

Honors Program

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*Attendance and the Minor Leagues -
Does MLB Affiliation Matter?*

Sport Management

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Attendance and the Minor Leagues-Does MLB Affiliation Matter?

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Introduction

Baseball is considered America's national pastime. From playing a game of catch when you are a child, through playing and watching games while growing up, baseball has a sense that it is a truly American thing to do. While most fans are aware of Major League Baseball, there is also a smaller stage for players with talent but maybe not all the perfect skills to make the majors can play. This is minor league baseball, and it allows for players to work on their skills so that one day they can play in the majors.

Minor league baseball is played in two different forms. One is affiliated with the Minor League Baseball system, which allows for players to be drafted by an MLB club and then go through the ranks of affiliated baseball. There is also independent baseball, where teams are not affiliated by with an MLB club, but players can work to have their contracts bought by an MLB club. Each type of baseball is able to bring in fans to come to their games. However, this then opens a question, which is what type of baseball is more successful is bringing in fans to come to their games. This paper addresses how teams did in terms of drawing in fans and compares independent leagues to affiliated leagues. The author also looks at how teams performed since the recent economic recession to see how the leagues have done in keeping attendance figures up during the recent economic struggles.

The author had three questions to be answered. The three research questions were as followed.

1. In terms of attendance figures, how are minor league and independent teams performing?
2. Which type of league has better attendance?
3. Compare attendance data from before and after the beginning of the recent economic recession from 2006-present.

In answering these three questions, the author found that he was able to get an understanding of the success of attendance, as well as comparisons between minor league and independent leagues. The author was also able compare how teams had been doing before and after the recent economic recession in order to get a sense of how the teams had been doing. In being able to answer these questions, it helped in terms of understanding the difference between affiliated and independent baseball, the success rates of each league, and how the recent economic recession had taken a toll on attendance figures.

Literature Review

There is some history in the background of minor league and independent baseball. Minor League Baseball (the official organization of leagues that play under that moniker) was formed in 1901, when it was then known as the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues. The leagues played their first official season in 1902, with ninety-six teams in fourteen leagues. Minor League Baseball grew to its largest point in terms of teams in 1949, when 448 teams playing in fifty-nine different leagues were members of Minor League Baseball. Since that time, Minor League Baseball has seen a slight drop in terms of overall teams and leagues but is still doing well. In 2012, Minor League Baseball saw fifteen leagues totaling 176 teams take the field (“Official Site”, milb.com).

Independent baseball, on the other hand, has a more recent history than minor league baseball. The current form of independent baseball started in 1993 with only two leagues. Since then, there have been twenty-five different independent leagues, with over 250 teams competing during that time frame (Independent Pro Baseball). Many ballplayers have gone through the independent ranks and have made it to the major league, including former Fargo-Moorhead RedHawk Chris Coste, who won a World Series with the Philadelphia Phillies in 2008 (The author’s affinity for the RedHawks and Coste notwithstanding).

There has been some previous research in the study of attendance and how it affects minor league baseball. One of these studies was done by J. Thomas Yokum, Juan J. Gonzalez, and Tom Badgett. The three authors, in 2006, studied how a franchise would be successful in drawing fans to come to their games. Yokum, Gonzalez, and Badgett found that their franchise would not have long-term success in their current market (Yokum, et al.). However, in comparing the current study to the research done by the three, the current study does not look at

predicting future success, but rather comparing the past success of these teams drawing in the fans.

There have also been studies done of how attendance affects major league baseball. One of these studies was done by Robert A. Baade and Laura J. Tiehen. In their study, they looked to develop a theory about major league attendance, and how that theory can contribute to resolving other issues in sport. The authors found that there was a strong correlation in the major leagues between how a team performs and how attendance figures. In looking at attendance at the minor league level, I also looked at this correlation between how a team was doing on the field and how they performed in drawing in fans.

Methods

In starting research, the author began by sending out surveys (Appendix A) with results (Appendix B) to the sixteen league offices that he was looking to acquire data from. Four of these leagues (American Association, Atlantic League, Can-Am League, and Frontier League) are independent leagues, while the remaining twelve (International League, Pacific Coast League, Eastern League, Southern League, Texas League, California League, Carolina League, Florida State League, Midwest League, South Atlantic League, New York-Penn League, and Northwest League) are affiliated leagues. In looking at collecting data, the author chose to use data from teams in previous cities. However, if teams had switched leagues over the course of the study, the author chose to use them as expansion teams in their current league. In order to get a proper balance, the author used attendance as a percentage of stadium capacity. This allowed for discrepancies in stadium size to be balanced out, and allowed an equal study. While the author received very few surveys in return, he was able to access the information over the internet. Some of these sites that had information available included minorleaguebaseball.com, baseball-reference.com, as well as the individual independent league sites. A complete lists of websites used is referenced in Appendix D.

