

November Dreams

VERO BEACH CAMP FULFILLS THE FANTASY
OF BEING A LOS ANGELES DODGER

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY PATRICK MERRELL

It's the first week in November, and 119 men, three women and 30 former Los Angeles Dodgers have come to the Jackie Robinson Training Complex in Vero Beach to play baseball. This is the Ultimate Baseball Fantasy Camp, a weeklong event described as a chance to "live the thrill of playing spring training baseball with some of the game's legends."

The "campers" hail from all walks of life and all parts of the country, although many are from the Los Angeles area. Their ages cover a wide range, from 26 to 91, as do their baseball skills. Some have played in high school or adult leagues, occasionally college, while others have only experienced the game from the comfort of the stands or their sofas.

"The vast majority are just fans," says Mark Stone, director of the camp. "It's an opportunity to be with players they've idolized over the years. For others," he adds, "they grew up envisioning the possibility of becoming a big league ballplayer, and so now they're getting the opportunity to walk out onto the field that some of the Dodger greats have walked and played on."

The cost for the camp is not cheap at \$4,395, but that includes accommodations for six nights, all meals, two personalized team uniforms, and several souvenirs, one a baseball autographed by all of the coaches. A couple of less-expensive packages are available for spectators, friends and family.

The 30 assembled ex-Dodgers will serve as coaches for the week, among them nine players from the 1981 World Series-winning team: Steve Garvey, Bill Russell, Pedro Guerrero, Rick Monday, Jerry Reuss, Tom Niedenfuer, Ken Landreaux, Burt Hooton, and Joe Ferguson. They'll unofficially be celebrating that 40th anniversary throughout the week – telling stories, sharing their experience, and looking for opportunities to rib their former teammates, a popular pastime for major league players. Rick Monday, who spends half the year as a Dodgers announcer and the other half as a Vero Beach resident, will be the week's emcee.



Three campers on the Great Lakes team watch the action along with one of their coaches, Dennis Lewallyn.



GREENBLATT
14

LEWALYN
35

RABISH
3

KNEE SAVER
KNEE SAVER

9



Rick Monday, the emcee for the week, goes over some rules with the campers.



After a casual Sunday workout and a good night's sleep for the campers, Monday addresses the troops in Holman Stadium first thing Monday morning. His rich, relaxed voice makes every pronouncement sound like something important, even if it's just introducing one of the trainers.

"If you have an ache or pain, go see Charlie Strasser," Monday tells the campers, referring to the man who served as the Dodgers head athletic trainer for 30 years.

"Don't worry," Strasser yells from the dugout, "I saw it on ER, so I know how to do it."

"This place has been called many things," Monday points out. "Obviously it's now the Jackie Robinson Training Complex, but for us, throughout this process, it's going to be Dodgertown – Historic Dodgertown – which was our home for so many years." The Dodgers founded the facility in 1948 and used it for spring training until 2008, when they opted to

relocate to Arizona. The facility was reimagined and renamed by Major League Baseball in 2019.

"We encourage everyone to play," Monday continues. "If you're injured and cannot run, whoever made the last out will be the runner. It's going to be a liberal strike zone, so if you can see it, you might want to hit it. There's no stealing. No metal bats. No intentional walks. And this is a no-fighting zone ... except for the coaches."

"Also," he says, "no player over the age of 70 can be thrown out at first base on a hit to the outfield." This rule gets an enthusiastic round of applause. "But I'd suggest that all of you over 70 make sure you have a driver's license in your pocket. We are going to check IDs at first base."

Monday concludes, "One thing that is mandatory is that everybody have *fun* this week!" Looking at the smiles in the crowd, it seems that's already been accomplished.

The camp coaches, in alphabetical order, are: Hector Berrios, Dann Bilardello, Craig Bjornson, Mark Brewer, Juan Bustabad, Brett Butler, Jon Debus, Glenn Dishman, Mariano Duncan, Joe Ferguson, Steve Garvey, Pedro Guerrero, Dave Hansen, Micky Hatcher, Burt Hooton, Ken Landreaux, Tim Leary, Dennis Lewallyn, Roger McDowell, Rick Monday, Tom Niedenfuer, Claude Osteen, Marty Reed, Jerry Reuss, Bill Russell, Ron Smith, Derrel Thomas, Dale Torborg, Jeff Torborg and Dave Wallace



Throughout the week, you'll hear campers saying things like "I can't believe I'm here" or "This is even better than I expected." It's just as enjoyable for the coaches – a chance to see old friends, make new ones, and to revisit a place that was a special part of their lives. As Brett Butler admits, "This is the first time I've been back here since 1997, and I can tell you that when I walked across a field, I teared up."

