training in 1970. To finance the construction of Desert Sun Stadium, which was built at an approximate cost of \$400,000, the city passed a 2 percent hospitality tax and sold \$100,000 worth of recreation bonds that had been obtained with voter approval seven years earlier. Desert Sun Stadium, which was three miles south of Keegan Field and just up the road from the Yuma Greyhound Park, consisted of a primary grandstand field adjoined by three practice fields. The complex's 12,000-square-foot clubhouse seemed especially luxurious after the swimming-pool locker rooms and double-wide

trailer offices at Keegan Field. The original configuration at Desert Sun had a seating capacity of 4,000, but by the end of the Padres' tenure in 1993, seating capacity had been expanded to 7,894. Several other improvements were made over the years, including a lighting system provided by the Padres in 1983, a weight room donated by Japan's Yakult Swallows in 1984, and added bleachers and box seats obtained with funds from benefit games.<sup>10</sup> When Desert Sun Stadium opened in February 1970, general manager Eddie Leishman claimed, "This complex will be head and shoulders above the other spring-training areas."<sup>11</sup> Visiting players also took notice. In 1976 Cubs first baseman Andre Thornton expressed frustration with his team's venue, old Scottsdale Stadium with its single field: "Look at that facility in Yuma. ... Here's a club that's been in existence less than 10 years. The Cubs have been around for 100. Chicago ought to have the best, but I don't find it to be true."<sup>12</sup>

Before the start of the 1984 regular season, owner Ray Kroc died at the age of 81. The Yuma City Council voted to name the complex the Ray Kroc Baseball Complex in his honor, while keeping the name Desert Sun Stadium for the primary field at the complex. Kroc's wife, Joan, attended the dedication ceremony held before the Padres-Angels game on March 11, 1984.

Moving to the Desert Sun training facility in 1970 was a major upgrade for the Padres, the visiting teams, and the fans, but attendance didn't increase substantially in the early years of the new complex. In 1973, for example, the home games drew a total of 13,735 fans for an average of 1,145 per game.<sup>13</sup> The March 24, 1974, game versus the world champion Oakland A's set an attendance record of 3,257.<sup>14</sup> By 1983 attendance had risen sharply to a spring-season total of 47,676, with a per-game average of 3,667.<sup>15</sup> In 1989 eight of the Yuma games were sell-outs for a total attendance of 69,541 and an average of 5,795.<sup>16</sup> These numbers were not sustained the following year due to the 32-day lockout imposed by the owners at the beginning of the 1990 exhibition season. The labor impasse caused scheduling havoc and economic hardship for all of baseball's spring-training sites. A handful of hastily rescheduled games were played before Opening Day, but attendance was predictably poor.

Yuma's year-round residents and seasonal "snowbirds" supported the Padres throughout their 25 years, but it was the influx of fans from San Diego, including one organization known as the Hot Stove League of San Diego, that accounted for the full occupancy of Yuma's hotels and motels, particularly for weekend series. In February 1987 Sylvester Stallone and the producers of *Rambo III* discovered a lodging scarcity in Yuma when the crew wanted to stay for several days while filming battle scenes in the nearby desert. (Stallone's company did return the following January, well before the Padres and their fans were due to hit town.)<sup>17</sup>

The Padres' lodging accommodations varied throughout the Yuma years, presumably because traveling secretary Doc Mattei would negotiate with local hotels for optimal prices and availability. The team stayed at resorts including the Flamingo, the Stardust, the Park Inn International, and the Ramada Inn. Players in camp from Padres minor-league affiliates, including the Hawaii Islanders and the Las Vegas Stars, were more likely to stay at the Motel 6. Future Padres general manager Kevin Towers recalled his experience: "Yuma, 1983. Our lodging was a Motel 6. Had a black-and-white TV. Towels were so small they wouldn't fit around your waist. Air conditioning was a westerly breeze through the window."<sup>18</sup> Things weren't necessarily better with the big-league accommodations, at least according to 1988-1995 team President Dick Freeman: "Most of us stayed at the Stardust. The name was the only thing impressive about that place. The mattresses had lumps."<sup>19</sup>

