



Reynosa's Parque Adolfo López Mateos sat empty after the Broncos left town in 2003. But now that the team is back, local fans have flocked to the stadium, giving the team the highest attendance mark in the league.

AMID DRUG WAR A BASEBALL TEAM RETURNS

FANS IN CRIME-RIDDEN REYNOSA HAVE FOUND SOMETHING TO CHEER ABOUT

BY JONATHAN CLARK, MALCOLM BEITH
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The News

REYNOSA, Tamps. — The residents of this northeastern border town haven't had much to cheer about lately.

At times during the past two years, their city's streets have been occupied in turn by soldiers sent in to quell escalating drug violence and by demonstrators paid off by the local cartel to protest the Army's presence. Narco-banners bearing threatening messages for the drug traffickers' enemies pop up regularly along public thoroughfares and kidnappings are common occurrences. On Feb. 17, five people were killed in a daytime shootout between gunmen and federal agents, terrifying locals and scaring away tourists from across the border.

But amid all the drugs, killing and terror has come at least one piece of good news: Reynosa has its baseball team back.

Five years after the Reynosa Broncos of the Mexican Baseball League, or LMB, left town for San Luis Potosí, city and state officials announced last winter that they had secured a deal to buy the struggling Tijuana Potros franchise. And on March 26, the reborn Reynosa Broncos played their 2009 home opener at Parque Adolfo López



The Broncos, who were one of the league's worst teams last year as the Tijuana Potros, have the league's second-best record.

Mateos, beating the Nuevo Laredo Tecolotes on a ninth-inning, walk-off home run by Panamanian designated hitter Julio Zuleta that sent the packed house into a delirium.

Inspired by the team's opening night dramatics — or perhaps desperate for something fun to take their minds off the drug war — the residents of Reynosa have flocked to see their new local heroes. Through their first seven home games, the Broncos averaged more than 8,000 fans per contest — the best figure in the

16-member league. Buoyed by the support, the team responded by winning their first six games. The Broncos, who ranked among the league's worst teams as the Potros in 2008, were 11-3 through Thursday, the second-best mark in Mexican baseball.

Suddenly, stories of the Broncos' heroics are competing with the latest drug war tragedy for space in local newspapers. And the narco-banners are being joined by new signs quietly popping up around the beleaguered city, such as one draped across a local

shop front bearing the slogan: "Los Broncos: El Orgullo de Reynosa" ("The Broncos: The Pride of Reynosa").

Miguel Mejilla, a 34-year-old bartender at The Mission, said patrons have been packing his bar on game nights to cheer on the Broncos and forget the trouble around them.

"The majority of people who come here talk about sports — and now baseball's one of them," Mejilla said. "It stops them talking about the crisis, about crime. It gives them something else to focus on."

Broncos players have noticed the effect as well.

"The first nights were awesome," said 31-year-old shortstop Marshall McDougall, a Florida native who joined the team this season after a brief career with the Texas Rangers.

"If I walk into a local restaurant the people are super-excited about having a local player around. I think this can serve as a kind of distraction for the people, especially since we are winning."

Now local officials and residents are hoping that the Broncos, a team that's quickly turned its fortunes around and inspired a wave of civic pride in the process, can serve as a catalyst for a larger comeback in Reynosa.

PONYING UP

Unlike central Mexico, where soccer is king, Reynosa has long been a baseball town, with the Broncos playing a central role in that tradition.

The franchise was born in 1963 as the LMB's first expansion team, joining the six original members, Mexico City Diablos Rojos, Monterrey Sul-tanes, Puebla Pericos, Mexico City Tigres, Veracruz Rojos del Águila and Poza Rica Petroleros.

The Broncos won their one and only league championship in 1969 before leaving town for León following the 1970 season.

They were back in Reynosa for the 1980-82 seasons, then returned again in 1995 only to leave for San Luis Potosí after the 2003 campaign due to ownership problems.

In recent years, an increasing number of local governments in Mexico have spent public funds to bring baseball to their communities. The LMB teams in the Port of Veracruz, Minatitlán and Tabasco are largely subsidized by public funds and the state



The Tecolotes, the Broncos' rivals from Nuevo Laredo, have a similar team story.

government of Veracruz dipped into public coffers to help rejuvenate the state's Veracruz Winter League in 2005.

With that precedent in mind, local and state officials in Tamaulipas decided to pony up to bring back the Broncos. The city and state each forked over one-third of the \$2.7 million price tag — the local private sector picked up the remaining third — and bought the Tijuana franchise, which was suffering from its geographic isolation from the rest of the league.

