



BE A MINOR MOGUL

For accountants, lawyers and even celebs, the latest local pastime is owning a baseball team—and in Riverside, yet!

By Tom Johnson

Two years ago I was in Palm Springs on business. Being in Palm Springs on business is like going to church in Las Vegas. You feel, somehow, out of sync with your surroundings. I wanted more than anything to stop thinking about business and start thinking about being in a resort town. So after a fairly involved process of justification, I abandoned my business and stumbled over to Angels Stadium to see the Palm Springs Angels, at that time the class-A farm club of the California Angels. I parked for free 50 feet from the stadium gate and bought a ticket for \$3.

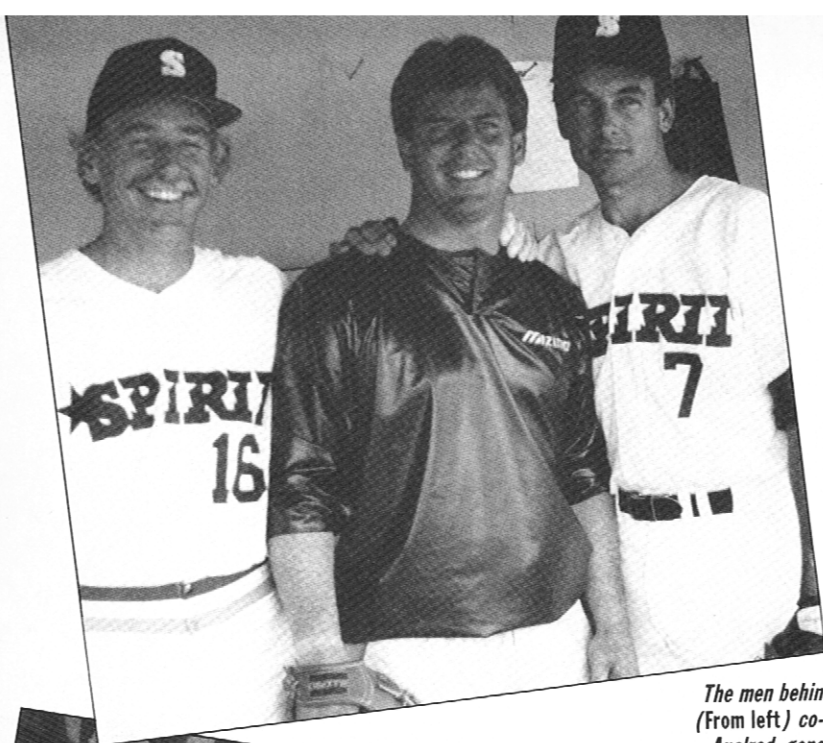
It'd been years since I'd seen a minor-league game, and what I recalled most about watching the Quad Cities Cubs was my seat, which was a convention of slivers held together by congealed filth. Here, the stadium was spiffy clean, and the seat was as comfortable as any at a major-league park. The field was an even mat of spectacularly green grass. I bought a hot dog for what seemed like a going-out-of-business price and took a seat right

behind the first-base dugout.

