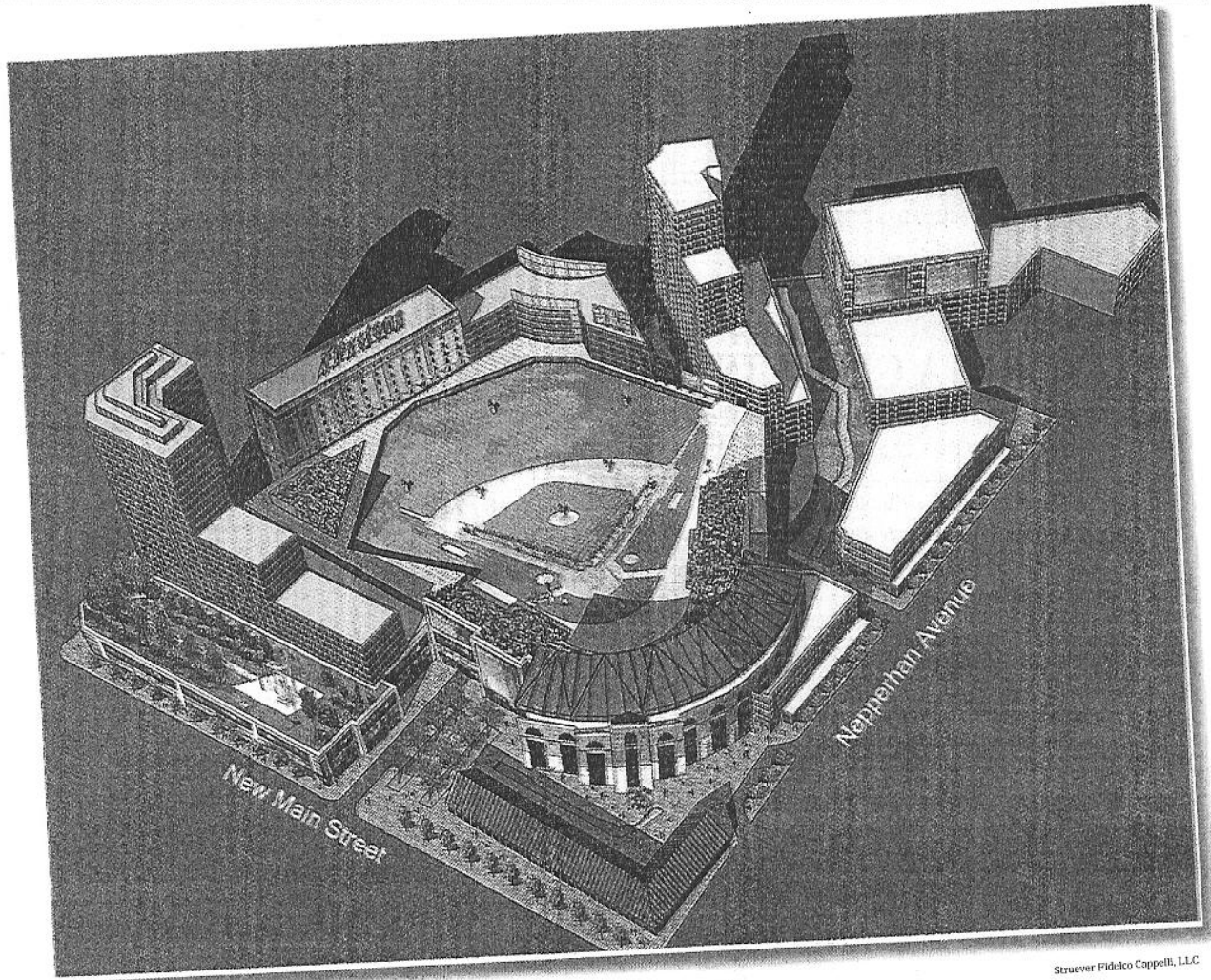


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The Bases Are Loaded

With 16 Minor League Teams, a Home Game Is Always Nearby

By DAVE CALDWELL

As recently as 1993, the New York area was a backwater for minor league baseball. After all, it had the Yankees and the Mets, who between them played a total of 162 home games a year.

