

HISTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN BASEBALL TOUR OF REDLANDS

Part I: The Tour Takes Root

Now in its 31st year, the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands began on a Monday in late June of 1990 with a simple phone call to the City of Redlands Mayor from the Aussie Expos coach, the late John (“JM”) Murray from the Redlands Shire of Queensland, Australia, asking about the possibility of an international exhibition and goodwill game between the two Redlands communities. At the time of the call Murray and his Expos team were attending the San Diego Baseball School and were less than a week away from making their annual bus trip to Sanger near Fresno to connect with host families and play a series of exhibition games. Murray noticed the City of Redlands on the California map and figured it was only a slight diversion from the direct route to Sanger. After talking to Murray, the late Mayor of Redlands, Chuck DeMirjyn, immediately contacted the President of Redlands Baseball for Youth (RBY), Steve Chapman, to request help with the exhibition game. “Steve, can you make it happen,” the Mayor asked. “I’m sure I can, Mayor,” Chapman responded. “When are they arriving?” “On Friday, four days from now,” replied the Mayor. Chapman immediately contacted the RBY board of directors to share the news and develop a plan to host the event. Chris McPeck, who had recently been assigned as the manager of the 14 year-old Pony All-Star team was quick to volunteer his team as the opponent for the Expos. He and his coach, Rene Leal, were excited not only about the opportunity to participate in an international exhibition game, but wanted to give their team some experience before the Pony All-Star tournament commenced in early July.

In addition to Murray and Mayor DeMirjyn, Chapman, McPeck and the RBY board of directors, a few others deserve credit for the planning of the Expos initial baseball tour of Redlands. Jane Dreyer, who at the time was the City of Redlands Public Information Officer, helped plan publicity and lunch for the Expos arrival at City Hall. Vince Askey of Sports Promotions International, Solana Beach, was the Expos contact and liaison. The historic first game was played at Community Field in 110 degree heat with Redlands, California defeating Redlands, Australia 9-4. Chapman recalls several of the Expos players being overcome by the severe heat late in the game and having to be benched with the aid of a cold towel. After the game McPeck invited Murray and the Expos to Uncle Howie’s Pizza for food and refreshments and learned they were spending the night in a local motel before departing to Sanger in the morning. McPeck and Murray became instant friends and made plans for a return visit of the Expos the following summer with McPeck promising Murray host families and an expanded itinerary. Chapman, who had announced the game but missed the pizza party afterwards due to a mild heatstroke, received a phone call the next morning from McPeck with news of the Expos plans to return in 1991. The planning for the 2nd Annual Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands had begun.

In each and every year since the historic first game the Expos have returned to Redlands for an annual baseball tour and the entire Redlands community has responded with a fun-filled itinerary of games and events. The warmth, friendship and hospitality of the Redlands community has made it the annual sanctuary for the touring Aussie Expos. “We have an encore problem each year,” remarks Chapman. “We’re not satisfied in repeating the success of each tour. We want to build on each experience and make the next one even better. And amazingly, we do it every time.”

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Part II: The Murray Years

Back in Australia John Murray led a successful career as a public relations consultant and for many years was chairman of the Redlands Strawberry Festival. He served on many positions for Queensland baseball including State Councilor and Judiciary Chairman as well as the Board of Management. At a young age he learned the game of baseball from American GI's who were serving in Australia during and after World War II. Murray is the founder of the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands and throughout his nearly 16 years of bringing high school-aged teams to America, created a unique exchange of baseball cultures between the two countries. His Australia Expos (formerly Brisbane Expos) organization was established in 1987 when he took his first team to America as a baseball exchange coordinated originally through Sports Promotions International. Since that time the Expos have toured America annually taking at least one and sometimes two teams. In addition to touring most major cities in California, the Expos have visited New York, Illinois, Indiana, Texas, Nevada, Arizona, Hawaii, and have even crossed the border into Mexico. They have attended major and minor league ballparks in all these areas, participated in training camps, and have enjoyed being hosted and playing games with high school-aged teams in many of the states.

Murray's Expos organization is founded on the Three A's, attitude, ability and achievement. According to Murray, while on tour his players must at all times exhibit a positive attitude. Regardless of their ability, they are on tour to learn and improve their baseball skill set. Additionally, each player is expected to establish their own set of goals for the tour, what they want to achieve as a means of improving themselves as human beings. Murray did not necessarily invite the best players, but he did look for the right type of personal character in the players he invited. His formula has been highly successful with many past Expos having successful careers both on and off the diamond. Initially his players were drawn primarily from the Brisbane area and state of Queensland, but over the years his recruiting was expanded to all areas of Australia, including Northern Territory and New South Wales. Without fail, Murray brought the Expos to Redlands, California for 14 consecutive years. But he suffered three major strokes dating back to 2002 and due to health issues could not participate on tour after 2003. His wife Denise and youngest son, Justin, a member of the 1990 Expos team, took turns leading the tour from 2004 through 2009. In total, the Murray Family brought the Expos to Redlands for 20 consecutive years.