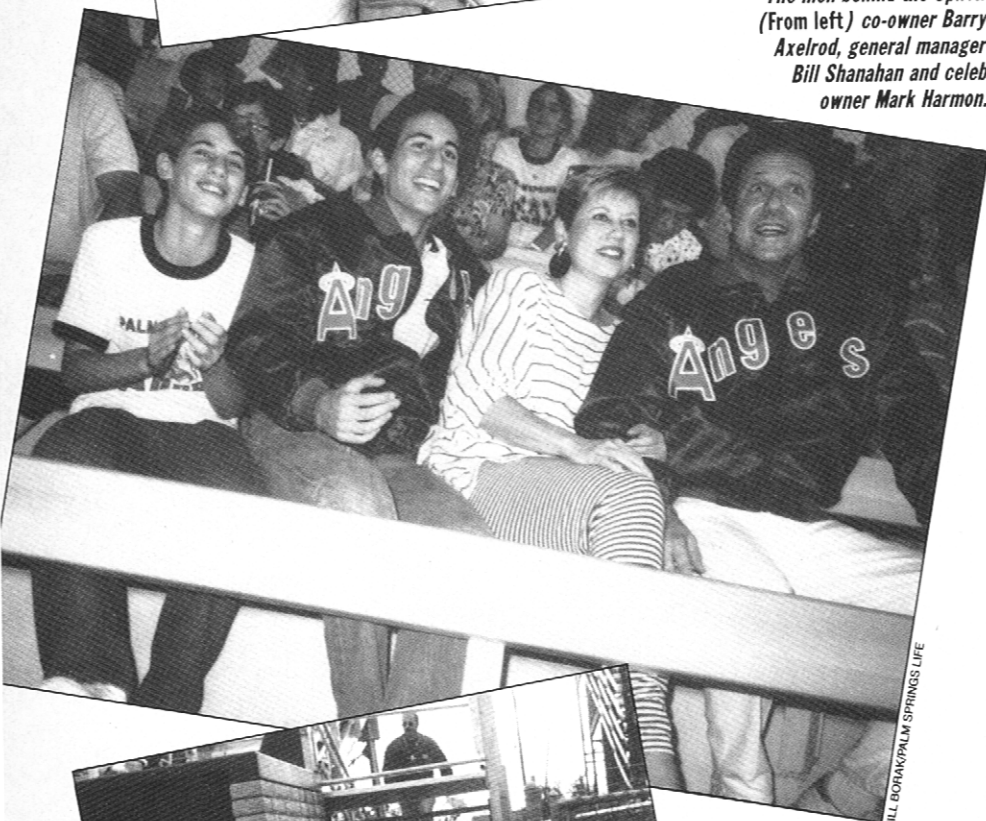
I was positioned near a large group of men, women and children who all seemed to know one another—who seemed, in fact, almost like one big family. They were boisterous but not obnoxious, and knowledgeable about the game—just the kind of people I like around me in a baseball stadium. Every time someone hit a foul ball into the stands, one of the men groaned, "There goes another \$3.50."

They were, it turned out, the owners of the Palm Springs Angels. I was a bit surprised. I always imagined the owners of minor-league teams to be tobacco-spitting nickel pinchers. The Palm Springs Angels, in fact, are owned by a consortium of professionals and show-biz types who bought the team more or less for the hell of it, though when you talk to them they like to emphasize the profit potential and tax benefits. They don't fool anyone, of course, because if it were money they cared about, they wouldn't have paid several hundred thousand dollars for something that in more than three years hasn't returned a dime.

ILLUSTRATION BY ROB WESTERBERG



The men behind the Spirit:
(From left) co-owner Barry
Axelrod, general manager
Bill Shanahan and celeb
owner Mark Harmon.



JILL BOYAN/PALM SPRINGS LIFE

Bleacher Brahmins: Co-owner
Bruce Corwin (far right) and
the farm team's First Family,
Danny, David and wife Toni,
in the front row at Palm
Springs' Angels Stadium.

**Team owner Bobby Brett and
general manager Leanne
Pagliai of the Triple-A
Riverside Red Wave on
opening day last season.**

What they do get, however, are business cards that read OWNER—PALM SPRINGS ANGELS and Palm Springs Angels warmup jackets that they wear proudly when they go out to dinner at, say, trendy Spago or the Bistro.

Whatever the dividends, there are apparently enough. Owning your own minor-league baseball franchise—or at least a part of it, anyway—is *the* thing these days. In fact, interest is so high that small backwater teams that would have sold for a paltry \$15,000 or so 10 years ago now go for as much as \$750,000. And they are being bought more and more by L.A. hobbyists who then move their team closer to home—in this case, the Inland Empire, which is becoming an epicenter of minor-league baseball.

"A lot of these so-called Walter Mittys, who can't be George Steinbrenners, are buying these clubs up," says Jim Paul, an El Paso, Texas, team owner who gives annual seminars on minor-league marketing and promotion. "They're hucksters, they're promoters, they're serious guys who have fun with what they're doing. They're bringing in expertise and capital, and that's making the game more enjoyable for everyone."

"It's the world's greatest hobby," says Allen Gilbert, a Palm Springs Angels partner who in real life is general counsel to the Metropolitan Theaters chain. "If it could pay more than zero dollars a year to run the team, I'd retire in a minute."