The campers work out at different stations for the rest of Monday morning. The coaches are watching closely, because during the lunch break, they'll huddle behind closed doors to draft players for the 10 teams. Each team is led by three coaches and will bear the name of a city related to the Dodgers organization: Brooklyn, Tulsa, Spokane, Ogden, or Rancho Cucamonga, for example. After lunch, the teams are announced and game No. 1 commences at 2 p.m.

There are always relatives among the campers – siblings, offspring, spouses, or grandchildren; and they'll be drafted as a unit so they can play together. For two teams, their rosters will include a large family group.

Tulsa gets the nine-member Bentson clan, led by its 91-year-old patriarch, Walt Bentson. Walt has been attending fantasy camps since 1986 and still bats in the games. This afternoon, he'll get his first base hit of the week, prompting an opposing player who's walking by to say, "That guy's my hero."

The other clan, the Days, will make up a good part of the Vero Beach squad. Their reason for being here is both deeply touching and tragic. In 2017, Tommy Day was among 60 people who lost their lives in the Las Vegas shooting at the Route 91 Harvest music festival. Several of his children, all of whom

Teams are named for cities connected to the Dodgers organization. In this afternoon matchup, the Tulsa team bats against Rancho Cucamonga.





Above: Potato Heads are awarded every night to campers for outstanding play. Right: The Demon, played by Dale Torborg, acts as the Kangaroo Kourt judge.



survived, were with him. One of them, Kelsey, is playing on the Vero Beach team. She's joined by her brother Nolan, an in-law, Mark Lopez, and Garr Bywater, a family friend who encouraged them all to come to Vero Beach to remember Tommy and his love of baseball.

Tom Day Sr., Tommy's father, is serving as an auxiliary coach for the team, and his wife, Diane, and several other members of the family have come to lend support as spectators. Those of the Days who are in uniform all wear No. 14, the number that Tommy wore as an amateur player.

"This is therapeutic," Tom Sr. says about being at the camp. "Rick Monday has been suggesting for years that I come." Monday met Tom Sr. through his work raising money for military veterans. Now they're coaching together on the Vero Beach team, alongside Burt Hooton and Hector Berrios. "I'm teaching these guys how to coach," Tom Sr. jokes. It's an emotional week for all of the Day clan, but one that's also filled with many laughs, as well as a lot of success on the field.

That night's festivities, held in an open-air tent, include the first round of "Potato Head" awards. Each team will present a Mr. or Mrs. Potato Head toy to its best player in that day's game. It's a Dodger tradition that dates back to 1983, in honor



The 91-year-old patriarch of the Bentson clan, Walt Bentson, connects with a pitch during an afternoon game in Holman Stadium.

of Paul Padilla, an assistant trainer who looked like the toy. After each game, Padilla would put a Mr. Potato Head in the locker of the player who was a standout that day.

“We take a Sharpie and draw hair on the Potato Head,” Stone says of the awards. “But it’s an old man’s balding hair, where it’s along the sides and back but with nothing on top. That’s what this guy Padilla looked like.” Among the winners is Walt Bentson, because how can you not give an award to the 91-year-old camp legend?

Tuesday’s schedule includes a morning and afternoon game, another round of awards after dinner, and then one of the camp’s highlights: the Kangaroo Kourt. This is another well-established tradition, to collect fines for dubious infractions committed by the players, both on the field and off.

Jerry Reuss, at one time a Dodgers color commentator, reads the infractions one by one to the judge, who is played by Dale Torborg, a major league baseball trainer and professional wrestler. Torborg is dressed up as his wrestling character, the Demon, an imposing figure inspired by Gene Simmons’ Kiss persona. He sports a black, silver-studded leather suit, 4-inch-high platform shoes and black-and-white face paint.

“We have an infraction, your honor,” Reuss tells the Demon. “A grievous infraction,” he adds for emphasis. “We had one player asking who’s on deck ... when his team was in

the field!” Mock gasps and groans fill the tent, followed by several cries to punish the offender with a piledriver, a wrestling move that ends with an opponent being dropped head-first into the mat.

“Does anybody want to raise their hand who did this?” the Demon calls out. “I see someone raising their hand,” he starts to say, but then dejectedly adds, “and it’s on our team.” The guilty party is ordered to pay \$10, which is deposited on the stage floor.

“Another infraction, your honor,” Reuss calls out. “There was a player – and I honest to God can’t believe this one – who in the fourth inning of a ballgame, with his pitcher on the mound, turned around, looked at his teammates and said, ‘Does he have a no-hitter going?’” Disbelieving cries from the crowd nearly drown out Reuss as he adds, “The next pitch – a base hit!” The Demon appropriately imposes a doubled fine of \$20 for jinxing his own pitcher.

And so the fines continue, one for a camper sporting brown shoes while wearing a full Dodgers uniform, another for hitching a ride on a golf cart, and another for the unpardonable sin of putting a Yankees baseball into play. A sizable pile of cash quickly accumulates on the floor, made all the larger if a camper dares to plead his case.

