

MINOR-LEAGUE MERCHANDISE MAKES ITS MARK

By Marc Allan

By any measure, the Indianapolis Indians' merchandising efforts from 1887 through June 1996 lacked something. And that something was retail space.

During the season, Bush Stadium offered a concession stand and some tables where two customers were company and three looked like an insurmountable crowd. The team's off-season merchandising efforts consisted of some items displayed in its front office.

All that changed when Victory Field opened last July. The new 1,000 square-foot Hot Corner Gift Shop allows a few dozen customers to shop comfortably year-round. (It's open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday.) And during the season, two concession stands - a permanent site along the first-base side and a portable one that changes location - are open during games.

"We had some of the same merchandise carried over from Bush Stadium to here," says Mark Schumacher, the Indians' director of merchandising, "and we noticed that people's reaction to it in the new ballpark was much more favorable. That's partly because they could walk in and pull it off the rack and see what it was like, versus looking at it from across a belly-up style stand."

What you're seeing in the Indians' new ballpark reflects a nationwide trend toward improved marketing of minor-league baseball merchandise. Minor-league merchandising grew from a \$2 million small business in 1991 to a \$46 million industry in 1995, the last year for which figures were available as of this writing.

Stadium gift shops have replaced novelty stands at most ballparks, and nearly all teams now have someone whose sole job is merchandising. As recently as 1992, teams typically designated merchandise as a side duty for someone on their staff.

Mary Kay Schultz, the retail director for the Lansing (Mich.) Lugnuts, the Class A affiliate of the Kansas City Royals, joined the team in April 1993 after 13 years with Spiegel. The Lugnuts' owners wanted their merchandising operation to resemble a retail store rather than a stadium concession stand.

"So when you come into our store," she says, "it looks more like a Gap or something you would see at the mall than something you would see ballpark to ballpark. We carry sweaters, we carry jackets, we carry golf wear. We're now expanding. We've been fighting for women's merchandise because a lot of our buyers that come in and purchase stuff are women, and they can't find anything. So we really pushed our vendors to go out in the market and find women's merchandise."

By next year, the Lugnuts expect to be a test market for women's polo shirts, jackets and fashion-oriented t-shirts.

The Trenton (N.J.) Thunder's 1,100-square-foot stadium gift shop has a department that specializes in kids' merchandise and another where you can select products from the Class AA team's parent club, the Boston Red Sox.



The Indianapolis Indians Hot Corner Gift Shop. (Photo by B&L Photographers)

They also have a book and video department - want to buy Dizzy Dean's autobiography or The Impossible Dream, about the '67 Red Sox? - an area where game-used equipment is sold and a selection of more than 200 minor-league caps from past and present teams.

"We change seasonally as well," says Eric Lipsman, the Eastern League team's director of marketing and merchandising. "In the early months of the season, we go heavily into the sweatshirts and long-sleeved stuff and jackets. Once we get into May and the warm weather, we put out t-shirts and give more emphasis to the lighter-weight stuff."

If that sounds like a department store, that's just what Lipsman wants.

This increased merchandising effort taking place at minor-league ballparks around the country had its roots in a 1991 licensing agreement between the minor leagues and Major League Baseball Properties. Instead of having 156 minor-league teams working as individual entities, the accord placed them all under one umbrella.

This meant that Indians' merchandise, for example, could be sold in retail stores as well as in other teams' gift shops. In 1996, \$191,000 worth of Indians' merchandise was purchased from suppliers for retail sales, ranking the team ninth among the 156 minor-league clubs.

The licensing agreement also attracted vendors eager to produce a wider variety of products, such as polo shirts, jackets and children's clothing, featuring minor-league team logos. (The Indians currently sell a selection of kids' jerseys, overalls and jackets, as well as caps, jackets and t-shirts.)

Finally, perhaps most importantly, the agreement made teams more marketing-conscious. After all, in the 1980s, major-league baseball merchandising grew from a \$1 million to a \$1 billion business. So why not try to do the same for the minor leagues?

In making the effort, 47 teams changed nicknames, and many more changed logos or colors, all spurring interest in their products and turning caps from obscure teams such as the Carolina Mudcats and Hickory Crawdads into national best-selling merchandise.

"Very traditionally, baseball has focused on marketing, sponsorships, season ticket sales, promotions and concessions," says Misann Ellmaker, director of licensing for the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues, the governing body for the 156 minor-league teams. "Back in '91, there were maybe only a half-dozen clubs who were pro-active and aggressive at developing merchandising programs in stadiums."

Now, total retail sales of minor-league merchandise has increased, from \$2.3 million in 1991 to \$23 million in 1992, \$40 million in 1993 and \$60 million in 1994. The total dropped to \$46 million in 1995, hurt by the major league's labor unrest, which resulted in a backlash against all of baseball.

The decline was expected to continue into 1996.

Brett Hullinger, director of marketing and public relations for the Salt Lake (Utah) Buzz, the top minor-league affiliate of the Minnesota Twins, said major-league merchandise sold so poorly in the team's store that all but Twins items have been discontinued.

As for Buzz merchandise, that has continued to sell steadily and well since the team started play in 1994. "The minor leagues," Hullinger says, "are where it's at."

Marc Allan is the popular music critic for the Indianapolis Star & News. But if he could write about baseball for a living, he would.

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