In addition to the Angels, there is the San Bernardino Spirit, owned by a similar group of investors—including actor Mark Harmon—who moved it from Palm Springs to San Bernardino. It drew enough people in its first year to break a 40-year California League attendance record. Future Hall of Famer George Brett and his brothers bought a team and moved it to Riverside. And there are other groups exploring the possibility of moving a California League team to nearby Ontario. The hot talk in the league office is that soon there may be teams in Palm-dale, Victorville and perhaps even Ocean-side. The minor leagues, once as good as dead in the eyes of most fans, are busting out all over Southern California.

In the case of the Palm Springs Angels, the story begins at a table in Bruce Corwin's house roughly five years ago. Corwin owns Metropolitan Theaters. One night he and some friends were playing Trivial Pursuit. "We always wanted to land on the orange," says Corwin, "because we knew we could answer all the sports questions. We were kidding around, saying, 'Wouldn't it be great to own our own team?'"

After everyone stopped laughing, Corwin and friends decided they really *would*

like to own a team. They shopped around and found the Redwood City Pioneers, a dying farm club of Anaheim's California Angels. That fit in well with Corwin's plan, which was to buy a team and to move it to Palm Springs. "We wanted it close," Corwin says, "so we could see more of the games." And the stadium they had arranged to use in Palm Springs, Angels Stadium, also hosts the California Angels for two weeks every spring, which made a very convenient tie-in.

Corwin started his consortium with a half-dozen men who had coached Little League together for years. Then he called a few friends. Those friends called friends. "We figured we'd have 20 partners," says Corwin. "We wanted it so that everyone who wanted to own a ball club could, for a limited amount of money, own a piece of the team." Partners started coming out of the woodwork; Corwin would hang up the phone, and it would ring again. By the time the deal was done, Corwin had 122 partners, including singer Tony Orlando and Westside congressman Mel Levine.

The very businesslike prospectus for the partnership, which is legally required to dwell on the risks and dangers of the enterprise and which Corwin says no one bothered to read anyway, listed three reasons to invest:

1. Your wife gets to sing the national anthem;
2. Your kids get to sit on the bench;
3. You get to visit exciting cities like Modesto.

"It was 99 percent pleasure," says Corwin, "and 1 percent business." Because it's a farm team under the California Angels, the new owners of the Palm Springs Angels have no control over its players. So instead they spent most of their efforts improving the field, lights, seats, concession stands and bathrooms and even air-conditioned the dugouts so the desert heat wouldn't exhaust the players. All told, they dropped almost \$150,000 into a stadium they didn't own and vowed to make going to the ballpark fun—even if it wasn't going to be profitable.

"We didn't want people who were interested in making money," says Marshall Stone, who runs Corwin's theater operation in Palm Springs and who is now general manager of the team. "We wanted people who were interested in perpetuating baseball, especially minor-league baseball. If they were interested in making money, we asked them not to invest in our club."

Other teams came south the same way—as hobbies cloaked in three-piece suits. Mark Harmon's interest in minor-league ball began when he was up

for a role in *Bay City Blues*, the short-lived TV series about the minor leagues. Barry Axelrod, Harmon's lawyer, had grown up watching the Hollywood Stars play minor-league ball in the old Gilmore Stadium before the major leagues arrived on the West Coast. Roy Englebrecht worked for the Lakers and wanted to own a sports franchise. Harmon, Englebrecht, Axelrod and seven others got together in late 1986 to buy the failing Ventura Gulls class-A club for \$260,000. Harmon, who financed the deal, ended up owning 30 percent of the team. "We purchased a troubled franchise," says Axelrod, "got some local investors involved, along with

described the team.

The open tryouts were an opportunity for everyone who'd ever dreamed of playing professional baseball to give it one last try. More than 400 hopefuls showed up to take their chances, including two women (one of whom made it through the first few cuts) and two 40-year-old L.A. lawyers who'd had a bet to see which one of them would be cut first. "We saw some real bad baseball," says general manager Bill Shanahan. "But everyone was having so much fun no one noticed." Shanahan and the coaches managed to find 25 people they thought could play passably well, and they went into the season in April

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Mark and some other friends, and it's been a great success."

"This isn't something either one of us got into as an investment," Harmon said at the time. "This is something you do for the love and support of baseball."

