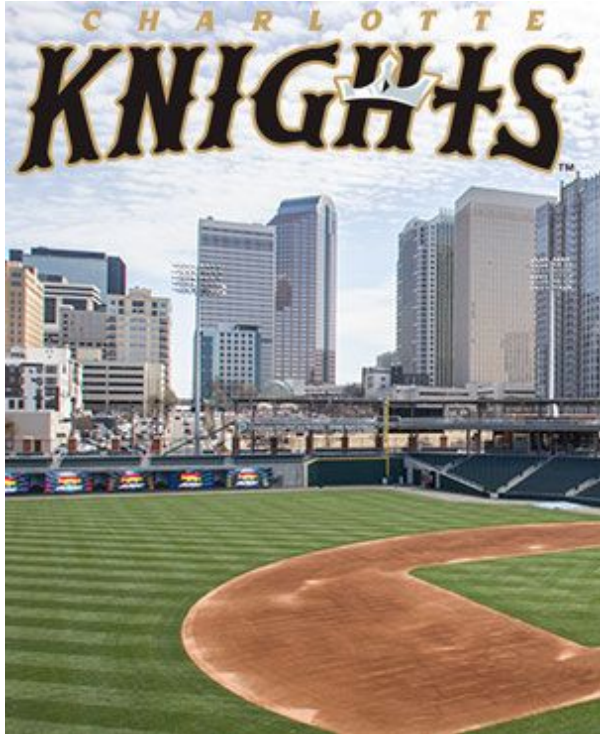


The Charlotte Knights
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Now that Spring has finally caught its steam and pushes us headlong through a pollen cloud toward summer, that glorious distraction of baseball once again shakes off the frost of winter and energizes all our senses, heralding the brilliance and heat of summer. In Charlotte, the occasion has more momentum than it's had in probably 20 years, as the Knights come back home to the city from their long lower Carolinian sojourn in Fort Mill at "The Castle." The AAA club's new digs are located on Mint St., the new BB&T Ballpark, may have a name that is a bit less on-the-nose, but it is having a huge impact on the city.

What makes a good baseball stadium is that it holds the character of the city it serves. Your Wrigleys, your Fenways, they'd be iconic on their own, sure, but it's that focusing effect that a baseball stadium has for the community that really makes those places become landmarks. Badges of the city. Uptown Charlotte is making one hell of a play for that right now. The ballpark is across the street from a brand new jewel in the city's park system, Romare Bearden Park. The stands and the Home Run Deck offer the kind of view of Charlotte's skyline about which poster manufacturers could only dream (count the panoramic field view pics uploaded to Facebook in the Charlotte area since the stadium opened April 11th 2014). The vendors feature a heavy local presence with several regional breweries represented, including a new Knights-themed ale from NoDa Brewing Company (now fresh off a big win in the IPA category at the World Beer Cup). We're putting our best on display here, and the impression is, well... impressive.

Ballparks have been on the bounce lately as engines of economic revitalization. Time was, moving out to the city perimeter was just smart money for owners and clubs. Throughout

the seventies and eighties with the cities in decline and with the available space for the huge parking monstrosities and pack-em-in stadiums out in the suburbs, small town ball floundered. Now, however, with walkable communities and city life being redefined by new architectural theories and live/work/use development plans, ballparks (with their uncanny ability to fit into tight urban spaces) are showing the kinds of economic muscles that have long been ignored. In Greenville, SC, Fluor Field, home of the Greenville Drive, started a whole downtown renewal almost on its own. Long a destination for cultural events at the Peace Center, Greenville was sorely lacking in the kind of downtown presence that really causes folks to identify with each other and their city. In the first four years of operation 110 new businesses were open or opening within a half mile of the stadium. Greenville's revitalized downtown area has since been toasted on many top ten lists featuring overlooked gems of towns. Charlotte could and should be next up on those lists.

Charlotte's history with baseball goes back more than a hundred years. The original Hornets were the baseball team here, folks, and, though, minor league ball got off to a bit of a rocky start, (the first club from 1892 folded after a short time), we've had pretty steady baseball in the Queen City since 1901. We've seen luminaries like Harmon Killebrew, fallen heroes like Jose Canseco and enigmatic legends like Moonlight Graham all play in Charlotte (in Graham's case, his entire career in one game). We've been affiliates of the Senators, Twins, Orioles, Cubs, Indians, Marlins and now the White Sox. Charlotte's been a secret baseball town for decades, and no one's remembered it until just recently. Why?

In 1985, after a fire investigators concluded was arson, Crockett ballpark burned down. The ownership never recovered. The replacement stadium was completely open-air, and that drove attendance down. Two years later, the team had a new owner and a short while later they hopped back across the border to Fort Mill, where they spent the next 20 years getting by as the afterthought of Charlotte sports. After all, with a brand new NFL franchise and a still serviceable NBA franchise, who had time to think of the ol' national pastime? There was always a steady stream of attendance there- the stadium was actually quite easy to get to- but typical to the era, it seemed to lose some of its pizzazz when taken so far out afield of the city that was their namesake. Finally, in 2011, the city pulled out a few landswaps and cleared the room for the new stadium.



It's a cherry spot, tucked away in a little section of Mint Street that you could easily drive

right by and take little note. When you walk into the stands, though, and are greeted by that huge electronic scoreboard (biggest in the minor leagues- 30ft by 82ft) the space seems bigger than it really is- there are no bad seats in the house, really. Even in the picnic section and on the home run porch, you're never so far away from the plate that the view suffers. Gameplay is close enough for you to be able to appreciate a pitcher's follow through, and you'll be hearing that violent smack of cowhide against cowhide in the catcher's mitt loud and clear. The bullpens are situated along the basepaths, so fans are definitely close enough to heckle the opposing team's pitchers as they warm up. Reportedly. OK, maybe actually- but that's baseball, right?

So, the burning question: should you go? Oh, hell yes. After an afternoon of ballpark beer and nachos and sun and an excellent win by the Knights over the Norfolk Tide, this writer was grinning ear to ear. The only thing lacking from the entire experience is the transportation aspect- you can either pay uptown prices for parking or you can take the bus into the Transportation Center and hike the three or four blocks over to the ballpark from there. Hopefully, the city will continue to follow up on this big investment they've made in our uptown and arrange some shuttles for us weary fans after a long bleary afternoon of hollering "Nice Mullet!!!" at the away team's relief pitcher.