

The Oregonian

Salem-Keizer Volcanoes attendance surges in wake of Portland Beavers' departure

By Jamie Goldberg
July 4, 2011

Pat Wolfram sat four rows back from the on-deck circle sporting his Father's Day gift, a brand new Salem-Keizer Volcanoes hat.

With his daughter Kelli at his side, Wolfram rose from his seat and joined in the raucous cheers as Volcanoes catcher Joe Staley drove a seventh inning home run over the right center field fence Friday.

It was a baseball tradition that Wolfram had played out with his three daughters hundreds of times. Yet, for the first time, the family wasn't cheering on the **Portland Beavers**.

"Every Father's Day and 4th of July, we'd go to the Beavers game," Wolfram said. "The kids learned to love baseball watching the Beavers."

In 2009, when the **Portland Timbers** were granted entry into Major League Soccer, team owner and city officials agreed to convert PGE Park to a soccer stadium – a configuration that would not allow baseball. The plan originally called for a separate baseball stadium to house the Triple A franchise, the Portland Beavers of the Pacific Coast League. But a stadium never materialized.

The Beavers left Portland after last season, leaving a gaping void for many baseball fans, some of whom have turned to the next closest baseball option: the short-season, single A Salem-Keizer Volcanoes.

After their first eight home games, the Volcanoes have seen a 27 percent increase in attendance compared with last year. In that time last season, they welcomed 17,820 fans, while in the same period this season the team has seen 22,662 fans go through the turn styles to watch prospects such as Giants first round draft choice, infielder Joe Panik.

The Volcanoes are an affiliate of the San Francisco Giants. Volcanoes owner and general manager Jerry Walker acknowledged that part of the fan increase could be in response to the buzz generated by the Giants winning the World Series, but he said that doesn't account for all the new fans.

"I know we're seeing a lot more Portland area people this year because I've been talking to a lot of them," Walker said. "We've been seeing a lot more people wearing Beavers gear and that is unusual for us."

Like many Beavers fans, Wolfram was disappointed when he saw the team he grew up with leave Portland. Yet, the Wilsonville resident was unwilling to abandon professional baseball. He bought season tickets with the Volcanoes and has attended all but two of their home games this season.

"It's a really cute stadium and a great family layout," Wolfram said. "Something that I didn't get much of at the Beavers games was the intimate atmosphere. ... These are the best guys from all the college teams. When else do you see them that close?"

Longtime Beavers fans David Chaffin and his wife Diane attended their first Volcanoes game two weeks ago for Diane's birthday. The Portland residents enjoyed seeing the newly drafted players make their first stop in professional baseball.

"The players are fun to watch," said David Chaffin, who plans to return to Keizer for 4 or 5 more games this season. "They're young. They're kids trying to move up in the baseball world."

Yet, the Volcanoes can't fully fill the void the Beavers left.

Chris Pratt attended his first Beavers game in 1988 when he was 8 years old, six years before he even made it to a Major League ballpark. After returning from college, he bought season tickets and would walk to PGE Park for games after work.

"I'd go to 30-40 games a year," Pratt said. "It was a way of life."

For Greg Miller, who had followed the Beavers for nearly 10 years, watching the entry level Volcanoes can't compare with the Triple A Beavers. Yet, the Vancouver resident plans to make the 50-mile drive to Keizer at least 7 or 8 times this season.

"The level of play is noticeably lower," Miller said. "Still, it does fill an itch. It is baseball, at least."

Miller might not have to drive as far to see single-A baseball in the next year or two. Efforts are under way to move the Yakima Bears, who play in the Northwest League with Salem-Keizer, to Vancouver. But the move would require a new stadium, the same obstacle the Beavers couldn't overcome.

Fans who have trekked to Salem express dismay that a city like Portland would let baseball go.

"I think it was a tough sell to get large numbers of people out to support what is ultimately just a minor league sport," Pratt said. "It's a matter of the city thinking bigger. Sometimes you have to take a risk to build for the future. I think it was a missed opportunity to not build a top-flight minor league stadium that could have someday been used for a major league team."

The Beavers were first founded in 1903 and played in the storied Pacific Coast League, once regarded as near the caliber of a third major league. Current Volcanoes Manager Tom Trebelhorn, a Portland native and former major league manager, recognized the important history of the Beavers in Portland.

"The Pacific Coast League has a rich baseball tradition, heritage, history and Portland was a big part of it," Trebelhorn said. "But, they left before and it's a great market, if somebody could go in there and build a ballpark."

For the time being, however, Portland fans must look elsewhere if they want to watch live professional baseball.

To honor the Beavers, The Volcanoes are throwing a "Salute to the Portland Beavers" night Sunday July 10 when they take on the Tri-City Dust Devils at 5:05 p.m.

"We came up with the idea recently because we've been seeing Beavers fans down here," Walker said.

The night is meant to recognize the legacy that the Beavers have left on the Portland area and will feature Beavers memorabilia, including the home plate from their last game at **PGE Park**.

"It's great to see that there's somebody out there actually thinking about the Beavers leaving," Pratt said. "I would hope there would be a good crowd to show that the people of Portland actually would like to have baseball back."