There was one minor league team — the Red Sox in New Britain, Conn. — in an area embracing Connecticut, New Jersey and a chunk of New York, including Long Island and Westchester and Dutchess Counties.

Last year the Yankees and the Mets drew a total of 6.9 million fans, 2.7 million more than in 1993. But these days 16 minor league teams share that same swath of land, and at least 3 more are on the way, leading some fans to wonder: How much of a good — and sometimes not-so-good — thing can even the most ardent baseball fan stand?

New York City and its suburbs have become a hotbed for minor league baseball, saturating the region with more clubs any other part of the country. And if a Yankees or Mets game is akin to taking in a Broadway play, then a minor league game is like a trip to a neighborhood cineplex.

"It's Hometown U.S.A.," said James P. Molinaro, the borough president of Staten Island, which is home to the Yankees' New York-Penn League team. "And it gives the parent an opportunity to go out and see some baseball with his family without spending \$400."



Librado Romero/The New York Times

Site for the proposed Yonkers minor league baseball complex (top).

Tickets, as well as peanuts, popcorn and hot dogs, are substantially less expensive in the minors than in the big leagues. The best seat in the house for a Staten Island Yankees' game costs \$11; a seat at the top of the upper deck of Yankee Stadium is \$20.

Of course, players in the minor leagues are far less polished than their big-league counterparts, but most people who go to a game already know that. The quality of play is not much better than what it is, at say, a local

college game. And the age of most of the players is similar. Only one of the 26 players on the current roster of the Lakewood Blue-Claws, the Philadelphia Phillies' Class A affiliate, has celebrated his 24th birthday.

Still, minor league officials like to say they have built an audience by emphasizing the notion that a night in Lakewood, Coney Island or Bridgeport is affordable family entertainment.

It is an appeal that has resonated.

In 2005, the 16 minor league teams in the area drew a total of 3,835,689 fans, or slightly fewer than the record 4,090,440 the Yankees drew last year while playing in a stadium about 10 times the size of an average minor league park.

While minor league fans will not get to see Alex Rodriguez swatting a home run for the Yankees or Pedro Martinez pitching to perfection for the Mets, they may get to cavort with a fuzzy mascot or participate in a three-legged race between innings.

"If people leave the park without knowing who won or lost the game, then we have done our job," said Jim Beaudoin, the general manager of the Connecticut Defenders of the Eastern League, a team based in Norwich.

Indeed, minor league baseball has become such a cottage industry that it is now regarded as a way to lure families and large groups into redeveloped areas where baseball is just one attraction. Retail shops, restaurants, office space and hotels are often other parts

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of the package. But a minor league ballpark does not guarantee that the area around it will be developed. For instance, KeySpan Park on Coney Island, where the Brooklyn Cyclones, a Mets' farm team, have played to capacity crowds since 2001, does not appear to have changed its surroundings much.

"If a ballpark is not part of a larger urban redevelopment, it's not going to be successful," said Mary-Jane Foster, a real estate developer who with her husband, Jack McGregor, owns and operates the Bridgeport Bluefish of the Atlantic League.

That lesson has not been lost on Mr. McGregor and Ms. Foster, who own one of three Atlantic League expansion teams on the drawing board. In their case, a ballpark in Yonkers is to be the jewel of a \$3.1-billion downtown renovation project.

The two other proposals for the Atlantic League, which was founded in 1998 and is made up of independent teams with no major-league ties, call for new stadiums to be built as part of Meadowlands Xanadu, a shopping center and entertainment complex going up in the Meadowlands Sports Complex in New Jersey, and a project in Nassau County on Long Island.

