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# How a Sun City pro baseball team lured legends for a season that didn't make it

Being a retirement community, Sun City seemed like the perfect match for a senior baseball team made up of former Major League legends. But fate stepped in and the Sun City Rays barely had any time to shine.



(PHOTO FROM THE EBAY LISTING)

A Sun City Rays Fergie Jenkins autographed game-worn jersey as of April 13 was going for \$1,578 on eBay.

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### SUN CITY RAYS 1990 TIMELINE

- February: Mailing goes out to 1,200 former MLB players to gauge interest, which the league claimed more than half responded with interest.
- July: Sun City Rays franchise formed. Rays CEO Marc Kaplan, Manager Jim Marshall, Director of Player Personnel Fred Stanley start building the roster.
- Sept. 24: Gov. Rose Mofford declares "Sun City Rays Day in Arizona."
- November: Fall training opens.
- Nov. 23: Opening day of the league. Rays play first six games in Florida. Rays will have 33 home games on the slate, 23 on the road in Florida and San Bernardino.
- Nov. 30: Home opener at Sun City Stadium vs. Daytona Beach. Opens a stretch of 10 games in 10 days.
- Dec. 5: Five-game series against the Florida Tropics opens at Sun City Stadium. All games start at 1:05 p.m. Last home game at Sun City on Dec. 9.
- Dec. 26: Senior Professional Baseball League ceases operations.



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Everything seemed to line up perfectly. There would be Major League Baseball-level talent not only in Arizona in a pre-Diamondbacks world, but in a team the Valley could call its own at the corner of 111th and Grand avenues in Sun City.

In 1990 the Senior Professional Baseball Association — for players 35 years old and up — already had one year under its startup belt after making its all-Florida debut, and the fledgling outfit was expanding west to other warm-weather markets with a team in San Bernardino, Calif., and a team in Sun City.

The Arizona club, the Sun City Rays, were set. Their home — Sun City Stadium — had been the spring training home of the Milwaukee Brewers for a dozen years. The Rays had their white with aqua and orange team colors (some called it peach) splashed through the pages of an impressive full color glossy program; had 21 front office members and seven more listed with stadium operations; and for their inaugural roster had a couple future Hall of Fame pitchers, Fergie Jenkins and Rollie Fingers, in the clubhouse.

Other notable faces around the league, all not far removed from their MLB playing days, included Bert Campaneris, Graig Nettles, Bobby Bonds and Dock Ellis.

Even legendary pitcher Vida Blue saw the potential.

When league founder Jim Morley — a real estate developer and former University of Arizona baseball player — wrote letters to some 1,200 former MLB players to gauge interest in his vision, more than half responded, including Blue.

“I can get people out. I can’t wait,” Blue wrote back, according to a write-up in the league’s official game program from 1990. “Hey, the majors will become our minor league.”

The Senior Professional Baseball Association’s second season, and first with the Sun City Rays, opened that November, 34 days after the conclusion of the 1990 World Series. The 56-game schedule would include a championship game on Feb. 10, the Sunday before spring training was due to open the MLB slate. Valley businessman Marc Kaplan was named Sun City Rays CEO.

“This was to be no ‘old-timers’ league,” the game program noted. “But an outfit that gave fans on-the-field battles every bit as hard fought as in the major leagues.”

Only, it didn’t.

They wouldn’t even make it to New Year’s before everything came to a sudden halt.