John Murray died peacefully on Monday, January 21, 2008 in the Redlands Shire of Queensland. He was 61 years old. One week prior to his death and at a bedside ceremony attended by many, he was awarded the Baseball Queensland Life Members badge by the Commissioner and became only the ninth person in 50 years of Queensland baseball to be awarded such a prestigious position. Here in Redlands, California we had lost a special friend. He brought something truly special to our community, enriching our lives with a positive influence on hundreds of Redlands families and a legacy that we will treasure throughout the remainder of our own lives. As a tribute to the late "JM," the Redlands City Council proclaimed July 3, 2008 as "John Murray Day" in the City of Redlands. Incidentally, prior to his death July 3rd was always the date that Murray had asked the Redlands tour organizers to set aside for the Australia Expos Hall of Fame induction ceremony. The Hall of Fame was created by Murray in 1999 during the Expos 10th tour of Redlands as a means of honoring players, coaches, organizers and supporters of the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands program alike; those who have given so generously of their time and work hard behind the scenes to help make these tours a success. A total of 33 players, coaches, organizers and supporters were inducted at the initial Hall of Fame ceremony on July 3, 1999.

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Part III: “With Smiles and Passion in Creating Inspiration Daily”

Following the Summer of 2009 the Murray Family announced their retirement from the tour and thus ending an amazing string of 20 consecutive years of bringing Australian ballplayers to Redlands. Despite the strong interest of Redlands families in continuing the program and eager to host, as late as February 2010 it appeared the program had witnessed its final tour the previous summer. But in late February a phone call was made to Chapman from Michael “Moe” Crossland of Coffs Harbour, New South Wales. It was a historic phone call for the tour and one that would continue the program through present day. Crossland called to inform Chapman that he was bringing the Expos back to Redlands that summer for their 21st consecutive tour.

Crossland literally grew up in the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands having experienced many tours as a player, team captain and coach dating back to 1999 when he just 15. As a cancer-stricken infant with a very slim chance of survival and spending most of his youth in hospitals, Crossland defied all odds as he grew. Although always at risk of continuing health issues related to his rare cancer, he played baseball in his pre-teen years, many times of which were interrupted with more hospital stays. At an early age he dreamed of coming to America to play baseball and his inspiration became the subject of an award-winning documentary in Australia on his remarkable life from birth to 14 years of age. John Murray just happened to see the documentary and realizing Crossland’s desire to play baseball in America, contacted the company that produced the documentary and asked how to get in touch with Crossland and help fulfill his dream. According to Chapman, “News of Crossland’s story and that he was traveling with the Expos for their 1999 tour had actually reached the host families awaiting the Expos arrival by bus at the Portuguese-American Club in Mentone. When he walked off the bus with all smiles and an abundance of enthusiasm, I sensed something really special for the tour, and that a blessed and spiritual element had just been added to our program that still exists today.”

As a show of respect to the Murray Family, Crossland suggested there be no Hall of Fame inductions that summer of 2010. The suggestion was well-received in Redlands. However, Crossland would return with the Expos the following summer and the very first joint induction into the Hall of Fame began, that of the Australia Expos and the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands. In addition to being the head coach and leading the Expos in their 31st baseball tour of Redlands this summer following a 5-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 Pandemic, Crossland is a gifted and internationally known inspirational speaker. His motto “With smiles and passion in creating inspiration daily” is the perfect way to describe the positive energy and goodwill he brings each summer to the community of Redlands.

The term “Aussie Ball” was coined over the years by Redlands players as a way of shortening the program name. It was much easier asking a friend or teammate on a high school campus, “Are you playing Aussie Ball this summer?” than asking, “Are you playing in the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands this summer?” The team name “909ers” was the result of a Name Our Team Contest held in 2005 before creating the uniforms that would be worn on the 2nd reciprocating tour of Australia by Redlands players under the Australian Baseball Tour of Redlands program. Player Adam Dewey won the team naming contest and the 909ers name has stuck for almost 20 years. The first reciprocating tour of Australia was in 1994 by the Redlands Quakes, including a game played on John Murray Field in the Redlands Shire of Queensland Australia.