

IN THE BALLPARK

Reviewing the stadiums across pro baseball

Moving mountains for PNC Field

Franchise sale helped bring renovations to fruition

By Joe Mock
BaseballParks.com

MOOSIC, Pa. — Crazy plays happen every day in baseball. Here's one, though, you might never see again: The owners of a team sell the franchise to raise the money to build the team a new ballpark.

This happened in northeast Pennsylvania. Lackawanna County owned the Class AAA team that played in the ballpark the county had constructed at the base of Montage Mountain in 1989. Lackawanna County Stadium, in the borough of Moosic, was the home of the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre Red Barons. They changed their nickname to Yankees in 2007 when the Bronx Bombers became the team's major league parent.

The county installed a natural-grass playing field and built a clubhouse after the Yanks came to town, but that wasn't nearly enough. The deteriorating stadium had faded seats and cramped, behind-the-grandstand concourses.

After assessing the cost of renovations vs. building a completely new ballpark at a different site, consultants and architects suggested a compromise: tear down the existing park and rebuild a new, modern facility in its place. Great idea, except the county couldn't afford the cost of even a rebuilt park.

The solution? Sell the team and use the proceeds to help pay for the new facility. The county sold the franchise to SWB Yankees LLC (owned by Mandalay Baseball Properties and the New York Yankees) for \$14.6 million. In turn, the proceeds partly paid the \$43.3 million price tag to demolish and rebuild. "Tearing down the old stadium



By Howard Smith, USA TODAY Sports

Mountaintop views: Montage Mountain provides much of the aesthetics for PNC Field, which reopened this season after a year-long \$43.3 million renovation.

and building the new one in the same place saved the county at least \$10 million," says Craig Schmitt, principal at EwingCole, architects for the new park.

The work to accomplish all of this was so extensive that the SWB Yankees had to play the International League season away from Moosic last year. When they returned in 2013, the team had a new identity (RailRiders being the winner of a name-the-team contest) and a stellar new ballpark to call home. It features a new concourse that runs next to the rocks of the hillside and an exceptional upper-level lounge.

More on PNC Field:

SITE

Moosic is between the population centers of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, just off I-81. Nestled in the northern end of the Poconos, PNC Field is at the base of Montage Mountain, which features 26 trails

We are interrupting our major league series for a special In the Ballpark. This week, we take a tour of PNC Field, which opened this season for the Class AAA Scranton/Wilkes-Barre (Pa.) RailRiders.

Joe Mock from BaseballParks.com, an affiliate of USA TODAY Sports Digital Properties, is the tour guide. Mock has visited 201 of the current 203 ballparks in use for the major leagues, spring training and the affiliated minor league teams. Mock found the best amenity of all at PNC Field to be free:

walking right up against the mountainside on the new outfield concourse.

"The original ballpark was situated to be next door to the mountain," says Craig Schmitt, principal at EwingCole, architects for the park. "We wanted to integrate the mountain into the ballpark, not the other way around."

Next week, our countdown of the majors' 30 parks from worst to best continues with No. 15, Safeco Field in Seattle.



By Howard Smith, USA TODAY Sports

Remodeled: PNC Field first opened as Lackawanna County Stadium in 1989.

The basics

Team: Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders of the Class AAA International League

First regular-season game: April 4, 2013, an 8-4 loss to Pawtucket (R.I.)

Capacity: 7,500 fixed seats, plus room for 2,500 general admission

Ticket price range: \$7 for general admission to \$12 for infield box

Architect: EwingCole

Construction: Alvin H. Butz Inc.

Price: \$33.8 million for construction. Total project cost was \$43.3 million.

Playing surface: Blend of three Kentucky bluegrasses

Bet you didn't know: Demolition of a light tower was delayed three weeks after a nest with newborn falcons was discovered.



Scranton/Wilkes-Barre RailRiders

Three for \$5: If you like your spuds deep-fried, PNC Field is the place to go.

Food favorite

Potato Pancakes

A local favorite that also was served at the old ballpark, \$5 buys three of these deep-fried potato patties with sour cream or applesauce.

of skiing in the winter. The parking lot of the ballpark also is the terminus of a streetcar line that runs from the Electric City Trolley Museum in downtown Scranton.

EXTERIOR

The new ballpark has a much lower — and far more attractive — exterior than the previous facility. Glass, aluminum and brick are the dominant building materials. No "retro Camden Yards look" here, jokes Schmitt. Instead, the park lets the surroundings provide the aesthetics.

INTERIOR

When demolition was complete last year, the only remaining aspects of the old stadium were the playing field, the home clubhouse and the concrete that held the field-level seats. Everything else was replaced and improved.

When asked to name their favorite aspect of the new park, both

Schmitt and RailRiders President Rob Crain agreed: the outfield walkway. Other new features include a 6,400-square-foot lounge on the upper level; a wider, open-to-the-field concourse; better-equipped concession stands; and an expanded merchandise shop.

FAN AMENITIES

Group party areas abound, and the Family Fun Zone with huge inflatables is beyond the center-field concourse.

Legends Hospitality, started by the Yankees and the Dallas Cowboys, runs almost all of the concession operations, and its food offerings are nothing short of fantastic. From Greek and Italian specialties to local-favorite potato pancakes and the exceptional BBQ at the Bent Buckle kiosk in right field, the food is of high quality.

It's also affordable to attend a RailRiders game, with free parking and surprisingly low ticket prices.