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## **For Orioles, overhauled spring training home is years overdue**

### **Team set to debut overhauled Ed Smith Stadium on Tuesday**

By Jeff Zrebiec, The Baltimore Sun

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SARASOTA, Fla.

The architectural style is "Florida Picturesque," and the baseball amenities make Ed Smith Stadium a field of dreams, but there really is only one way to describe the dramatic restoration project that has created a beautiful new home away from home for the Orioles.

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Long overdue.

Two decades after they began their quest for a new all-purpose spring training facility, the Orioles will christen Ed Smith Stadium on Tuesday afternoon against the Tampa Bay Rays in what will be a celebration for an organization that has endured substandard and outdated spring facilities for years.

"I think everyone in the organization is glad the quest is over, the odyssey is over and the foundation is now in place," said Alan Rifkin, an Orioles attorney who negotiated the deal with Sarasota along with executive vice president John Angelos. "It's moving from a facility that has seen its better days and is on its decline to one that is one of the most well-built, well-designed structures in all of spring training. It's moving up to the penthouse."

The Orioles' \$31.2 million renovation of their new spring training home and the minor league complex at nearby Twin Lakes Park started in June and will continue long after the big league team heads north for the 2011 season. However, the stadium has already garnered rave reviews from players, coaches and team officials. Orioles fans and the Sarasota community, which has hosted spring training for almost 90 years, will now get their first glimpse of the overhauled 22-year-old stadium.

"In a way, it represents to us this euphoric moment of being able to turn it over to fans," said Orioles vice president of planning and development Janet Marie Smith, who has spearheaded the renovation efforts. "And yet, we also realize it represents a new beginning of evaluating how we use it and what else we may want to do to tweak it. One thing we're excited about is just architecturally, this little Ed Smith Stadium has been here for like 20 years but without any real personality. I think we're just really pleased that it's come together and people have responded so favorably to what is clearly not just a facelift, but a complete overhaul."

Rifkin and Smith led Hall of Famer and former Oriole Frank Robinson, familiar with the stadium from his

playing and coaching days, on a tour of the facility late last week. According to Rifkin, Robinson said: "I've been to this ballpark before, but I don't believe I been to *this* ballpark."

### **Circuitous route to Sarasota**

After training at dilapidated Fort Lauderdale Stadium for 14 years, the Orioles moved their spring operations to Sarasota last year, signing a 30-year agreement with Sarasota County. The agreement capped years of tedious and at times contentious negotiations with different spring suitors, including Vero Beach, Fort Myers and Naples.

Initially, the team pledged to keep its spring operations in Fort Lauderdale, but that plan, and an agreement on a \$40 million stadium upgrade, was nixed when the Federal Aviation Administration wanted a \$1.3 million annual payment from the club for the use of the land. Fort Lauderdale Stadium is adjacent to an executive airport.

When the Cincinnati Reds left Sarasota to train in Arizona and the Boston Red Sox opted to stay in Fort Myers, the Orioles, whose lease in Fort Lauderdale expired, found common ground on the Gulf Coast.

"The world works in mysterious ways," Rifkin said. "In retrospect, it's significant and productive that the FAA took the position it took and the Red Sox made the decision they made. That moment in time was simply fortuitous."

While the state of the Ed Smith facility last year was a significant upgrade over what the club had grudgingly gotten used to in Fort Lauderdale, it still had plenty of limitations. But that has mostly changed over the past nine months.

The four practice fields have been enhanced, with one carrying the same dimensions as Camden Yards and another being equipped with an AstroTurf infield to help the Orioles prepare for road games against the Rays and Toronto Blue Jays. The stadium houses the only high-definition video board in the Grapefruit League, 35-foot-wide concourses, picnic areas down the right- and left-field lines, an air-conditioned lounge and deli, a plethora of concession options and plenty of places to get out of the sun.

"It's 10 times better," Orioles center fielder Adam Jones said. "This is big league spring training. The last few years, it's been like we're playing independent ball."

### **Exceeding expectations**

Orioles president of baseball operations Andy MacPhail has been involved in four spring relocations or reconstructions. He was with the Houston Astros when they moved from Cocoa Beach to Kissimmee and in the Minnesota Twins' organization when they relocated from Orlando to Fort Myers. With the Chicago Cubs, he was part of the effort to remodel their stadium in Mesa, Ariz. He said he had less to do with the Ed Smith project than any of the other three.

