

RETROSPECTIVE

Opening Day at Zephyr Field

by

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A sellout crowd of 10,366 witnessed the opening of Zephyr Field on April 11, 1997, as the Zephyrs beat Oklahoma City, 8 – 3.

That the ballpark opened on time is a credit to many who were relegated to the background on the occasion of the home opener, like the principal contractor Joe Calderera and his staff, numerous sub-contractors who worked around the clock to make the deadline, and, of course, the Zephyrs' fine front office staff, capably led by GM Jay Miller. These were the unsung heroes of opening night 1997.

They cut no ribbons and received little or no recognition on the big night, but their work was certainly the key to getting the park ready to a degree necessary to accommodate 10,000 people and their vehicles.

Zephyrs president and principal owner Rob Couhig and his general manager, it should be noted, never wavered in asserting that the ballpark would be ready for the scheduled opening.

The occasion of the opening game had a surreal, dreamlike quality partly because of the newness of the surroundings, and partly because a rainstorm that lasted half the day had somewhat dampened expectations of many holding tickets. Regardless, Miller called it "the smoothest opening day I can remember," and he's seen several in both the major leagues and in the minors.

There was no way to know how much difficulty there would be in getting 10,000 fans into and out of what had been a construction site up until Friday morning. To the credit of the Zephyrs staff and the Jefferson Parish Sheriff's Office, the extraordinary volume of traffic was handled reasonably well.

On the field before game time Jefferson Parish and state officials, along with the Zephyrs ownership team, basked in the moment of completion of the creation of a new home for the Zephyrs. Nobody in the crowd of 10,000 seemed to mind that many of the park's features, such as the party boxes and the levee area were not completed for opening night. Many in attendance had never before seen a Zephyrs ballgame, but they cheered the home team both at bat and in the field.

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The euphoria seemed to carry to the Zephyrs lineup, which smacked three triples on the way to an 8 – 3 victory to christen the new field and send the big opening night crowd home happy. The first page of the first chapter in the club's history at the ballpark on Airline was written with a happy ending.

Zephyr Field Firsts

First Pitch – a called strike from New Orleans pitcher Nitkowski to Oklahoma City centerfielder Little.

First Hit – a single to left by Little.

First Extra-Base Hit – Oklahoma City DH Smith hit a double in the second inning.

First Triple – Rivera in the bottom of the second inning.

First Home Run – Bubba Smith on April 13th.

First Out – Oklahoma City second baseman Estrada hit a ground ball between first and second and was thrown out from Zephyrs second baseman Bridges to pitcher Nitkowski covering first.

First Run – Little scored on a single to center by Anthony.

First RBI – Anthony

First Strikeout – Nitkowski struck out Brown to end the top of the first inning.

First Zephyrs Hit – Flora, the first batter for New Orleans, singled to center.

First Zephyrs Run – Ramos scored on a triple by Rivera in the second inning.

First Stolen Base – Flora stole second in the first inning.

First Base on Balls – Nitkowski walked Oklahoma City catcher Tackett in the second inning.

First Error – Zephyrs shortstop Rivera committed an error on a ball hit by Sagmoen in the second inning.

First Double Play – With Mora on at first with one out in the third inning, Colon hit into a 6-4-3 double play, Frias to Estrada to Brown.

First Souvenir – The first foul ball to enter the stands was off the bat of Anthony. It skipped off the left side of the screen and bounced into Section 116 behind the Oklahoma City dugout.

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