For now, Steven B. Kalafer — a developer and owner of about 30 automobile dealerships who at one time had a stake in every team in the Atlantic League with the exception of the Atlantic City Surf — also owns a New Jersey franchise called the Bergen Cliff Hawks, which he planned to have play at a ballpark at Xanadu. But for now, the financially troubled developers of Xanadu have failed to produce a plan for the park and Mr. Kalafer is suing them.

The Nassau County team, which still does not have a name, will be operated by Frank Boulton, the founder and commissioner of the Atlantic League who already owns three teams in it, including the Long Island Ducks, which has played to capacity crowds at the 6,000-seat Citibank Park in Central Islip since its inception in 1998.

Mr. Boulton does not seem to be concerned that his new team will be based about 25 miles west of the Ducks, who drew 429,218 to 70 home dates last season. He conceded in a recent interview that the landscape could become too cluttered with minor league teams, although he insisted that point had not yet been reached.

As Mr. Kalafer said, "The region was simply under-served."

That is not to say that owning a minor league team in the region is a ticket to success.

Andrew Zimbalist, an economics professor at Smith College who is a leading authority on sports business, said in a telephone interview that while it is hard to have too many minor league teams — since fans prefer to travel only minutes to a game — the New York area might well be reaching that point.

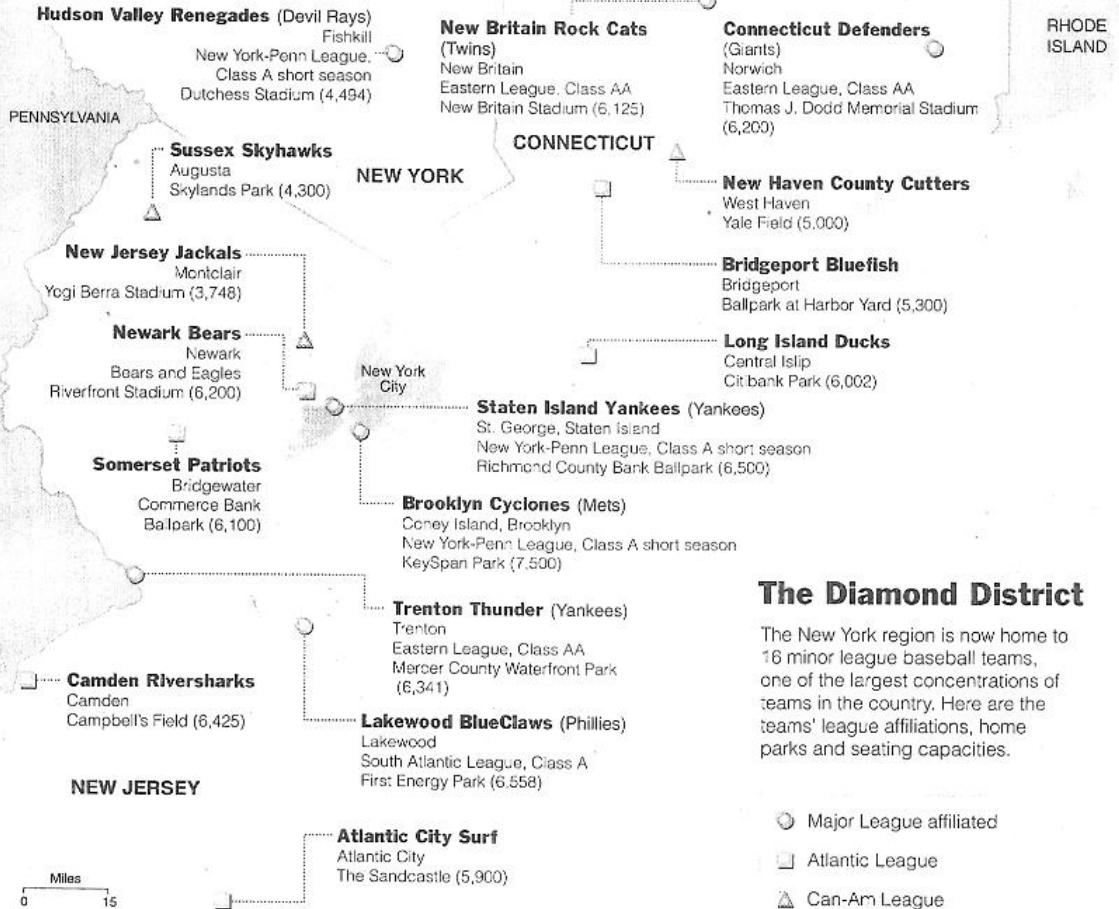
"I'm exaggerating here, but it's a little bit like having a bowling alley in each community," he said.