However, that hasn't stopped MacPhail from walking around the complex twice a day to check the progress workers have made since he arrived in Sarasota two weeks ago.

"The ballpark has exceeded my grandest expectations," MacPhail said. "I didn't realize that you can dress that park up to the extent that it's been. It's a little gem of a ballpark. It's a shame that we're only playing 16 games here."

MacPhail has said several times that the new Ed Smith complex, coupled with the massive renovation at the

once-derided Twin Lakes minor league facility, eliminates another excuse for the organization. Gone are the days when the club's major and minor facilities were 3 1/2 hours apart. Gone are the days of the two-hour-plus car rides to most Grapefruit League venues, of the big league players dressing in a cramped clubhouse and working out in a tent in a Fort Lauderdale Stadium parking lot.

"By the time the clubhouse is done, our facility is going to be as good as anybody's in Florida," MacPhail said.

It certainly looks the part from the outside, starting with an arched opening that allows fans to walk through the home plate entrance and immediately get a glimpse of the entire field. That was the idea of team owner Peter Angelos, whose family was extremely active in the project. Angelos watched the team's intrasquad game Sunday and toured Ed Smith Stadium for the first time afterward.

The renovated stadium also includes a facade that fronts onto Euclid and 12th streets, stucco and tile details and a wrap-around apron that addresses frequent concerns about a lack of shade. The project, collaborated on by Washington-based David Schwarz Architects and Sarasota-based Hoyt Architects, borrowed from the "Florida Picturesque" style that is evident in many of the city's high-profile public buildings, including the Ringling Museum of Art.

"Sarasota has a rich architectural tradition and has a style that is very distinct to Sarasota," David Schwarz said. "We wanted to tap into that history. We wanted to make a facility that was fan-friendly and extremely open to the players."

The redesign also has a distinct Orioles feel. Hanging above one of the main entrances to the stadium is a chandelier, made from Louisville Slugger bats, that holds the Orioles' championship pennants. A team store is adjacent to the entrance, as is a deli named Cafe 54 for the year the Orioles returned to Baltimore. The picnic areas feature orange umbrellas, and the one down the right-field line includes an oversized Oriole bird bobblehead doll. An Oriole weather vane sits atop the roof on the third-base side.

Retired Orioles numbers hang from under the press box and suite area, and a quote from Cal Ripken Sr. will be displayed prominently on the outside. Inside the stadium are seats that have been removed from Camden Yards and since refurbished.

"The whole thing has an Oriole feel to it," manager Buck Showalter said. "It feels like our home."

### **Still work to be done**

The full project isn't expected to be complete until spring training 2012 as renovations will begin on the clubhouse building, which houses the weight room, player's dining area, team offices and a major and minor league locker room, when the team heads north in about a month.

A lawsuit, filed by two citizens groups that alleged Sarasota officials violated Florida's Sunshine Laws in their negotiations with the Orioles, held the project up for more than a month and prevented workers from beginning the clubhouse renovation before this spring.

"I think the most challenging thing for us was the compressed time frame," said Smith, who found a way to reuse much of the material removed during the project. "We didn't start the construction until June. It was a tight budget, a tight timeframe and there were limitations with the site. But sometimes your most creative ideas come from having parameters."

Schwarz said the time will allow them to make alterations, along with rethinking areas of the facility depending on the feedback they get this spring. Team officials also understand that some issues still might

have to be rectified.

The visiting clubhouse and training room are small, even by spring training stadium standards. A big area of the playing field is not visible from the bullpen benches. There is no way for visiting players to exit the stadium other than through the stands or through the outfield. The control room is also extremely cumbersome, and there is uncertainty about the size and location of the press box.

In effect, aspects of the project remain works in progress. Workers have been on site six days a week, two shifts a day for months, and that will continue up to Tuesday's first pitch.

"It's remarkable what they can get done," MacPhail said. "It's a testimony to a deadline because at 1:05 [p.m.] Tuesday, that pitch is being thrown. Ready or not, here we come."

The Orioles have been ready for this moment for years.

[jeff.zrebiec@baltsun.com](mailto:jeff.zrebiec@baltsun.com)



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