Padres players and team officials frequently commented about Yuma's nightlife and entertainment scene – or lack thereof. As he neared the end of his eighth and final Yuma spring-training camp in 1980, Dave Winfield complained to the *Los Angeles Times*, "There's nothing to do here. Nothing."<sup>20</sup> Another future Hall of Famer, Ozzie Smith, expressed a more positive view: "I was there to play baseball, so I really didn't care that there wasn't much else to do."<sup>21</sup> Outspoken reliever Goose Gossage explained in his autobiography the difference between Yuma (home of Marine Corps Air Station Yuma) and Fort Lauderdale, Florida, where his previous team, the Yankees, trained: "Down in Florida, you get to see a bunch of beautiful young girls in bikinis. Out here we get to see jarheads."<sup>22</sup> According to catcher Terry Kennedy, "Yuma was the best. We played baseball all day and cooked out every night. That was it. When we left there, we were ready for the season." Infielder Tim Flannery, another key member of the 1980s Padres teams, would find rental housing in Yuma each spring so he could be joined by his family. Flannery recalled fondly, "We would barbecue every night out there with the family. My son, he learned to walk here; he learned to swim here."<sup>23</sup> Dick Williams, who managed Kennedy and





Flannery, expressed a contrarian view in his autobiography: “Perhaps because their spring training facility in Yuma, Arizona, is too relaxed and too close to San Diego ... this organization traditionally has the slowest starts in baseball.”<sup>24</sup> Greg Riddoch, manager in 1990-1992, noted the friendliness of Yuma’s winter visitors: “I’d go out jogging in the morning and there would be all those RVs out there. ... Someone would always have a pancake for me. Then I would jog on back to the ballpark and get ready for the game.”<sup>25</sup> It might seem impossible to find common ground in such mixed reviews of Yuma, but reliever Randy Myers’ existential description of the town comes close: “It’s not where you’d probably like to be, but it’s a nice place when you’re there.”<sup>26</sup>

Yuma’s relatively short distance from San Diego (170 miles, approximate three-hour driving time) was a major factor in its choice as the Padres’ spring-training site. As GM Leishman explained, “This proximity makes it easy for many San Diego fans to attend the exhibition games.”<sup>27</sup> He also noted that the team’s training location enabled many of the players’ wives and children to attend weekend games in Yuma. Visiting teams didn’t benefit from this proximity, however, and complaints about long bus rides to and from the Phoenix and Tucson camps were common. The scenic drives through the desert could also be tiresome for the Padres, but a bigger challenge for the team was gaining access to ballfields when on extended spring road trips. In 1986, for example, the team played 12 games during a 10-day stay in the Phoenix area. Manager Steve Boros explained, “We just don’t have access to the fields and the time. But we’ve got to play somebody, and they don’t want to come to Yuma all the time.”<sup>28</sup> Greg Riddoch, manager of the 1992 squad, shared similar frustrations: “We can’t work on fundamentals. We don’t have our own facility. ... We have to find a field each day that the guys who aren’t playing in the game can work on.”<sup>29</sup> When the California Angels moved their training site from Palm Springs, California, to Tempe, Arizona, after the 1992 season, Yuma’s

isolated location became even more of a logistical issue for the Padres and the other Cactus League clubs.

There were no rainouts during the first 22 years of Padres spring-training games. This remarkable streak is understandable given the city’s average annual rainfall of 3.36 inches, but rainouts did occur in both 1991 and 1992.<sup>30</sup> High winds in Yuma are not uncommon, and on March 13, 1971, a Padres-Indians game had to be canceled due to a sandstorm. Manager Preston Gomez said, “It would have been risky to try and play – someone could have gotten hurt.”<sup>31</sup> And when acclaimed rookie pitcher Jim Abbott of the Angels made his professional debut on March 3, 1989, in a B-squad game at Desert Sun Stadium, his biggest challenge was not the Padres hitters, but the wind gusts approaching 30 miles per hour.<sup>32</sup> It’s rare to hear anyone complain about a *lack* of humidity, but in 1987 manager Larry Bowa did just that in commenting about the weather in Yuma that spring: “The facilities are nice and the people are great, but the weather was terrible. ... It was windy every day. ... It’s hard for a pitcher to throw breaking balls here. There is no humidity in addition to the wind. I prefer training in Florida.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, Yuma is known for the extreme heat of its summers, but the town is also renowned for its typically mild winter weather. On March 19, 1978, however, an 81-year-old San Diego woman was overcome by the 84-degree sunshine during the Padres-Indians game. After she was revived by paramedics and asked how she felt, Frances Price replied, “I think I’m okay. The only thing that bothers me is that the Padres are playing such lousy baseball.”<sup>34</sup> Unknown to Mrs. Price, manager Alvin Dark would be fired just two days later – a rare spring training firing – and new manager Roger Craig would lead the team to its first-ever winning season in 1978.

