



Baseball's minor league New Orleans Zephyrs became the first professional sports team to permanently return to the Crescent City after Hurricane Katrina. The Zephyrs became the Baby Cakes and in 2019 they played their final season in New Orleans before the franchise was moved to new stadium in Wichita, Ks.

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METAIRIE, La. -- Professional baseball always has ranked behind football, fais do-do and girls gone wild in the diversions of New Orleans.

But the minor-league New Orleans Zephyrs assumed a major role last month when the Washington Nationals' Class AAA affiliate became the first New Orleans pro team to return home permanently after Hurricane Katrina.

The Zephyrs play in suburban Metairie, just off Interstate 10 on the western border of New Orleans. They relocated from Denver in 1993. Their 2006 slogan is "Proud to call New Orleans home." "We want to connect with things that were here before," said Zephyrs radio announcer Ron Swoboda, an outfielder for the New York Mets from 1965 to 1973. "Everything that can get up and running is a good thing. People were interested in this team. We average about 5,000 a night for the season [the Zephyrs are averaging 5,371 for 16 home dates]. For us just to be here is spectacular. We had 11,000 people on opening night. It was a scene."

The Zephyrs fled New Orleans by bus just before Hurricane Katrina hit Aug. 29. Two weeks after the hurricane, Zephyrs owner/president Donald Beaver promised the team would play its entire 2006 season at home. After the storm, FEMA and the National Guard used Zephyr Field as a base and helicopter staging area for post-hurricane recovery efforts.

Swoboda, 62, has been with the Zephyrs since 1995. He left Milwaukee TV in 1981 to become a sports anchor on the ABC-TV affiliate in New Orleans.

"We played exhibition games in New Orleans when I was with the Mets," Swoboda said before the Zephyrs hosted the Nashville Sounds in late April. "When I played, I did everything the

tourists did -- went right to Bourbon Street, ate some oysters and stuff like that. But coming to New Orleans and learning about it was different in every way."

Swoboda wore a blue polo shirt adorned with a tiny red crawfish. He has taken time to study the history and music traditions of New Orleans. Music is a spiritual extension of community in New Orleans. After the game, Swoboda was heading to the Carrollton Station nightclub to hear a local singer-songwriter.

"The feel of this town is completely unique from anywhere else I have been in America," said Swoboda, who lives in Uptown. "This was a very important city at one time. I don't know that we're so important anymore. There are reasons for New Orleans to be here, with the river, the port and the oil business offshore. Cities rebuild. Historically, we'll go with that idea."

Ironically, as Swoboda spoke, Air Force One roared over Zephyr Field. Earlier in the day, President Bush had visited the Lower 9th Ward. Swoboda stopped, looked up at the huge jet heading north and said, "Right now, you feel like you're living in a big puzzle with a bunch of pieces missing."

Baseball has been played in New Orleans since 1859, beginning near the present-day Louisiana: "When I was a kid, we'd climb up on a fence and look over at the field. They played at Tulane and Carrollton in Pelican Stadium. That wasn't far from the projects where we lived. We'd walk there. They also had bullfights in the stadium."

Eight major-league teams held spring training in New Orleans, ranging from the Chicago White Stockings in 1870 to the Cleveland Indians in 1935. Until the Zephyrs arrived in the city in 1993, New Orleans had been without pro baseball since 1977.

The 1977 Pelicans played in the Class AAA American Association. Satchel Paige served as "vice president for public relations." They were an affiliate of the St. Louis Cardinals and featured infielders Tony La Russa and Ken Oberkfell and pitcher Pete Falcone. The Pelicans played in the Superdome, and their 1977 attendance of 217,957 ranked second in the league to Denver. Still, the team moved to Springfield, Ill., in 1978.

Zephyrs general manager Mike Schline was born in 1977.