Harmon and his partners moved the club to San Bernardino, which Englebrecht—described by one of his partners as a "promoter's promoter"—pegged as a city in need of something to root for. They tied their promotional campaign to San Bernardino's quest for an individual identity, naming the team "the Spirit" and hiring as coach former major-leaguer Rich Dauer, who grew up near San Bernardino and is something of a local hero.

But unlike the Palm Springs Angels, the Spirit had no major-league affiliation. That meant that the partners had to find and pay their own players, coaches and trainers. With a major-league affiliation like the one the P.S. Angels have, players are assigned to minor-league clubs and are paid by the major-league affiliate—an arrangement that saves the minor-league team more than \$150,000 a year, although it cuts into a team's autonomy. The Spirit held tryouts in the spring of '87 while the major-league teams were in spring training. And the coaching staff found itself auditioning a lot of washouts in search of a second chance. "Cast-offs, retreads, ne'er-do-wells and party animals" was how Paul Oberjuege, the sports editor of the San Bernardino *Sun*,

hoping they were good enough, as baseball people say, to be competitive.

"They were San Bernardino's boys, no matter where they were from," says Shanahan. "You talk about a motley crew of guys who'd been kicked and rejected—and this town adopted them."

The players responded. They won their first game in front of a sold-out crowd of 3,000. The next game sold out as well, and the team won again. Incredibly, the Spirit moved into first place and stayed there. The owners were ecstatic. Crowds averaged almost 2,500 a game. "I've never played anywhere with a crowd like this," one player told the *Sun*. "It really pumped me up." The excitement was more than anyone expected.

"We needed that," says Shanahan. In its first year of operation, the Spirit broke a 40-year-old California League attendance record, drawing more than 160,000 fans. "The opening night was absolutely electric," says San Bernardino mayor and season-ticket holder Evelyn Wilcox.

Harmon, though not involved in the day-to-day operation of the team, chipped in a couple of interesting ideas. He organized the Mark Harmon San Bernardino Commission Against Drugs night, a celebrity all-star game that raised a few thousand dollars for local drug-treatment centers. The event was a great idea and a wonderful promotion—the only problem was that Harmon couldn't attract many celebrities to San Bernardino. "That first

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year we didn't get too good a turnout," says Axelrod, "so a bunch of us owners played in it, and now we've become celebrities out there. We play every year."

As the season wound on, former major-leaguers looking to make comebacks started calling. At first Shanahan resisted. "The chemistry was going good," he says. "And when it's going good you don't make changes." The Spirit cooled off in July, however, and some magic left the team. Shanahan signed former big-leaguers Terry Whitfield and Rudy Law.

"I felt we had a real chance to win the

the business of entertaining and putting bodies into the seats." The contract, which also cut the cost of operating the team, suddenly made the Spirit profitable. "As it turned out," smiles Axelrod, "the team turned out to be more of a good business deal than we'd anticipated."

Palm Springs and San Bernardino worked so well, in fact, that last year George Brett and his three brothers, Ken of the California Angels and real estate investors Bobby and John, decided to get a Califor-

tickets and advertising space in programs and on outfield billboards. "People didn't know what we were," she says. "You'd call people and say, 'Hi, I'm with the Riverside Red Wave,' and they'd say, 'We support a Little League team already.'"

The first game was a disaster. Even though the city of Riverside was spending roughly \$1 million to refurbish the stadium, few of the improvements were finished or even evident. Almost 3,000 people went to the game, only to be confronted by long lines for the portable johns and the single hot-dog stand. "There was only one electrical outlet," shrugs Pagliai, "so we could have only one stand."

Things were not much easier for the players. Since the clubhouse was still little more than a cement slab, the 25 Red Wave players used a non-air-conditioned, 20-by-40-foot trailer as a locker room. "That was embarrassing," says Pagliai. "Those guys were touching buns, and they didn't like it."

By June, however, construction on the main facility was complete. The players moved into a new clubhouse, the fans enjoyed the new bathrooms and the concessionaire hauled his hot-dog cart away and moved into a shiny new stand.

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championship our first year," says Shanahan. "And we almost won the dang thing."

