

Feb. 27, 2005----

TUCSON, Ariz. -- The rush is what you wait for all winter. The game plan includes the candied smell of freshly cut grass, the convertible top down with the Allman Brothers on the radio and a drive west from Tucson through the Sonoran Desert to Scottsdale. Speed limit is 75 mph. Keep your fingers crossed. Hope is the odometer of spring training.

And you have yet to catch a game.

Baseball in March puts the spring in the step of young and old. I'm juiced in a natural way; baseball is back. The majestic Southern Arizona landscape hosts the Cactus League. The White Sox train in Tucson, the Cubs are up the road in Mesa (an overrated experience). The San Francisco Giants are in a quaint stadium in downtown Scottsdale and the steroid-free Oakland Athletics are in the tiny Phoenix Municipal Stadium. The Milwaukee Brewers can be found at Maryvale Stadium in Phoenix where, of course, you can get the best bratwurst in Arizona.

On this mid-February day Rockies first baseman Todd Helton, who is at camp early, is playing fetch with his dogs in the outfield of historic Hi Corbett Field here. Across town, new White Sox pitcher Orlando "El Duque" Hernandez walks into the White Sox clubhouse alone, carrying two Marriott Residence laundry bags over his left shoulder. Hernandez finds his locker space alongside fellow starting pitchers Jose Contreras, Mark Buehrle and Freddy Garcia. That's quite a rotation -- on Feb. 15. Then strolls in White Sox reliever Jon Adkins, wearing baggy camouflage shorts and a T-shirt, who has dropped 15 pounds over the winter.

Roland Hemond is in the house, too.

This wonderful gentleman, who is the White Sox' executive adviser to general manager Ken Williams, is entering his 55th year in baseball and he still has a speed limit of 75 mph. Hemond, 75, walks with a merry jaunt around Tucson Electric Park, which the White Sox share with the Arizona Diamondbacks. He looks as if he is hosting the grand opening of a garden store. Hemond is jaked. Strands of his white hair corkscrew to the sky. A gray thrasher flies around the grass, colored a deep green by recent rains.

Hemond's longtime compatriot Bill Veeck brought spring training to Tucson in 1947 when he owned the Cleveland Indians, marking the unofficial birth of the organized Cactus League. (From 1927-29 Detroit and Pittsburgh played several games in Phoenix.)

Veeck and his family lived on a ranch in Tucson in the late 1940s. San Francisco Giants owner Horace Stoneham joined Veeck as a 1947 trailblazer. Veeck's Indians trained at Hi Corbett Field, built at 3400 E. Camino Campestre in central

Tucson in the early 1930s. Ted Williams, Satchel Paige and Willie Mays are among the legends who played in the beige stucco ballpark. The Rockies have trained at Hi Corbett since 1993 and Corbett still has the cheapest box seats (\$2) in Cactus League (800-388-7625). Bonus points to Hi Corbett for providing the set for the hit 1989 film "Major League."

Other teams such as the New York Yankees, Detroit Tigers and the new Washington Nationals train in Florida. Hemond was the White Sox general manager between 1970 and 1985 when the Sox trained in Sarasota, Fla.

"Baseball talk used to be how the humidity in Florida enabled the players to get in better condition," Hemond says during a two-hour conversation in his Tucson office. "They still get in fine shape in Arizona. It may be tougher to judge your club in Arizona rather than Florida because the air and altitude here is more like Denver. Sometimes your pitching doesn't look too good in Arizona, but when you go north your breaking ball is breaking better. That dates way back. I remember Bob Lemon telling me how he and Bob Feller were pitching poorly throughout spring training and they'd do fine when they went north."

Cactus League supporters also say the spring weather is more dependable in Arizona than in Florida, but I'm 0 for 2 in consecutive spring training visits to the "Valley of the Sun." Early last March I saw the Giants spank the Cubs 9-3 in the first game of spring training and fans were huddled under blankets in a steady cold rain. This spring I'm in Arizona under dry but cloudy skies during a break in a 10-day span of rain.