"We knew we had a fighting chance to play this season in New Orleans," said Schline, who lives in the Garden District. "The stadium didn't flood. We committed because we wanted to show our support for the city. In 1998, we were setting Triple-A attendance records [519,584 for the season], and this city put us on the map. We were going to go through bad times with them. That is what community is all about. [Pacific Coast League president] Branch Rickey [III] once told me how baseball has been a stabilizing force, using the example of how baseball tried to lift people out of the Great Depression. We saw that."

On April 5, the day before the Zephyrs' home opener, players and coaches boarded a bus for a devastation tour of New Orleans. They saw the damage from the Lower 9th Ward on through the Lakeview neighborhood.

"It put a new perspective on all of us," Zephyrs manager Tim Foli said. "It was tough. It affected everybody in town. The games are important and all my players want to get to the major leagues, but now they understand how families are more important than the game. They took a new approach on how they treated the fans. They're signing more autographs. They're more aware. We're just trying to give the fans a little piece of their life back."

Zephyrs third baseman Brandon Larson was a member of the 1997 NCAA baseball champions from Louisiana State in Baton Rouge. He said he never will forget the devastation tour.

"It was depressing," said Larson, 29. "Nobody said a word. You see it on TV and hear it on the news, but it doesn't hit you until you see it in person. I was shocked. Just the fact we're here playing is history in the making."

Larson is making do. Players usually have their own places at the Class **AAA** level, but teammates are doubling up this season in New Orleans.

"That's the only thing that's been asked of us," said Larson, who played for the Cincinnati Reds between 2001 and 2004. "They were talking about putting 25 FEMA trailers out in the parking lot for us. But after seeing the destruction and realizing there's so many people that don't have a place to stay makes you realize you're fortunate to have what you got."

FEMA and the National Guard were living at Zephyr Field until mid-October, Swoboda said.

"That was a vital mission," he said. "They're out there plucking people off their rooftops. They roughed up the joint a little. They got into the suites. But their mission wasn't to be tidy. Plus, the scoreboard was [blown] down. The party-shack roof [in right field] was in left field. We lost roof panels to the suites and press box, and they all took water. So that had to be fixed."

The Zephyrs opened the season with a new \$575,000 scoreboard, paid for by their personal insurance carrier. Some of the promotions this summer at Zephyr Field are New Orleans-specific, such as the May 26 Boy Scout Sleepover and Hurricane Preparedness night. Located next to the New Orleans Saints' practice facility, Zephyr Field (capacity 10,000) has been featured in the films "Mr. 3000" and "Failure To Launch."

Schline is in his second season as the Zephyrs' GM. When he returned to New Orleans on Sept. 10, he lived at the stadium for a month. He found the Zephyrs had no problem with 2006 sponsors.

"We've had a better time with sponsors this year than the last two or three years," he said. "Our name is pretty good to be associated with right now. At a time when the line is being drawn on who's staying and who's going, we're one of the front-runners of staying. And having Tulane play its entire season here takes us from a 72-game venue to a 113-game venue. You add up those two attendances, and there will be more people walking through the gates this year than ever before. It makes sense to have a sign on that outfield wall."

Schline said about 80 percent of the Zephyrs' fan base is from the Metairie-Kenner area (Jefferson Parish).

John J. Vollenweider Sr. is a retired Jefferson Parish fire chief who attends every Zephyrs home game. He sits in the upper deck of Zephyr Field and has an unobstructed view of the field and the Canadian National railroad line that rolls beyond right field (the old Denver Zephyrs were named after the Denver Zephyr train). Vollenweider's baseball cap states "Foul Ball Champ No. 223" to commemorate the fact he chased down more foul balls last season in Section 223 than anyone else.

"This is a whole lot cheaper than going to a Saints game," said Vollenweider, adorned with a Santa Claus beard, baseball glove and wide-angle camera. "Baseball has become a diversion for this community."

Vollenweider bent over to pick up his camera. He aimed it at the young men in spring. Like everyone else in New Orleans, he was trying to get a clear picture on things.