"We have no intention of becoming permanent managers of the Broncos," Reynosa Mayor Óscar Luebbert Gutiérrez told The News, saying that the city hopes to sell its share in the team to a local buyer by the end of the year.

But the fact that the city council was willing to approve the expenditure in a time of economic uncertainty underscores the importance officials placed on the project.

"In order to stimulate investment and interest in the team, we saw the need to do our part to bring the



The return of the Broncos has allowed folks in Reynosa to gather at the ballpark, let down their hair and forget about the crime-related tension gripping their city.

But then the turf war abruptly ended, with murders dropping to 55 last year. Wal-Mart opened a new megastore in town, the city inaugurated a shiny cultural center and, in March 2008, Nuevo Laredo's local professional baseball team, the Tecolotes, moved back to town after having left in 2004 to become — you guessed it — the Tijuana Potros. Now visitors from Texas are trickling back over the border and journalists have begun writing stories about the comeback of Nuevo Laredo.

STAYING OUT OF TROUBLE

No one is ready to write Reynosa's comeback story quite yet, however. Not as long as the shootouts and kidnappings continue, and the Army remains deployed to the area.

"In terms of the sheer visibility of the military in Reynosa, the difference is immense," said Derrick White, a power-hitting Broncos outfielder who moved with the team in the offseason from Tijuana, another border city ravaged by drug violence. "Tijuana is so spread out, in many areas you would not see the military in the streets. You are much more aware in Reynosa about what is going on, you hear about every shooting that happens in the city."

And while the Broncos players say the tension is not enough to affect their performance or give them second thoughts about playing in Reynosa, they still take precautions off the field.

"If we don't go around bothering the criminal elements of Reynosa, then they won't bother us," said McDougall, the shortstop.

"You really need to stay out of trouble, though," he added. "Wherever you go, you have to be careful at night. Most of the time I head straight from the stadium to my house in Reynosa

●●
In Reynosa we are not used to the violence that is occurring right now. And that's why it's so important for our city to have the Broncos back.♦♦

ÓSCAR LUEBBERT GUTIÉRREZ
Reynosa mayor

or the hotel with no funny business in between."

White, a California native who played in the majors with the Montreal Expos, Detroit Tigers, Chicago Cubs and Colorado Rockies, said he makes sure not to "act like a star" and draw attention to himself around town. He said that he and his teammates have cut down on their partying, and that they make an effort to travel in groups. And while he has yet to bring his family down from the United States, White says that if he did, he would make sure that someone from the team met them at the border and escorted them around town.

Reynosa resident Juan Jaramillo, a 44-year-old married father of three, can understand such concerns. But he's glad to have found a new place in town where he can take his family for a night of fun and community spirit: the ballpark.

"A lot of people love baseball here [and so] it's great to have a big league team. It's good for a healthy mind," he said. "It's a place you can go with the family and kids. Having a team like this is phenomenal."

Hamels battered in Denver

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

DENVER — Cole Hamels hardly looked like a World Series MVP in his 2009 debut.

After his start was pushed back because of spring training elbow trouble, Hamels was roughed up and chased early by the Rockies on Friday in Colorado's 10-3 victory over the Philadelphia Phillies.

Jason Marquis pitched seven strong innings in his Rockies debut, and Colorado beat the defending World Series champions in its home opener. The crowd of 49,427 was the highest paid attendance in a regular-season game at Coors Field, which opened in 1995.

Hamels (0-1) was supposed to start Philadelphia's season opener Sunday night, but his outing was delayed due to a sore left elbow that slowed him this spring. The left-hander allowed seven runs and 11 hits in 3 2-3 innings, including a five-run third in which he gave up half a dozen extra-base hits.

Marquis (1-0), acquired from the Chicago Cubs in the offseason, improved to 4-0 at Coors Field by allowing two runs and five hits. He also went 2-for-3 at the plate with a sacrifice bunt, a run-scoring single and a double.

Garrett Atkins homered and Todd Helton drove in three runs for Colorado, off to a 3-1 start.

Jayson Werth went 4-for-4 with two doubles and a homer and scored all of Philadelphia's runs. But cleanup hitter Ryan Howard bounced into three double plays as the Phillies fell to 1-3.

Hamels' unpleasant third inning could have been even worse, but plate umpire Mike Everitt called Dexter Fowler out for runners' interference when catcher Carlos Ruiz picked up his dribbler and nailed him in the back with a throw to first base. Rockies manager Clint Hurdle argued vehemently and replays showed Fowler never strayed from the chalk line as he sprinted to first.



Reigning NL Cy Young-winner Cole Hamels exits.