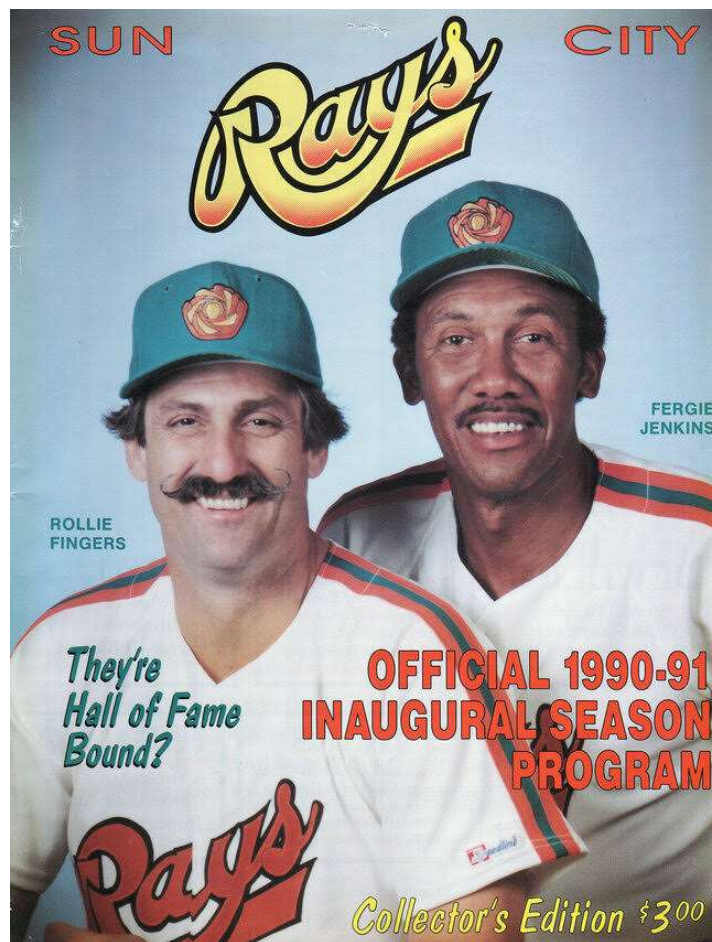
Morley found inspiration for the Senior League while watching the PGA’s Senior Tour and worked to build a baseball model along the same lines. The league would include a salary cap to maintain competitive balance, and the focus would be on smaller ballparks in warm weather cities.

Each franchise committed either \$850,000 or \$1 million (sources differ) for the privilege of joining the Senior League, with that money supporting player salaries, stadium leases and league expenses. Each team selected 15 players in a draft, with the remainder of the rosters filled out by undrafted free agents. Each team's salary was capped at \$550,000 for the season, with individual player salaries ranging from \$2,000 to \$15,000 per month, [according to the Society for American Baseball Research](#).



Fergie Jenkins, left, and Sun City Rays CEO Marc Kaplan announce that the 1971 Cy Young Award winner had signed with the Rays in 1990 for their inaugural — and only — season.

(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA, FILE)



Rollie Fingers and Fergie Jenkins were the biggest names on the Sun City Rays' 1990-91 roster. Both pitchers were former Cy Young Award winners, and Jenkins (who was 47 years old when he signed with the Rays) was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1991, one year before Fingers, who was 44 as a Sun City Ray, was elected to the Hall.

(PROGRAM COURTESY OF THE DEL WEBB SUN CITIES MUSEUM)

The league even signed a three-year TV contract with cable provider Prime Network, with a stipulation calling for a minimum of six teams in the league, the Society further noted.

Although Major League Baseball wouldn't award a franchise to Phoenix until 1995, baseball already had huge roots in Arizona and its favorable climate.

Spring training dated back to 1929 when the Detroit Tigers became the first Major League team to hold formal camp in Arizona when they set up for one year at Riverside Park. By 1990 there were eight teams in the Cactus League (compared to 15 today) that drew an average of 3,637 fans that year.

The Pacific Coast League existed as a Triple-A league since 1946 and by 1990 had two Arizona teams (Phoenix Firebirds, Tucson Toros). The Arizona State League started as a D league as early as 1928, eventually evolving into the Arizona-Mexico League, and in 1988 the Arizona Complex League debuted in and around Phoenix as a home for Rookie-level ball.

“I first became aware of the Senior Professional Baseball Association in the summer of 1989, and from the moment I knew that Arizona was a perfect location for an expansion franchise,” Kaplan wrote in 1990.

Big-time players continued to appear on Senior League rosters. Among the new players added for the 1990-91 season, according to the Baseball Hall of Fame, was Jim Rice, longtime Red Sox slugger, whose final Major League season was as a 36-year-old in 1989. Former MLB players Luis Tiant, Dave Kingman and Joaquin Andujar also joined the league.

Jenkins in December 1989 visited with a Ft. Myers, Fla., news station two days after his 47th birthday to talk about playing then with the Winter Haven Super Sox.

“I think that the most important thing is that we’re playing and doing something that we like to do,” Jenkins said. “If we weren’t we’d be back home working.”

A few months later Jenkins would be the oldest on the Sun City Rays roster, while Ronn Reynolds, who had played six MLB seasons, was the youngest at 32, with the age restriction lowered to 32 for catchers. Rays roster players with 10 or more years of MLB service included Bill Campbell, Pete Falcone, Lenny Randle, Barry Bonnell, Jim Dwyer, Tony Scott and Joel Youngblood.

Jim Marshall, who played in the Majors for five years and later managed the Cubs and A’s, was named Sun City Rays manager.

