

## Despite economic downturn, Cactus League up

League on pace to break 2005 attendance record

### Peter Corbett

The Arizona Republic  
 Mar. 14, 2008 12:00 AM

Despite an economy as shaky as a rookie pitcher's first big-league outing, Cactus League baseball fans are showing up in Arizona on a record pace.

At the season's midpoint, about 550,000 fans have attended 92 games, up nearly 2 percent from the same time last year, said J.P. de la Montaigne, president of the Cactus League Association.

But he admits being nervous this time of year, hoping wet weather doesn't rain on the parade of visitors to Cactus League stadiums, which drew more than 1.25 million fans last year.

"We all become weathermen this time of year," he said of Cactus League officials, noting that Sunday's high temperature could plummet to below 60 degrees.

Sunburned tourists are as much a Cactus League tradition as beer, hot dogs and sunflower seeds. And their visits to Arizona are a huge boost to the economy in March, the Valley's busiest month for visitors.

Cactus League fans, half from out of state, are a home run for Arizona's economy, with an economic impact of \$202 million, according to the most recent Cactus League study conducted five years ago. It's likely that that number has increased because attendance is up 17 percent since 2003.

### Fans could set record

This season, Cactus League visitors are on track to eclipse the more than 1.27 million record fans in 2005, said Robert Brinton, Cactus League Association vice president.

He said that sports-related tourism seems more resistant to the ebbs of flows of the economy than

other travel.

An increase in more locals attending games could also account for the strong turnout through the first half of the Cactus League.

The Chicago Cubs in Mesa, the perennial Cactus League leader at the box office, could set a record for average attendance, Brinton said.

The Cubs have drawn almost 11,000 fans per game the past two seasons.

### No Bonds, Giants slump

In Scottsdale, the San Francisco Giants have seen a 17 percent decline in attendance through the first half of this season.

In recent seasons, the Giants have been second in Cactus League attendance, with more than 10,000 fans per game.

Seattle Mariners could surpass the Giants as the No. 2 in attendance, Brinton said.

The loss of home-run king Barry Bonds and a last-place finish in 2007 appear to be hurting the crowds at Scottsdale Stadium.

"The buzz the last few years was all about Bonds," said Louis Masotti, 73, a Giants fan since his childhood in New York.

He and other San Francisco fans say they will not

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miss Bonds because he had become a distraction to the team.

Still, Bonds was a powerful Cactus League draw.

In recent years, Bonds slugged a barrage of homers out of Scottsdale Stadium during batting practice as kids scurried for souvenir baseballs.

Antonio Carrillo, 24, of San Francisco, attending a Giants game earlier this week, said he is eager to see the team's lineup of younger players. But he acknowledges that the Giants won't draw as well without Bonds.

Giants spokesman Matt Hodson said he believes the team will make up the early spring-attendance shortfall. Large crowds are expected for the next two weekends and for the team's two remaining games against the Cubs.

"People still want to come out and see our young pitchers," he said. "They're loyal Giants fans, they want to see the team play."

### D-Backs draw more fans

Elsewhere in the league, the Diamondbacks have attracted 58,543 fans through their first nine home games, up 3.5 percent from a year ago.

Ticket sales at Surprise Stadium, spring-training home of the Texas Rangers and Kansas City Royals, are up 8 percent, said Mark Coronado, director of Surprise Community & Recreation Services.

Surprise has seen larger walk-up crowds this year, Coronado said, in part because of improved concessions, a new party tent and youth activities.

Milwaukee Brewers spokesman Tyler Barnes said that ticket sales so far are up 30 percent from last year and that remaining games against the Diamondbacks, San Diego Padres and Los Angeles Dodgers are selling well.

The Dodgers are making a rare visit from their spring camp in Vero Beach, Fla., which should create some additional excitement in the final stretch of the Cactus League.

"Barring rainouts, it's going to be a very good

season," said Brinton, the league official.

**Republic reporters Tony Lombardo, Eugene Scott, Nick Piccoro and Jim Walsh contributed to this article.**

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