



PAWTUCKET RED SOX

OUTTA THE PARK

New England's minor league baseball games provide quirky entertainment and family-friendly fun

By Bart Beeson

THE CROWD CHEERS AS a cowboy rides a pink flamingo around the field and throws hot dogs to the fans, and kids duel with novelty light sabers as part of a *Star Wars* night celebration. This is the kind of offbeat entertainment you might see while catching a minor league baseball game in New England.

At these always family-friendly affairs, minor league organizations often pay as much attention to creating a fun ambiance as they do to the baseball. Teams offer theme nights, giveaways, promotions, between-inning

entertainment, colorful mascots and a variety of local food and drink.

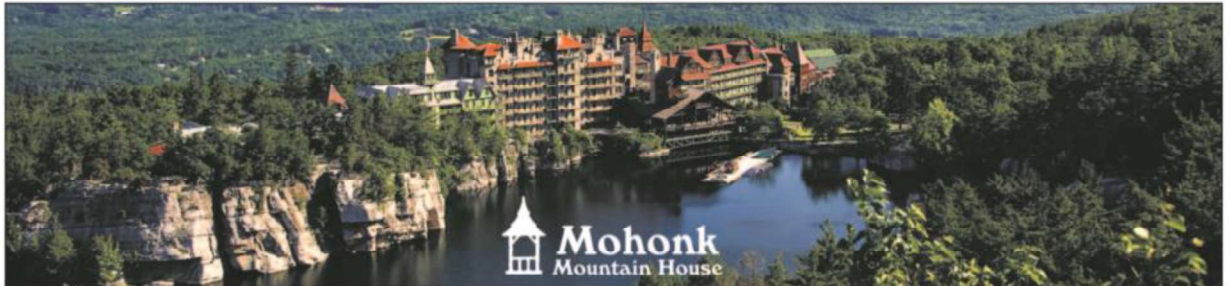
As the venues are generally smaller than major league parks, fans have the chance to get close to the action on the field, at a fraction of the cost. A family of four could easily spend upwards of \$350 to go to a Boston Red Sox game (the most expensive in the majors), including parking, food and other purchases, compared with about \$65 for a similar experience at a minor league game. Here's a sample of what you can look forward to from four minor league teams in New England:

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PAWTUCKET RED SOX

For Boston Red Sox fans, the closest thing to catching a game at Fenway Park is to see the Pawtucket Red Sox — known to their fans as the PawSox — at McCoy Stadium in Rhode Island. The arena is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, and that history is on display throughout the venue, with murals and displays throughout. Last summer, the team established its own Hall of Fame, inducting Red Sox players Jim Rice and Wade Boggs. And then there are the displays commemorating the longest game in baseball history, which took place there in 1981 and lasted 33 innings played on two days, two months apart. While the PawSox games offer a great chance to see up-and-coming major leaguers, or a pro back for rehab (now-retired Red Sox slugger David Ortiz spent some time there several years ago), it's also family-friendly. "We know that when people come here, they're not always coming for nine innings of baseball," says Dan Rea, PawSox general manager. "People might just be looking for a fun night out and maybe catch a little baseball while they're at it." Saturday nights in the summer feature fireworks, and on Family Fun Sundays, fans can run the bases after the game. Those looking for New England tastes can find Del's frozen lemonade, local brews and Rhode Island-style clam chowder. General admission for kids starts at \$6; \$9 for adults.