The league opened its second season, and first with the Sun City Rays, in November 1990. The Rays opened the 56-game schedule with their first six games in Florida and made their Sun City Stadium debut against Daytona Beach on Nov. 30, 1990. That opened a stretch of 10 games in 10 days in Sun City.

Tickets were \$6 for box seats and \$4 for general admission, and the Rays boasted better than 800 season ticket holders — more than any other team in the league. The Rays were averaging 1,500 fans per game at home and even

had a partnership with the Windmill Inn in Sun City West to house visiting teams.

The Rays were rolling through their homestand, which concluded with a Sunday matinee against Florida on Dec. 9, before they were off for another road trip that would take the team into the Christmas break.



Sun City Rays players warm up at Sun City Stadium prior to a Senior Professional Baseball Association game in 1990.

(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA, FILE)



Rollie Fingers signs autographs for fans at Sun City Stadium in 1990.

(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA, FILE)

As it turns out, that's where the season — and the league — ended.

The day after Christmas the Ft. Myers Sun Sox abruptly folded and the league found itself in the precarious situation of also having to cease operations immediately. Not only did the league's TV contract call for a specific number of teams to exist, without the Sun Sox, a news report at the time noted, Morley said there would be too many open dates in the schedule for the league to continue, and halting play immediately would help minimize financial losses.

"This hit us like a bombshell," Morley, from Phoenix, told the Naples Daily News at the time.

Players, too, felt the sudden shock.

"It's sad. Sad is a good word for it," Eric Rasmussen, Sun Sox pitcher, who learned about it himself by reading it in the paper, told the Naples Daily News.

“No matter how old you are, you still feel like a kid when you play this game. When they take away your team, it’s sad.”

With the season’s early and unexpected end, Kaplan at the time figured the Sun City Rays would lose about \$750,000. Had the season been played to its 56-game limit the team would have lost between \$500,000 and \$600,000, he said.

“I’m extremely disappointed,” Kaplan said in a news report that day. “It’s been a long weekend. I was up until 11 last night trying to convince Ft. Myers to stay. I can’t see the benefit of going forward now.”

Kaplan and Morley had not spoken to Sun Sox owner Michael Graham on that fateful day.

“I don’t have any great desire to,” Kaplan said.

The Rays had been scheduled to host San Bernardino on Dec. 27 to begin an eight-game homestand at Sun City Stadium.

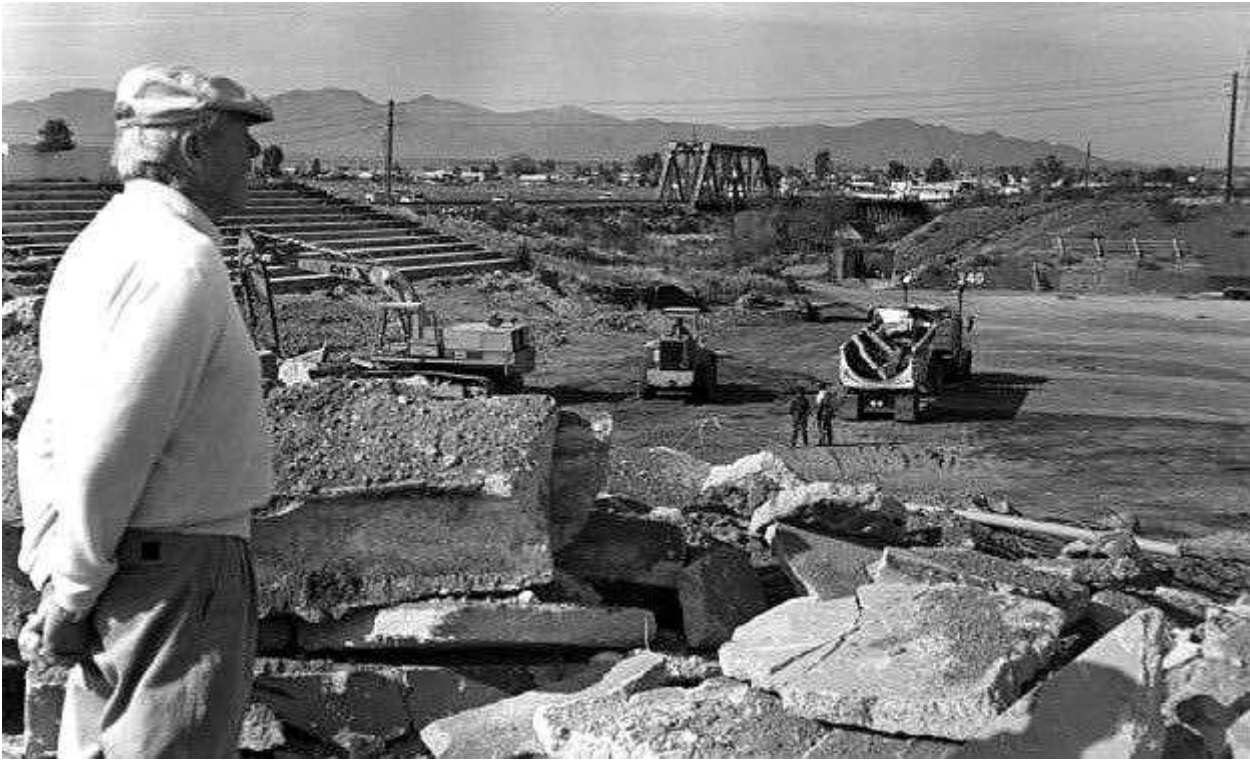
Reports at the time indicate the league had been struggling.

