



BACKGROUND

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The Birth & Inaugural Season of the Continental Baseball League

Who would have ever thought the initial plans for the Continental Baseball League would be carved out over a lunch in Dallas between a Mets fan that grew up in Queens, NY and a Yankees fan from the Bronx? But that's how the idea for a pro independent baseball league was hatched.

Ron Baron, the CBL's president and CEO, met Bob Ibach, a former Chicago Cubs executive and baseball writer, at the winter baseball meetings in Dallas in early December, 2005. The two had decided to go to lunch that day and the conversation quickly turned to forming a new pro baseball league.

"It's kind of strange," recalled Ibach, who was raised on baseball at Yankee Stadium in the 1950s, "because earlier that year I got a call from Ron about wanting to start a women's pro volleyball league in Texas. He had done a search online and found out that my PR firm in Chicago had been involved in a women's pro volleyball league in the Midwest.

"Then one day, just before the Winter Meetings in Dallas, Ron called me up and said, 'scratch that idea about women's pro volleyball. I have a better idea I want to talk with you about—starting a minor league pro baseball league.' So we agreed to meet when I came to Dallas that December."

Baron, the Mets fan from Queens, has resided and worked in the sports industry in Texas for many years now. He has more than 20 years experience in sports law and marketing, founding The Center for Sports Law and Risk Management, Inc. in Dallas in 1988. During those years, he saw first hand what a successfully run pro baseball league could deliver, especially one that focused on a family-friendly message. Both Baron and Ibach decided the blueprint for the CBL would be to present families, and especially youngsters, with an opportunity to experience pro baseball up close with their hometown heroes, something often missing in the major leagues these days.

Tickets, Baron noted, would be kept in the \$5 to \$10 range, parking would be free and concession stand items would cost far less than those \$8 beers and \$7 hamburgers being sold at Wrigley Field, Yankee Stadium and Fenway Park. "We wanted to allow a family of four to come out and see a game for under \$50 and have a night they would remember. And, be able to come back again and again to enjoy," said Baron.

During the spring and summer of 2006, Baron traveled to many states to meet with officials in those cities about supporting CBL franchise. His travels took him to Colorado, Missouri, Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Kansas. "I got a real geography lesson that summer," said Baron, who made all the trips by car.

By early 2007, it was decided the CBL would concentrate its initial season in Texas. "We wanted to keep expenses down, especially traveling costs, because that can quickly kill off a league," said Baron. The first CBL franchises were named in February of 2007, with teams located in Lewisville, TX (Lewisville Lizards), League City, TX (Bay Area Toros), Tarrant County, TX (Blue Thunder) and a traveling team, the Texas Heat.

By late February, everything was in place, and the league's first draft soon followed. In late March, player tryouts were held in Lewisville, a league schedule was drafted, front office staffs were in place and not long after the gates were open to begin play on Memorial Day weekend.

Then came the rain. Record rains, the most precipitation the state of Texas had seen in more than 50 years.

The CBL attempted to open its inaugural season on May 25, then May 26. No go. Then finally, a bit of sunshine was seen in League City, if only for a few hours, but enough time to "Play Ball." The CBL was baptized at 5:12 on Sunday, May 27, 2007. Mitch Elliott of the visiting Texas Heat delivered the first hit in league history, an infield single. Later, Samson Oldenburg hit the first home run in CBL history. The contest, played before a sold out crowd cheering on the hometown Bay Area Toros, went 10 innings before the Heat delivered a 6-5 win. It took 3 hours and minutes to complete, but the wait was worth it.

Then, it rained some more for several days.

Soon, games were back on, and the caliber of play impressed both Ibach and former big league outfielder Jay Johnstone, who won four World Series rings with the Los Angeles Dodgers and New York Yankees combined. Johnstone, the CBL's director of player relations, liked what he saw. "The games were very well played for the most part," offered Johnstone, "and I could see the energy in the stands from the fans. It was a good mix."