Still, the team's performance was strong enough that four players signed contracts with major-league clubs at the end of the season. Two of those players, Mike Brocki of the Seattle Mariners and Delwin Young of the Detroit Tigers, had a chance of playing in the majors.

After the wild and woolly opening season—including the definitive minor-league experience of a dog running onto the field in the middle of a game—the Spirit signed a player-development deal with the Seattle Mariners. The Mariners like having their kids play in front of relatively large crowds every night, preparing them for the packed houses of the big leagues. The contract also freed the Spirit's owners from having to worry about hiring players. "It was tough to get used to, at first," says Shanahan. "It made my job easier."

The player-development deal was, however, too good for the owners to pass up. The Mariners, besides paying the players, would also pay the coaches and trainers as well as pick up travel and equipment expenses. On the down side, Mariners officials cleaned house, releasing many of the original team heroes and replacing them with their own prospects.

"I don't miss it," says Englebrecht of the personnel hassles. "It took away from the fun of operating this team. We're in

nia League team of their own.

"It seemed like the Bretts had covered every area of baseball there was except owning a team," says Bobby, who oversees the Bretts' real estate and restaurant businesses from Manhattan Beach. "So we decided that as a side investment we wanted to be owners."

First they bought a team in Spokane, Washington. Though it was doing well as a business enterprise, the brothers never got the chance to see the team play. "It was too far away," says Bobby. "What fun is having a baseball team you never see?" So the Bretts bought a Salinas team and moved it to Riverside.

"I swore I'd never go through starting up a team again, but there I was," says Leanne Pagliai, who'd worked with the Spirit during its start-up season and whom the Bretts hired to run their new team. The deal to buy the team was closed so late that the team—an affiliate of the San Diego Padres—still didn't have a name or a place to play two months before its season was scheduled to open. "We had a contest to name the team," says Pagliai, "and once we got that done we could print up letterhead."

The newly christened Red Wave signed to play in UC Riverside's sports complex, which had all of 3,000 seats. There were no offices, so Pagliai moved a trailer into the parking lot, set up folding chairs and a card table and went to work selling season

The owners of these teams, now that they're all safely affiliated with major-league clubs, have nothing to say about what happens on the field. The players, coaches and trainers, all hired by the major-league clubs, are accountable only to their bosses in the bigs.

Which leaves the owners, in the words of Bruce Corwin, to worry about "the towels, the fence signs, the promotion and the concessions." Since most of the owners have more of a background in entertainment than they do in sports, they're perfectly comfortable competing with one another off the field to create what they call "a great baseball experience." "You try to make sure people are smiling and having fun," says Bobby Brett. "It's more important than winning and losing, because you can't control winning and losing. That's where the satisfaction is."

Soon there were giveaway nights, unheard of in the minors just a few years ago. And more of the teams were booking various "entertainers" to perform between innings—although owing to the relatively small budgets of the minors, that entertainment was often of the vaudeville-is-not-dead variety. Last year, the San Bernardino Spirit hosted a performance by a harmonica-playing contortionist.

"But baseball is the best promotion we have," says Marshall Stone, general manager of the P.S. Angels. "Around that,

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we try to make it a three-ring circus, as opposed to just a one-ring circus."

Performing in one of those rings, certainly, are the owners. Unlike major-league owners, isolated in their "sky boxes," the owners of minor-league teams sit right in the stands with their customers. "We get to know them," says Bobby Brett. Corwin sometimes gets so carried away that he throws bags of peanuts to people in the crowd, something that doesn't sit particularly well with his general manager. "Over at the concession stand I'm trying to sell them for a buck,"

and people would rather have the teams close to their homes so they can have some fun with it."

Sixteen years ago, the Visalia Oaks sold for \$15,000. California League president Joe Gagliardi estimates that class-A teams around Los Angeles today may be worth close to \$1 million each.

"You make money when you sell the team," says Corwin. "We paid \$280,000 for our team, and last month Modesto sold for \$750,000. So we'll make money if we ever sell it, but we're in it because we're having the time of our lives."

"Baseball is the best promotion we have, but around that, we try to make it a three-ring circus, as opposed to just a one-ring circus"

says Stone, "and Bruce is up there giving away 600 bags for free."

