

# Sunshine League

*Make a bee line to Florida before the end of March to enjoy the crack of a bat and the whoosh of a driver*

**BY PETER ABRAHAM**

**N**ew York Yankees manager Joe Torre has been going to Florida for spring training since 1961, when he was a young catcher with the Milwaukee Braves, fresh out of Brooklyn. “I didn’t play golf then,” says Torre, “but I wish I had. I’d be a better player now.” To make up for those misspent days of his youth, Torre plays as often as possible once the Yankees arrive in Florida to prepare for the upcoming season. “Spring training is busy for us, but I’ll try and sneak out and play nine holes with my wife before a night game,” he says. “It’s relaxing.”

Like Torre, there are plenty of Met Area baseball fans for whom golf and spring training is an unbeatable combination. A trip to Florida in February or March offers you a chance to see your favorite team and get in a few rounds, so you can get prepped for your season the same way the players are for theirs. The Yankees train in Tampa, while the Mets are farther south and on the opposite coast, in the city of Port St. Lucie. Don’t worry, that’s enough space to keep rival fans apart.

## **Tampa Area**

The Tournament Players Club of Tampa Bay (866-752-9872; [www.tpc.com](http://www.tpc.com)) is popular



with the Yankees because it’s only 15 miles from Legends Field. It is the home of the Champions Tour’s Outback Steakhouse Pro-Am, scheduled for February 16 through 18 this year. One of the toughest courses on the Champions Tour, the back nine is particularly difficult at the TPC. However, you’ll find plenty of room to safely maneuver your drives, and a large practice facility to work out the rust in your game.

Make your way northwest across Tampa Bay to the hamlet of Palm Harbor, where you’ll find the four 18-hole courses of the Innisbrook Resort and Golf Club (727-942-5577; [www.innisbrookgolfresort.com](http://www.innisbrookgolfresort.com)). The featured track is the Copperhead, which plays

**Whether you’re coming to see Derek Jeter and the Yankees (above) or Tom Glavine and the Mets (opposite page, top), you’ll have plenty of golf options.**



COURTESY OF THE NEW YORK YANKEES

at 7,340 yards from the back tees and has long been regarded as one of the best public-access courses in Florida. It is also home to the PGA Tour's Tampa Bay Championship, held from March 8 through 11 this year. Keep that in mind when you select your travel dates, and plan accordingly.

The Island Course at Innisbrook, while not as brawny as Copperhead, still provides plenty of challenge due to an inordinate amount of water hazards. In fact, both courses offer elevation changes and tree-lined fairways that evoke the feel of the Carolina Sandhills. The Island Course hosted the 1990 NCAA men's golf championship, won by Phil Mickelson, then of Arizona State.

Rounding out the golf options at Innisbrook are the Highlands North and Highlands South courses. The first is the more exacting layout, demanding accurate approaches, while the latter is relatively open and exposed to the coastal wind. Together, the 72 holes of golf at Innisbrook comprise one of the best stay-and-play golf experiences in Florida.

In nearby Largo you'll find Bardmoor Golf and Tennis Club (727-392-1234; [www.bardmoorgolf.com](http://www.bardmoorgolf.com)). The course was renovated in 2001 by Gary Koch and now features some



of the best greens in the Tampa area. All 18 holes are on lakes.

The semi-private Fox Hollow Golf Club, north of town in New Port Richey (800-943-1902; [www.golfthefox.com](http://www.golfthefox.com)), is about 35 minutes from Legends Field. The Robert Trent Jones-designed course is true to Florida, incorporating several species of local flora and fauna.

Worth a side trip is Lake Jovita Golf and Country Club (352-588-2233; [www.lakejovita.com](http://www.lakejovita.com)) in Dade City, about an hour away from Tampa. Home to two courses, the South Course features a 94-foot drop from tee to green on No. 11. That's the largest natural elevation of any course in the state. Tom Lehman and Kurt Sandness designed the layout. The North Course is more contemporary in style and stands as a worthy complement.

**The sixth hole on the Ryder Course at PGA Golf Club (main photo, above) offers an inviting fairway. Bardmoor's 17th hole (inset) is lined with water down the right side.**





The bustling Tampa area offers a wide variety of hotels in every price range. The Renaissance Tampa Hotel International Plaza (813-877-9200) is a short drive from Legends Field and offers pleasant décor and a convenient location. Fleming's Prime Steakhouse and Wine Bar is right across the street alongside Roy's, a popular Hawaiian fusion restaurant.

## That's the Ticket

Here's how to plan ahead if you want to see either of the hometown teams play spring training games.

### Yankees

**Site:** Legends Field, 1 Steinbrenner Drive, Tampa.

**Tickets:** Seats range from \$17 to \$23 and sell quickly. Call 800-969-2657 or log on to [www.yankees.com](http://www.yankees.com).