Throughout their Yuma stay, the Padres had signed and renewed a series of five-year contracts with the city, but the final contract was only for two years (1992 and 1993). Consequently, it was

not a surprise when the team announced in July 1992 that the San Diego organization had signed a 20-year contract to train in Peoria, Arizona, beginning in 1994.<sup>35</sup> A local headline best expressed the feelings in Yuma regarding the upcoming 1993 lame duck training camp: “Celebration, Sadness in Store for Padres’ Swan Song.”<sup>36</sup>

At the conclusion of their 1993 spring training season – their final one in Yuma – a couple of San Diego icons weighed in on the impact of the long Padres-Yuma relationship. After the team’s March 31 finale, against the Chicago Cubs, Tony Gwynn said, “I’ve been here for 12 years, and I’ve really enjoyed it. ... I’m going to miss Yuma. I’m going to miss the short drives over. I’m going to miss the way the people treated us here with a lot of respect.”<sup>37</sup> And broadcaster Jerry Coleman, never one for understatement, proclaimed, “We owned this town. Nobody has been treated better than we were treated here. I don’t believe that, in the history of baseball, has a city embraced a ballclub the way Yuma embraced the Padres.”<sup>38</sup>

The goodwill and good memories shared between the Padres and Yuma was evident in the annual series of split-squad games staged in Yuma between 1998 and 2007. The Arizona Diamondbacks, who joined the National League in 1998, were the “visiting team” for most of these well-attended exhibitions. After complaining that the Diamondbacks had brought only one of their frontline players, Tony Womack, to play on March 24, 2002, a Caballeros de Yuma member commented, “We’re really happy with the Padres. They bring big players to this game every year – it’s their game, they’re the home team. They get great support from Yuma.”<sup>39</sup>

After the Padres’ departure following the 1993 exhibition season, professional baseball maintained a bumpy existence in Yuma through 2011. After conducting spring training in Yuma from 1974 to 1999, the Yakult Swallows decided in 2000 to resume training in their home country with the other Japanese teams. In 1995 Yuma attracted an independent minor-league team called the Desert Dawgs who played a grand total of 10 games before their league folded. From 2000 to 2002 the Yuma Bullfrogs struggled to draw fans to summer baseball games in Yuma. Similarly, the 2005-2011 Yuma Scorpions experienced many roster and management changes, along with one constant: poor attendance.

In 2015 the city made the difficult decision to convert the primary field at the Ray Kroc Baseball Complex to a soccer field. The grandstand field had rarely been occupied after 2011, and a professional soccer team agreed to pay for the conversion. The pro soccer enterprise was not a success. Finally, in September 2017 Yuma residents witnessed the opening of the Pacific

Avenue Athletic Complex, a six-field facility designed solely for ... softball.

The Cactus League of today is dramatically different from that of 50 years ago when Yuma hosted the Padres’ inaugural spring-training camp at Keegan Field. The team has spent the past 25 years sharing the massive Peoria Sports Complex with the Seattle Mariners. The Peoria facility consists of 13 full-size baseball fields spread over 145 acres. The main stadium has a seating capacity of 12,518.<sup>40</sup> In 2018 average attendance for the Padres home exhibition games was 5,887, up slightly from 2017’s average of 5,617.<sup>41</sup> And the reduction in travel has been an even more dramatic change for the 15 Cactus League clubs that now train in Arizona. The teams all train in the Phoenix metropolitan area – 10 complexes total, five with dual occupancy. Yuma would never have a place in today’s centralized, corporate-style Cactus League, but at the outset, the community’s exceptional hospitality and eagerness to be a baseball town made Yuma an ideal match for the young San Diego Padres franchise.

## NOTES

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- 6 Lorge.
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- 29 Murray Chass, "Baseball Notebook," *New York Times*, March 22, 1992: A-5.
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