

Fresno Grizzlies welcome Houston Astros affiliation: 'We couldn't be any happier'

By Angel Moreno

The Fresno Grizzlies triple-A baseball team announced it has changed its major league affiliation from the San Francisco Giants to the Houston Astros. Managing partner Chris Cummings and Derek Franks, vice president of operations, spoke at a news conference. <http://www.fresnobee.com/grizzlies> THE FRESNO BEE

Moments before the Fresno Grizzlies baseball club announced the biggest change in its history, the backdrop was finally set.

A large white banner -- emblazoned with Houston Astros and Fresno Grizzlies logos, and giving off the crisp scent of freshly pressed ink -- was draped on the wall of the Cru Club at Chukchansi Park, signaling the start of the new partnership after the San Francisco Giants declared the end of their relationship with the Triple-A club earlier in the day.

The Grizzlies and Astros signed a two-year player development contract on Thursday, ending the Fresno club's 17-year run with the Giants.

"We're thrilled to have this relationship and this opportunity to move forward with the organization," Grizzlies owner Chris Cummings.

The deal was the last act in a hectic week of negotiations between major league clubs and Pacific Coast League franchises. The Giants signed a deal with Sacramento, which had been the home for the Oakland A's top minor-league club. The A's moved their Triple-A affiliation to Nashville, which had been with the Milwaukee Brewers. The Los Angeles Dodgers (Oklahoma City) and the Colorado Rockies (Albuquerque) also changed clubs.

Cummings said the Grizzlies continued to talk Tuesday to the Giants and the other teams still looking for affiliates. His 10-year relationship with Astros President Reid Ryan, son of Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan, helped make him feel like Houston was the right fit. The Astros were left looking for a Triple-A home when the Dodgers paired with Oklahoma City.

Reid Ryan, who as a player spent part of the 1995 season with the Visalia Oaks, said it was the right choice.

"We're excited to partner with the Fresno Grizzlies," Ryan said in a statement. "In meetings with General Manager Jeff Luhnow and Player Development Director Quinton McCracken, we quickly realized that Fresno was a perfect fit for us. The Grizzlies have a solid foundation and staff and will be great partners with the Astros."

The move, which Cummings called the "worst kept secret around Fresno" because of social media, was first reported by The Bee on Thursday morning.

The new pairing "makes sense for everybody," Grizzlies Executive Vice President Derek Franks said.

Ryan and other Astros executives are expected to visit Fresno next month, Franks said. The visit will coincide with an event for season-ticket holders to get to know the organization as well as a possible unveiling of new home uniforms, Franks said.

There are no plans for changes to the Grizzlies brand, including Parker the mascot. Franks noted that it's a bonus that the club and the Astros share the same shade of orange.

The Grizzlies will face challenges with marketing and promotions as they are no longer able to piggy-back on San Francisco's success. Fresno will still conjure up zany promotions to draw crowds, including the annual Taco Truck Throwdown and special uniforms, such as this year's Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles jerseys.

"One of the things we've been committed to is the fan experience," Franks said. "We're going to highlight the farm system of the Astros, the prospects and players and continue to make the fan experience a top priority."

The Grizzlies also don't plan to take down any images of former Grizzlies throughout the ballpark like the concourse banners of Buster Posey and Madison Bumgarner.

"The Giants will always have a part of our history," Franks said. "We'll never erase that, and it will always be a part of our tradition."

Houston also may bring something that San Francisco enjoyed only rarely in Fresno -- a winning team.

"We are thrilled to be in line with a great baseball family like the Ryans who understand the minor league operation and understand baseball," Franks said. "We couldn't be any happier with the outcome and we are thrilled for the next chapter of Fresno Grizzlies baseball."

The Ryans' other baseball interests call into question how long the Grizzlies-Astros relationship will last. The Round Rock (Texas) Express, another PCL franchise, is owned by Nolan Ryan and his family with Houston businessman Dor Sanders. Round Rock has a player development contract with the Texas Rangers through the 2018 season.

Cummings said the Fresno baseball franchise is still for sale and the new affiliation with the Astros shouldn't impact that.

"We're exactly in the same position we have been in and we're looking to the next season in baseball," Cummings said. "If something happens on the ownership level it will, if it doesn't, as it has the last couple of years, that's fine. We're committed to making sure baseball continues in Fresno and that we have a first-class team here."

Giants President and Chief Executive Officer Larry Baer said location was the Giants' main incentive to switch their Triple-A affiliate to Sacramento, which had enjoyed a 15-year run of success with the A's.

"First and foremost, the Giants want to express our sincere appreciation to the Fresno community, in particular to Mayor Ashley Swearengin, the Grizzlies ownership and the fans, for their longtime support of our club," Baer said. "It was a difficult decision to move our affiliate, but ultimately we felt that the proximity of the River Cats to San Francisco was critical to the development of our players."

GRIZZLIES HISTORY

With the Giants stocking players, the Grizzlies have had only five winning seasons. And they made the Pacific Coast League playoffs just once, in their first year of existence, losing in the 1998 division semifinals to Calgary.

A look at the Grizzlies' year-by-year performance in the PCL (Finish denotes the club's standing in relation to all 16 PCL teams, rather than its standing in its four-team division):

Year Record Finish

1998: 81-62 2nd (tie)

1999: 73-69 7th

2000: 7-84 15th

2001: 68-71 9th

2002: 57-87 16th

2003: 55-88 16th

2004: 62-82 15th

2005: 68-76 11th (t)

2006: 61-83 14th

2007: 77-67 4th

2008: 67-76 11th

2009: 71-73 10th (t)

2010: 75-69 6th

2011: 65-79 13th (t)

2012: 74-70 9th

2013: 68-75 12th

2014: 68-76 13th

The reporter can be reached at amoreno@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6401 or @anhelllll on Twitter.

Copyright

© 2014 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>