Just a week before the end, players had accepted a 16% salary cut which was to begin in January. Also, rosters were trimmed from 24 to 22 players to save money. For the Sun Sox at least, players had played the previous four games without salary and were still owed by the time the team folded.

Financial stress appeared in other ways. The Florida Tropics team had seen its former owner pull out prior to the start of the 1990-91 season and the league had stepped in to manage it. All eight teams the first year were in Florida, but by the second year only two — the Sun Sox and St. Pete Pelicans — were still in the same city for the second year.

Also, the Senior League schedule had been reduced from 72 to 56 games for the second season.

At the time everything stopped, Sun City was 13-9 and in second place behind the 15-8 Pelicans, who won the championship the year before.



Onlookers watch Sun City Stadium — originally built in 1971 — get torn down in 1995.

(INDEPENDENT NEWSMEDIA, FILE)

As it turned out, the Sun City Rays played just 10 home games in their brief existence. The clock was also ticking on Sun City Stadium.

It was used briefly for a time in the Arizona Fall League, and a group had unsuccessfully tried to woo the Kansas City Royals there for spring training. Meanwhile, Peoria Sports Complex opened just a few miles up the road by 1994 to put the Sun City ballpark's future in even more doubt.

The seven-acre stadium site was sold to developers who demolished the ballpark in favor of The Fountains at Sun City, an independent-living community offering senior apartment residences that opened in 1996.

Kaplan at the time was left with trying to satisfy obligations to sponsors and Rays season ticket holders.

“If they said this league was flaky, I’d agree with them today,” Kaplan was quoted in news reports on Dec. 27, 1990. “This failure had nothing to do with the players, the location of the teams, or the game attendance. The problem was with the owners.”

Kaplan, a Scottsdale resident who owned Health and Nutrition Laboratories of Phoenix, died at age 57 in 2015. A line in his obituary read, “He went on to

become an extremely successful entrepreneur and proud owner of the Sun City Rays senior league baseball team.”

With even the stadium gone, about the only traces of the Sun City Rays anymore are authentic collectibles on eBay. There’s the odd Sun City Rays T-shirt, pins, baseball cards, old game tickets, batting helmets, even a Fergie Jenkins autographed game-worn Rays jersey that at last check was going for \$1,578.

“This is like the death of a close friend,” Kaplan was quoted at the time. “But you can’t spend a lot of time feeling sorry for yourself.”



Listed as a 1990 Sun City Rays helmet, from the Senior Professional Baseball Association, as of April 13 was going for \$118.75 on eBay.

(PHOTO FROM THE EBAY LISTING)



A Sun City Rays Fergie Jenkins autographed game-worn jersey as of April 13 was going for \$1,578 on eBay.

(PHOTO FROM THE EBAY LISTING)

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#### Meet Steve

Steve Stockmar joined Independent Newsmedia, Inc., USA, in 2017, and has been an Arizona journalist for almost 30 years. He serves as editor of Sun Life Magazine and contributes to West Valley communities where he focuses mostly on arts & culture, education, and profiles of neighbors making a difference.

**Community:** Every season Steve serves as a “buddy” with the Miracle League of Arizona in Scottsdale, has volunteered his time with Family Promise in Glendale, and previously served on the Ghostlight Theatre board in Sun City West.

**Education:** Graduated from Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff with a Journalism major and English minor.

**Random Fact:** Steve once won a 50-player live Texas Hold 'Em poker tournament.

**Hobbies:** Anguishing over his beloved Chicago Cubs and Bears; listening to Beatles and Grateful Dead music.