The Tucson-Phoenix corridor has seen nearly triple the average rainfall this year. This is why the grass is so pristine. Keep in mind that Tucson is situated in a high desert valley surrounded by four mountain ranges. Sometimes it doesn't get as much rain as Phoenix and Mesa to the west.

Another difference between the Cactus League and Florida's Grapefruit League is the proximity of camps. Florida teams are far apart. Conversely, the White Sox and Diamondbacks are just a four-mile drive through an ugly industrial area to Hi Corbett Field. Scottsdale Stadium is just four miles from Phoenix Municipal Park. The Cubs' HoHoKam Park is 120 miles door-to-door from Tucson Electric Park.

Tucson Electric Park is south of downtown, adjacent to Interstate 10 toward El Paso. I bet that's how Glendale, Ariz., native Marty Robbins got the idea for his 1960 hit "El Paso."

The sleek 11,500-seat park opened in 1998 when the White Sox relocated to Arizona from Florida. Just like U.S. Cellular Field, there is nothing to do around the park, but the stadium does incorporate excellent site lines and a stunning view of the Santa Catalina Mountains beyond the outfield berm. On a good day fans can also catch stunts provided by the nearby Davis-Monthan Air Force Base pilots.

"Back in the 1950s some clubs had players stop at Hot Springs, Ark., to thaw out on

their way south," Hemond recalls. "It was earthshaking to see a player show up with 25 pounds of loose flesh and you'd wonder if he could get ready for Opening Day. It probably shortened their careers. Today's players are fortunate. With their income they can concentrate on getting in good shape year-round, rather than being a bartender or milkman or whatever off-season work they found to make ends meet."

Baseball always sees new dreams in spring training.

In recent years it has become a fresh source of revenue for major league corporations. Spring training 2005 also brings more world influences than in previous years. This year's White Sox camp represents nine different countries. Even trainer Herm Schneider is from the Netherlands and bullpen catcher Man Soo Lee is known as "The Babe Ruth of Korea."

Hemond's mother was from Montreal so he spoke French the first six years of his life. When he was farm director of the Milwaukee Braves during the mid-1950s, he was at minor league spring training camp in Waycross, Ga., working with young French players like Claude Raymond and Ronald Piche (who both made it to the major leagues). "They were so happy I greeted them in French and helped them out," Hemond says. "It's like the Latin players today when they come here and someone speaks Spanish fluently and can help them out." In 1985 Hemond even announced the White Sox trade of Vance Law to Montreal in French just to have fun with the media.

Spring training brings baseball back to earth this way. Autographs are easy to obtain and at Tucson Electric Park its common to see White Sox players wander into the stands or sit in the press box after getting in their at bats. In 1996 I caught a Giants-San Diego Padres game at the Peoria Sports Complex, about 40 miles northwest of Mesa. I wanted to see former Cub turned felon Mel Hall get in his at bats for the Giants. But after going 0 for 3 with two strikeouts, it was the late Padre Ken Caminiti who came to sit in the stands with a group of us down the right field line. I still have the scorecard to prove it, but keeping score in spring training? That's goofy.

After a hard day of baseball around Mesa, Phoenix and Scottsdale, the Camelback Inn, 5402 Lincoln Dr. in Scottsdale remains my favorite place to reboot (there's 435 guest rooms, or casitas). This year when I check in I notice a tiny greeting card earmarked with a John Barrymore quote: "Remember A person is not old until their regrets take the place of their dreams." I think about that a lot during my trip.

Then, a couple of days after Scottsdale Hemond tells me, "Enjoy the moment. Too many people don't capture the great moment. Sometimes you stay up late after a victory to celebrate. Now, nobody celebrates, they just take off. When they lose they're despondent. People say they hate to lose. But you should love to win."

That's good stuff. It's a winning deal to let the desert wind blow through your hair.

Don't rush the stories of a Chicago beer vendor you bump into on the road. Stop to track down a baseball mind with the sweet wisdom of Roland Hemond.

You will have no regrets.