Ibach, who once covered some of the best Baltimore Orioles teams in the 1970s for the *Baltimore Sun* newspaper, also was impressed. "Looking back on that first season, the thing that probably surprised me the most—but also impressed me the most—was the consistent level of play. I mean, guys were making the double plays regularly, hitting to the opposite field, and turning in solid performances. At times, the pitching took a beating, but that's because some of the parks we played in the first season definitely favored the offense, "I think that is going to change in 2008 because we have some much better facilities in place this time around."

Ibach and Baron are excited about many of the moves made during the past off-season. The Blue Thunder, the defending champions, have moved to the Ballfields at Craig Ranch in McKinney to play its 36-game home schedule. The Corpus Christi Beach Dawgs will play in beautiful digs, complete with skybox suites, at Fairgrounds Field. The Bay Area Toros moved over to Robinson Field in Texas City, a former minor league park with lots of history, and certainly, those improvements will help some of the pitching stats.

Most of all, the CBL is excited to be playing pro ball in Texarkana, a city that loves its baseball and which has not had a minor league team since 1954. By bringing on former major leaguers as Steve Trout to manage the team, Ibach and Baron both expect to see a first rate team fielded by the Gunslingers at George Dobson Field in 2008.

“I’ve been a baseball fan since my dad started taking me to see the Dodgers play in the L.A. Coliseum when I was 6 years old,” said Gunslingers principal owner Frank Snyder, a former Washington, DC lawyer who teaches at the Texas Wesleyan Law School in Fort Worth, “I love taking my own boys to baseball games. It’s a sport where families can shape summertime memories that last for a lifetime, and our goal is to deliver that kind of fun and excitement to the citizens of this community.”

Those who followed the CBL’s first All-Star game played at Clear Creek Wildcat Stadium in League City last July got a good dose of that excitement. The North All-Stars (Lewisville and Tarrant County players) turned back the South All-Stars (players from Bay Area and the Texas Heat) in a 7-2 contest. Karl Krailo of the Blue Thunder was named the MVP of the game, going 2-for-2, including a home run.

The evening before, Noah Scott of the Toros won the first ever CBL Home Run Derby contest with a homer over the left field wall on his final swing, giving him four homers in 10 swings. Scott is the younger brother of former Houston Astros outfielder Luke Scott, now with the Baltimore Orioles.

As the 2007 CBL season progressed, a tight race ended in early August with the Blue Thunder taking the regular season championship under the direction of manager Curtis Wilkerson, a former Texas Rangers infielder. The Blue Thunder, behind the bat of eventual CBL batting champion Josh Blackstock (.373), posted a first place mark of 30-17, followed by the Texas Heat at 25-17. The Heat was led by the league’s MVP, first baseman Robby Winn, who paced the CBL in home runs, RBI and hits.

The CBL’s top pitcher award in 2007 was presented to Blue Thunder hurler Zach Duncan, who held opposing batters to a .241 batting average and struck out 57 in 51 innings. The league’s reliever award was split between Blue Thunder’s George Castillo and Randy Strann of Lewisville.

The CBL also received recognition during the playoffs when the championship trophy was named after former Rangers star and MLB Hall of Fame pitcher Ferguson Jenkins.

The Blue Thunder won the first Ferguson Jenkins Championship Trophy by trouncing the Bay Area Toros on the opening night of double elimination. However, the Toros bounced back the next day to defeat the Texas Heat, and eliminated the Heat the following day before losing the title game later that same day to the Blue Thunder, 6-3. Joseph Pagan, the Blue Thunder’s fine catcher, was named MVP of the championship series.

“We’re anticipating an even more exciting season in 2008, and we’re extremely proud to bring CBL action to new cities such as Texarkana, Corpus Christi and McKinney,” noted Baron. “We have a lot of great family activities planned for the summer, and I really believe fans will be impressed by our caliber of baseball. Not only that, but our league is based on the premise of giving youngsters an up close experience, and everyone attending CBL games will get a chance to see and meet their local heroes at the ballpark. We’re looking forward to creating memories for families that will last a lifetime.”

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