



## Cocoa Stadium was our own... 'Wonder of the World'

Bruce Bochy still calls it "a special place."

Jimmy Wynn was terrified of the snakes and gators.

And hundreds of [baseball](#) stars can say they launched their careers where NASA's rockets were launching from nearby.

It might not have had the same historical significance as Wrigley Field or Fenway Park, but Cocoa Stadium (now the Cocoa Expo Sports Center) created plenty of memories, dreams and realities after it was built in 1963 as the spring training home for the Houston Colt .45s (later the Astros).

Like the Astrodome in Houston, Cocoa Stadium became our Brevard County's little "Eighth Wonder of the World."

"We had been training in Apache Junction, Ariz. -- nothing but a bank, restaurant, hotel and ballpark there," Wynn said. "So it was a lot better in Florida -- warmer, too. But every morning we'd see snakes and alligators. I'm scared of both, so I'd stay away from the field until the all-clear was given. I just remember everyone checking his shoes all the time in the locker room.

"But that was a lot of fun. That was the start of my career. Those were good ol' days. I made a lot of friends, too. We sat around and talked baseball and ate good food."

Wynn, who came to the Colt .45s in the 1962 expansion draft after signing a \$350 bonus check with the Cincinnati Reds, still works for the Astros. Now 66, he and former pitcher Larry Dierker are executives in community relations, and Wynn also works with the Minute Maid Grand Slam for Youth baseball program.

"I remember we had those burglar bars in the dorms to keep us from slipping out on those midnight curfews we had, and there was a security guard making sure, too," Wynn said, laughing. "But I was a kid. I played by their rules because I just wanted to play."

Wynn, a three-time All-Star outfielder known as the "Toy Cannon" for his mammoth shots, hit 291 home runs during his career.

Bochy, a Melbourne High and Brevard Community College graduate, was signed by the Astros as a catcher before playing nine seasons in the majors.

"I spent five springs at Cocoa Stadium," said Bochy, now the San Francisco Giants manager. "It was a special place for me because that was where I had my first big-league camp."

He also played the one season when the Cocoa Astros' Class A team was brought back for a year.

"It was great," he said. "I got to commute from home in Melbourne. The drawback was the number of speeding tickets I got on I-95.

"The worst memory was how big the park played. It was 360 feet down the left-field line. I also didn't care for the snakes that were all over the complex. And the dorm was miserable -- four guys to a room for younger players."

Growing up in Melbourne, Bochy, like many starry-eyed youngsters, admitted to skipping school on occasion to catch a game or two, and collect autographs.

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"(Once I) had Doug Rader chase me and a couple of buddies when we were getting on him," Bochy said.

A sign at the entrance of the Cocoa Expo offices, where the dormitories still exist, reads: "Through these doors have passed some of the greatest athletes and coaches in the world."

There is no doubt.

During the first season, nine future Hall of Fame players stepped onto the field, including Roberto Clemente, Frank Robinson, Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax. The next season, Mickey Mantle and Whitey Ford came to play, but the list is endless. Superstars such as Nolan Ryan, Tom Seaver, Rod Carew, Joe Morgan, Brooks Robinson, Steve Carlton, Carl Yastrzemski, Don Sutton and Johnny Bench also have played at Cocoa Stadium.

There were many memorable moments, even with the minor league teams that played there. Dierker and Tug McGraw threw no-hitters in a four-team rookie league in 1964, and J.R. Richard threw a no-hitter for the Cocoa Astros in 1970 against Daytona.

There even was the first triple-header in [Florida State](#) League history on Aug. 13, 1972, involving both minor league teams that played in Cocoa.

But after a summer of discontent in 1984, and friction between the Astros and the city of Cocoa concerning who would pay for stadium renovations, the Astros packed their bags and headed to Kissimmee, a \$5.5 million facility funded primarily by tourism tax, where they remain.

It wasn't until 1993, when the Florida Marlins announced they would be training in Viera, that Cocoa Stadium again opens its doors to the major leagues for one spring. Space Coast Stadium was not completed in time, so the Marlins has to play in Cocoa. Remember the Marlins' first opponent? Naturally, it was the Astros.