But when it comes to the New York area, with 16 minor league teams and more on the way, Mr. Zimbalist said: "It sounds to me like 16 is too many. You can certainly have a glut."

Take the New Jersey Cardinals, a farm club of the St. Louis Cardinals, which at the end of last season moved from Sussex County to a new ballpark in State College, Pa., where the team will be called the Spikes. Or the Ravens, an Eastern League affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays, who left New Haven, Conn., for Manchester, N.H., where a new ballpark was completed after the 2003 season.

"Yale Field did not have some of the amenities you'd like to have in a modern ballpark," said Charlie Dowd, the former general manager of the Ravens who is now general manager of the Bridgeport Bluefish.

But just as quickly as teams move to other homes, new ones take their place. For instance, Sussex County and New Haven quickly lured franchises from the Can-Am League, another independent league. The



New Haven County Cutters entered the league in 2004, and the Sussex Skyhawks will make their debut this season.

The Cutters' management spruced up Yale Field, a charming ballpark in West Haven, Conn. As for the Skyhawks, the team spent \$1.5 million renovating Skylands Park, in Augusta, yet it sliced ticket and concession prices to woo back fans, and it is focusing heavily on group sales. A box seat that had cost \$12 is now \$10, and hot dogs, which sold for \$3.25, now cost \$2.50.

"I absolutely think it's a gold mine," said the general manager of the Skyhawks, Ben Wittkowski, who had worked for the New Jersey Jackals, another team in the Can-Am League in Montclair. "It's the only game in town."

Although the Long Island and Somerset teams have always attracted large crowds, other Atlantic League teams have struggled. The Nashua Pride, in New Hampshire,

moved to the Can-Am League during the off-season, forcing the eight-team league to replace them with the Road Warriors — who do not yet have a home park — to balance the schedule.

Another of Mr. Boulton's teams, the Atlantic City Surf, averaged 2,018 fans a game last year at its 5,900-seat stadium, the Sandcastle. The Newark Bears, a New Jersey team that had been owned in part by Mr. Kalafer until late last year, averaged 2,709 in 2005 at the 6,200-seat Bears and Eagles Riverfront Stadium.

"But this will really be the first season since the park has opened that there's not construction going on in front of the site," Mr. Kalafer said.

The Bridgeport Bluefish were founded in 1998 by a group of investors that included Ms. Foster and her husband, Mr. McGregor. Another member of the group, Mickey Herbert, bought controlling interest in the club

The Diamond District

The New York region is now home to 16 minor league baseball teams, one of the largest concentrations of teams in the country. Here are the teams' league affiliations, home parks and seating capacities.

- Major League affiliated
- Atlantic League
- ▲ Can-Am League

in 2000, but Ms. Foster and Mr. McGregor bought the team from him in December 2005.

Last season, the Bluefish averaged only 3,036 fans a game at the 5,300-seat Ballpark at Harbor Yard. The team did not have enough money to advertise, a crucial component to success in the minors, said Mr. Dowd, the general manager.

This year, Ms. Foster said, the push is on to make the Bluefish enticing to suburban mothers, who usually make the entertainment decisions for their families.

"It has not made money," Ms. Foster said of the club. "But we also believe that it can, or else we would not have come back."