**Schedule:** The Yankees play 15 games at home starting March 1 against Minnesota. The final game is March 31.

**What to see:** Owner George Steinbrenner often watches games from his suite behind home plate and rides around the complex in a golf cart. Check out the practice fields to see legends like Yogi Berra instructing the players.

**Promising prospect:** Philip Hughes, a 20-year-old right-hander, was 12-6 in the minors last season, striking out 168 batters in 146 innings. The Yankees hope he's their next pitching star.

### Mets

**Site:** Tradition Field, 525 NW Peacock Blvd., Port St. Lucie.

**Tickets:** Seats start at \$25 or you can stretch out on the grassy hill in right field for only \$6. Call 772-871-2115 or visit [www.mets.com](http://www.mets.com).

**Schedule:** The Mets start the exhibition season at home on Feb. 28 against Detroit and will play 16 games at Tradition Field. The last home game is March 30.

**What to see:** The four practice fields are over to the left side of the stadium. It's a prime spot to see the players up close. Keep an eye out for Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax; he's an old friend of owner Fred Wilpon.

**Promising prospect:** Mike Pelfrey was the team's first-round draft pick in 2005 and made it to the majors for four games last season. The 6-foot-7 right-hander has a 98-mph fastball.

## Port St. Lucie

The Mets trained in St. Petersburg for 25 years before moving across the state to Port St. Lucie in 1988. Back then, it was a speck on the map 50 miles north of West Palm Beach, with fewer than 40,000 residents. It was common for foul balls to lay untouched because of the alligators sunning themselves just outside the outfield fences.

Nearly 20 years later, it is an entirely different scene in Port St. Lucie. A sustained influx of retirees and second-home buyers has created extensive development. In 2005, Port St. Lucie was deemed the nation's fastest-growing city by the U.S. Census Bureau, and is now home to nearly 160,000 residents. The Mets have benefited from the growth, and now routinely draw thousands to their spring training games.

Golf also played a large role in Port St. Lucie's boom, as PGA Village (800-800-4653; [www.pgavillage.com](http://www.pgavillage.com)) opened in 1996 and became a destination for traveling golfers. It sits just off Interstate 95, only two miles from where the Mets play at Tradition Field.

PGA Golf Club has three courses: the Ryder Course, the Wanamaker Course and the Dye Course. Known simply as the North Course before it was redesigned, the Tom Fazio-built Ryder Course features towering pine trees and rolling hills, quite different from the pancake-flat landscape seen on the drive into town on the highway.

Fazio also designed the Wanamaker Course and incorporated wetlands, palm trees and palmettos to create a true Florida feel. You'll need to hit the ball well off the tee here, as a good approach shot is required to land on the well-guarded greens.

The Dye Course is one of the more interesting tracks in Florida. It evokes a links but also includes several tropical touches, including pine straw roughs and huge coquina waste bunkers. Pete Dye, who has his offices just down the coast, was at the top of his game for this one.

Since the PGA Village is affiliated with and run by the PGA of America, it's no surprise that the practice grounds are impressive. Still, you will likely be blown over once you see the PGA Learning Center in person. It is a 35-acre facility that includes a three-hole teaching course, fairway target areas, a 7,000-square foot practice green, practice chipping areas, nine types of practice bunkers and more than 100 private practice stations. Along with traditional lessons from professionals, the Learning Center has video analysis, computer imaging and the



The TPC of Tampa Bay hosts a Champions Tour event and boasts one of the toughest back nines in the state.

MATT system from TaylorMade, which employs high-speed digital cameras. If you can't improve your game here, you're just not trying hard enough.

It's now also possible to stay at PGA Village, as there is a new 130-room Hilton Garden Inn (772-871-6850; hiltongardeninn.com) on the site along with Sam Snead's Tavern, a golf-themed restaurant. PGA Village also offers 300 townhouse-style units, which include full kitchens, laundry facilities and a large community pool. Contact Premier Golf (888-439-1831; www.premiergolf.com) for information.

Both the Hilton Garden Inn and the villas offer golf packages that include breakfast, one round per night of stay and admission to the Learning Center.

Oh, and don't be surprised if you run into one of the Mets when you tee it up. Many of the players rent villas during spring training and tote their clubs along. Star pitcher Tom Glavine is an avid golfer and often works on his game at PGA Village. "You can't beat the facilities," he says. "If you want to practice or play a round, you have all kinds of choices."

Before signing with the Mets and becoming acquainted with what Port St. Lucie has to offer, Glavine spent spring training with the Atlanta Braves in Orlando and played several rounds with Tiger Woods at Isleworth and Orange Tree.

"Tiger is a good baseball fan and he was very gracious," Glavine says. "I was able to see a side of him you don't see on television. It was a great experience."

So if you're in Port St. Lucie, take Glavine's advice and drive over to Tradition Field to catch a game or two between rounds. "Baseball and golf on the same day," he says. "You can't beat that." ■

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