Last year, to boost the rivalry between San Bernardino and Riverside, the mayors of those towns made a civic-pride bet. "I went over and offered a challenge to Riverside mayor Ab Brown," says Wilcox. "If our city won, he'd have to take me to lunch or dinner. If their city won, I'd do the same." Riverside won the California League pennant last season.

The new interest in owning farm teams—notables such as producer Thom Mount (*Bull Durham*) and actor Bill Murray also own teams—is leaving its mark on minor-league baseball. "Ten years ago you could have bought any of these teams for the debt," says Jim Paul, who bought the double-A El Paso Diablos for \$1,000 in 1975. "These guys are buying these teams as a hobby, and it's driving up prices. That's why the minor leagues are a really hot item. You buy one now, you've got enough money in it that you have to take it seriously."

Prices in the California League in particular have gone up. "There's a heck of a lot of Californians who like baseball and have a lot of money and would like to be able to say they own part of a baseball team," says Bobby Brett. "It comes down to supply and demand. There are only so many minor-league franchises available,

And while the Riverside and Palm Springs teams have been losing money, both say they will probably make money this year, and San Bernardino is already profitable. "I am not independently wealthy," says Englebrecht, "so I am very bottom-line oriented. These teams *should* be profitable." Norman Brokaw, who owns three-quarters of 1 percent of the Palm Springs Angels, says that owning a team isn't enough. "Part of the fun of owning something," he says, "is to make it profitable."

Promotions lure fans into the stadium, boosting ticket and food sales. But it's the sale of *ad* space on outfield walls that really puts a team up over the top. Palm Springs charges as much as \$2,500 for a single sign, and this year the team raised the height of the outfield walls four feet so they could squeeze in an extra 11 signs.

"The player-development contract and the outfield signs make it all possible," says Angels partner Allen Gilbert. "Without them, we wouldn't be able to do it no matter how much fun it was."

The involvement of Mark Harmon in the San Bernardino franchise was, according to Shanahan, a "great door opener with advertisers." George Brett's name attached to the Riverside Red Wave "sure never hurts," says Bobby Brett. At Palm Springs, which may be the schmooze capital of the minor leagues, having a 122-partner network has helped the team not

only to sell signs but to find sponsors for giveaway nights. A partner who is an executive at Warner Bros., for example, convinced the studio to buy a huge chunk of the right-field wall during the team's first season.

And Corwin, who is ready to play just about any angle for the sake of his team, has brought baseball into totally unrelated transactions. "I'm going out to buy a new Cadillac this afternoon," he smiles, "and what's going to make or break this deal is that they have a car dealership in Palm Springs. I'm going to make sure they sponsor our tote-bag night."

The main challenge to these teams is to keep their fans interested. "Our competition is television," says Shanahan. Since class-A players seldom play in the same city two years in a row, fans can't form attachments to the players themselves. This forces the team management to adjust and adapt quickly to market conditions. Many of the innovations you see in the majors—alcohol-free sections, for example—were first tried in the minors.

"You're one of 56,000 when you go to a Dodger game," says Jim Paul, "and no matter how well the Dodgers manage it, you're still a face in the crowd. You're a bigger part of the crowd in the minors. When season-ticket holders don't renew, we call them and ask what's wrong. The Dodgers, who do as good a job as anyone, would never notice you were gone."

If there's a hot fad in the minor leagues, it's restaurant seating. In San Bernardino, they're opening restaurants along the outfield lines. Riverside is a little more modest with its barbecue area. Unlike big-league stadium clubs, which require huge cash outlays to join, the minor-league restaurants sometimes have tables available without a reservation.

The consumer-oriented approach to baseball has endeared the Inland Empire teams to their city governments, which often help in getting stadium improvements. Those improvements, at least theoretically, come from the percentage the cities get of the ticket and concession sales. "If they draw real well, we would get the money back over a few years," says Riverside mayor Brown, who put more than \$1 million into UC Riverside's stadium so the Red Wave would play there. "They didn't draw that well, but I'm sure they'll do better this year."

Ah, yes, this year. All three team managers are promising their owners a league pennant this year. And the owners are promising winners to everyone from mayors to fans—even though they don't have a whit of control over the caliber of the team itself. But nobody cares. After all, winning isn't really the point here. ■