► 1 Columbus Ave.; 401-724-7300; pawsox.com



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USA TODAY SPECIAL EDITION

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Field of Dreams/Fan Appreciation game

PORTLAND SEA DOGS

PORTLAND SEA DOGS

The lighthouse in center field rises up from behind the center field wall; the beacon flashes and fireworks spark as the fans cheer a home run for their team. This is baseball in **Portland, Maine**, home of the Sea Dogs and their mascot, Slugger. The Sea Dogs, a Class AA affiliate of the Boston Red Sox, play at Hadlock Field, home to the Maine Monster — a replica of the left field wall known as the Green Monster in Fenway Park. Visitors get treated to the full Maine experience, including lobster rolls and

crab cakes and local craft beers like Shipyard and Allagash to wash it all down. The team hosts a number of promotions throughout the summer; one of the most popular is the *Field of Dreams/Fan Appreciation* game (this year, on Sept. 3), when players wearing replica 1929 Portland Eskimos uniforms, emerge from a cornfield erected in center field and go into the stands to thank fans. The team also hosts Throwback Thursday events. Last season, its *Top Gun* night was a hit, and for the 2017 season, there is a *League of Their Own* night planned to commemorate

the film's 25th anniversary. With an average ticket price of \$10, a Sea Dogs game is an affordable family outing, and general manager Geoff Iacucessa says they try to appeal to both baseball and non-baseball fans: "If five people are coming to the game, we want to have something for each of them." Fans may catch future major leaguers — Red Sox players and alumni including Dustin Pedroia, Josh Beckett and Jonathan Papelbon have come through the organization. ► 271 Park Ave.; 800-936-3647; seadogs.com

HARTFORD YARD GOATS

The obvious question when catching a minor league game in **Hartford, Conn.**, is, "What exactly is a Yard Goat?" Before moving to Hartford in 2016, the team formerly known as the New Britain Rock Cats held a contest in which fans submitted new names (River Hogs, Praying Mantis and Whirlybirds were among other top finishers), with the Yard Goats — named for a small train that works in a train yard — winning out. The Class AA team, an affiliate of the Colorado Rockies,

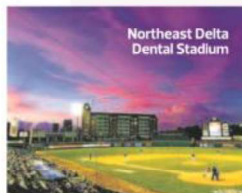
will play in Hartford for the first time in 2017, in the new Dunkin' Donuts stadium, where a 15-foot-high Dunkin' Donuts coffee cup will emit steam every time the Yard Goats hit a homer. General Manager Tim Restall says they've created distinct food and entertainment areas that fans can visit while walking the 360 degrees around the concourse. "The days of fans sitting in their seats for nine innings has changed, so we were able to create these neighborhoods so that people can mingle and go on to the next (neighborhood)

and catch up with friends and family," he says. Visitors will be able to head to the Bears Barbecue deck to grab a pulled pork sandwich, or go to Reggae Right for a meat patty from Scott's, a local Jamaican bakery, and a Red Stripe beer. Along with the food and promotions, there's high-quality baseball. In 2016, six Yard Goats players made it to the major leagues. Seats in the new stadium will start at \$6 and go up to \$19. ► 1214 Main St.; 860-246-4628; yardgoatsbaseball.com



Outfielder Raimel Tapia

DAVE SCHOFIELD



Northeast Delta Dental Stadium

NEW HAMPSHIRE FISHER CATS

The outfield is filled with adults and children parrying and dodging, taking part in what is unofficially **New Hampshire's** largest balloon sword fight. Every year, New Hampshire Fisher Cats fans take to the field to partake in this tradition, one of many annual promotions. The Fisher Cats (named for the native fisher, a weasel-like mammal known for its ferocity) play in Northeast Delta Dental Stadium in downtown Manchester, a city that has seen revitalization over the past several years, with once-abandoned mill buildings being filled with businesses and restaurants. Mike Ramshaw, president of the Class AA affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays, says the open concourse design of the newly renovated property makes for a great baseball experience: "From the moment you walk into the stadium you can see everything. You can stand in line at the concession stand and not miss a beat of the action." This season will see the Fisher Cats hosting the Eastern League All-Star game on July 12 as well as the popular PoutineFest on June 24. The Fisher Cats host 33 fireworks shows every season, at nearly half of their home games. Tickets are \$12 in advance and \$14 day of game.

► 1 Line Dr.; 603-641-2005; nhfishercats.com

NEW HAMPSHIRE FISHER CATS