Indeed, Ms. Foster says she is so sure of the drawing power of minor league teams that she and her husband plan to run an Atlantic League team in Yonkers, where the stadium will be the hub of that city's redevelopment when it is completed, probably in 2008.

"We were really amazed at how Yonkers has turned itself around," she said.

Even though the downtown area of Yonkers, a city of 200,000, is less than 10 miles from Yankee Stadium and less than 20 miles from Shea, Mayor Philip A. Amicone believes that the team will not be competing for customers with New York's two big-league teams.

"To travel to Yankee Stadium and Shea Stadium costs a fortune for a family," he said. "Now, Yonkers is going to be a place where people want to come again."

The ballparks on the drawing board for the Meadowlands and in Nassau County will not be in the middle of urban areas, although the goal for each is the same: to draw those seeking affordable family entertainment to a site that also has offices, shops and restaurants.

In fact, a ballpark was not originally included in Charles B. Wang's plan to renovate Nassau Coliseum, the home of the New York Islanders of the National Hockey League.

In addition to a substantially refurbished arena and a sports technology center, Mr. Wang — the owner of the Islanders and founder of Computer Associates — wanted



The grounds crew at Citibank Park in Central Islip, home of the Long Island Ducks.
 Phil Marino for The New York Times

Leagues Of Their Own

When it comes to minor league baseball, it's hard to tell the teams apart without a scorecard.

Today there are eight minor league teams in New Jersey, four in Connecticut, two in New York City and one each on Long Island and in Dutchess County in New York, representing five different leagues. Three of those leagues — the Eastern, South Atlantic and New York-Penn Leagues — consist of farm teams of major league clubs.

The Eastern League is a Class AA league, meaning that its players are two steps from the majors, and the South Atlantic League is Class A, three steps away. Teams in each of the two leagues, which opened the season earlier this month, play 140 games a season.

The New York-Penn League is a short-season Class A league, and teams — made up largely of players who tend to be younger and less skilled than in the long-season Class A league — play a 76-game schedule beginning in June.

In addition, two independent leagues, the Atlantic and the Can-Am, have teams in the area. Neither league has ties to the majors, but big-league clubs often raid independent teams to stock their rosters. Of the two leagues, the Atlantic, which plays a 136-game schedule that opens this week, tends to have players who have accomplished more as professionals.

The most notable Atlantic League player in recent years was Rickey Henderson, the former Yankees and Mets outfielder and the major-league career leader in stolen bases, who played for the Newark Bears in 2003 before signing a contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers midway through the major-league season.

The Can-Am League, which plays a 92-game schedule that begins in late May, has younger players hoping to impress scouts from major league teams that want to fill the rosters of their minor affiliates.

DAVE CALDWELL

his ambitious project to include office towers, hotels, apartment buildings and town houses.

Mr. Wang and Reckson Associates, a development company based in Long Island that is his partner in the project, were awarded the project last month over a rival bid by the owners of the Mets, in part because they added a 6,000-seat minor league ballpark to their plan to match the one the Mets proposed.

The Meadowlands Xanadu development is no less ambitious. Besides a luxury hotel and office buildings, the Mills Corporation, the lead developer of the site, has vowed that Xanadu will be a 4.8-million-square-foot "entertainment destination."

What Bergen County stands to gain — if a ballpark is ever built there — is a team that it truly can call its own.

"It's a community builder, it's something that can bring pride to a community," said Steve Cohen, the general manager of the Brooklyn Cyclones. "We realize that not everyone who comes to a Cyclones game is a die-hard baseball fan."

As Mr. Cohen put it: "For every two people who walking in are baseball fans, there are two people who aren't. But they leave with a smile on their faces, just like the baseball fans do."

The Bases Are Loaded (With 16 Teams)



The site in downtown Yonkers for a proposed minor league baseball complex that would be the centerpiece of a \$3.1-billion downtown renovation project. The stadium is scheduled to be completed in 2008.

Librado Romero/The New York Times