The nice part is, all the money goes to charity, and one

of the recipients is Tommy's Angels, a nonprofit in honor of Tommy Day that donates money to children in need. Thousands of additional dollars will be added on the final night, when signed coaches' jerseys are offered up in a silent auction.

Wednesday morning is free time for the campers, and unfortunately, game No. 4 is rained out in the afternoon. Meanwhile, some wives of the campers and coaches meet for a luncheon at The Ocean Grill, hosted by Susan Russell, wife of longtime Dodger Bill Russell. "It was lovely," says Kim Thomason, wife of camper Bryan Thomason. "Susan brought us little gifts. It just felt so inclusive."

The nighttime festivities revolve around a camp talent show, which consists mostly of singing acts, from rock and roll to an Irish tenor. The crowd, as it invariably does with everything that goes on in the camp, shows enthusiastic support for each and every performer, several times with a standing ovation.

Thursday is overcast but dry, so a third game is squeezed into the lineup – on top of the doubleheader that was already

scheduled. Happy hour can't come soon enough at the end of the day for many of the worn-out troops, especially for the Southern Californians who are unused to the type of humid weather Vero Beach dishes out on this day. Some of those who aren't lining up at the bar are in the trainers' room being taped up or having ridiculously large bags of ice applied to their knees, elbows, shoulders, or other aching body parts.

The after-dinner festivities are blandly billed as "discussion," but there's a surprise in store – a visit from Dodger great Sandy Koufax. He's been to several camps in the past, often just for the last day, but this time he's come to help celebrate Jeff Torborg's eightieth birthday.

"The idea came from Dale Torborg," camp director Stone says. "He wanted to present his dad with a jersey. We put No. 80 on it, for 80 years, and had all the coaches sign it. Dale reached out to Sandy to see if he would come by to commemorate it with him. Jeff and Sandy were on the same team together," Stone says, "and Jeff caught Sandy's perfect game in 1965. They have stayed in touched every year since."

Lauren Bentson, named as the standout catcher of the camp, entertains the crowd during the talent show on Wednesday night.





Brett Butler, Hector Berrios, Jerry Reuss, Steve Garvey and Dave Hansen catch up with each other before heading off for the morning workouts.

“We didn’t let anybody know he was coming,” Stone says. But when he showed up, “a few guys saw him and said, ‘Hey, Sandy’s here! Sandy’s here!’ The word spread and guys were running to get baseballs or other things to be autographed. He was nice enough to sign some stuff, but then we had to stop it because he was really here to give the presentation. It was supposed to be Jeff’s day.”

“It was a special moment for us as a family,” Dale Torborg says. “Having him here was absolutely amazing. That was a huge, huge honor for my dad.”

Friday morning is another rainout, causing game No. 7, which will decide the camp champion, to be moved to the afternoon. Unfortunately, another storm front moves in several hours later, and the final game has to be canceled.

On Friday night, the grand finale, it’s time to reflect on the week and also to dole out the camp awards. Because of the rainout, two teams are named as co-winners: the Benton’s Tulsa team, with a perfect 6-0 record, and Ogden, with a 5-1 record.

Rick Monday offers some final thoughts and then brings Tom Day and his two grandchildren, Kelsey and Nolan, up on stage to thank them for coming. Monday tells a story from one of the Thursday games. “I told Tom, ‘You need to have

Camp director Mark Stone addresses the group at Holman Stadium



an at-bat.' And yesterday, I finally convinced him," Monday says. "Mickey Hatcher is pitching, so I went to Mickey and said, 'Look, Tom Day is going to lead off for us. The first pitch, throw it behind him.' He did, and Tom played right along with it and immediately charged the mound."

The capper to that story is the on the very next pitch, Tom hit a line drive and beat the throw to first. At 80-something years old, he looked better running down the line than many of the campers. While Kelsey and Nolan Day are still on stage, they discover they've made the all-star team. Later, Nolan will be named the camp's Gold Glove winner.

As the awards continue, the Bentsons make several trips to the stage. Laura wins for outstanding catcher in the camp, Mark is chosen as the best right-handed pitcher and the hitting champ is Matt Bentson. In addition the Leadership Award goes to both Walt Bentson and Neil Adams, each of whom has attended at least 40 camps and has been instrumental in making the fantasy camp what it is.

Dave Wallace, a former player and coach, sums up the experience as well as anybody in his closing remarks. "We're all so lucky," he says. "So lucky to share one another's company, to share a passion we all love – and that's Dodger baseball." He then adds, referring to the campers, "You come up to us and say, 'Boy, we have fun.' What you need to understand is, this is so much fun for us!" 🍀



Several members of the Day clan head to Holman Stadium for a game.

A large open-air tent, set up on a lawn outside the dining hall, is the gathering spot every night to enjoy stories, presentations, and one another's company.