From there, the author analyzed each of the team's data. The author used the formula of $\text{Attendance Percentage of Stadium Capacity} = \text{Per-Game Average} / \text{Stadium Capacity}$ in order to figure out what the average came out to be for each team in a given year. The author then took the averages for each team in a league in a given year to get the league average for one year. After completing that, the author took the averages for a league for each year and averaged them out to get the seven-year average for each league.

Finally, after analyzing each year for each league individually, the author compared each year for the leagues as one. The author averaged out the averages for the seven years in this study, in order to make a seven-year average. By using this seven-year average, the author had one number from which he could compare each of the leagues as a group, and it also allowed for a larger spectrum of whether or not these leagues were successful over the whole period. The author also looked at which year specifically that each league had their best year in terms of average attendance, in order to compare how leagues have performed before and after the economic recession.

Results

Fourteen out of the sixteen leagues that were surveyed came in at 50% or above for the seven-year average of stadium capacity. Only one league came in at 70% for the seven-year average. Nine leagues were between 60% and 70% in their seven-year average, while one league was below 40% in their seven-year average. There are cases of franchises in particular leagues that are doing well in drawing in fans, consistently performing in the 90% range of stadium capacity. There are also franchises in these leagues that are also drawing in the 30-40% range of stadium capacity.

7-Year Averages

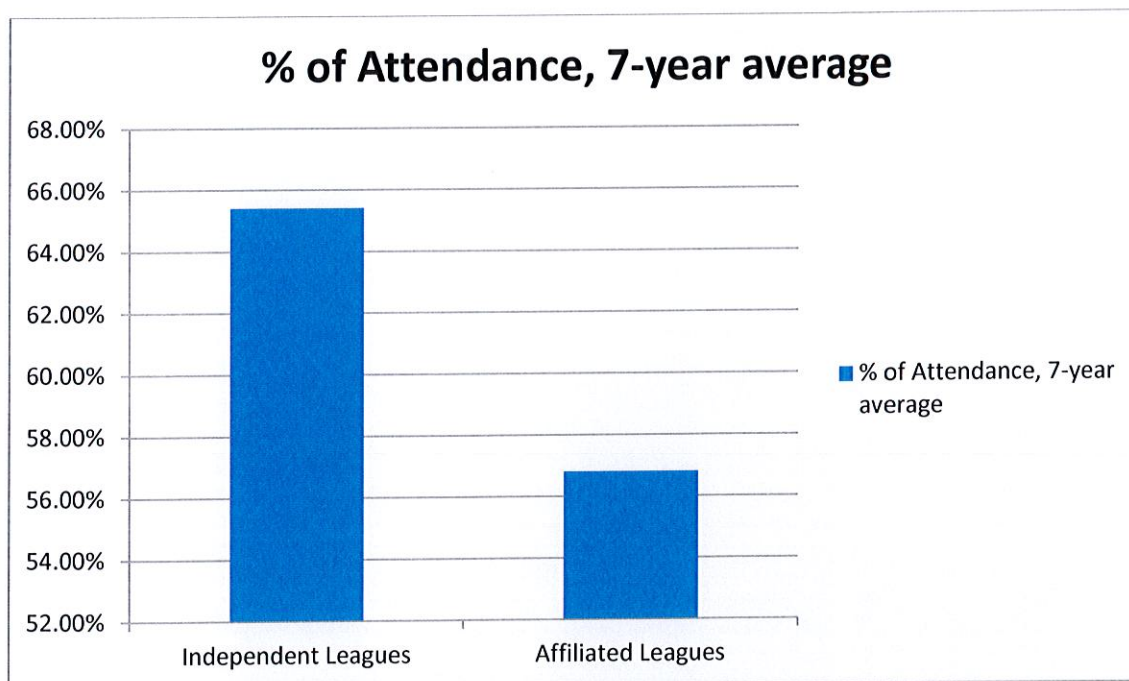
Atlantic League-72.57% (I)	American Association-62.31% (I)
New York-Penn League-69.26% (A)	Can-Am League-61.93% (I)
Eastern League-66.31% (A)	Midwest League-58.25% (A)
Texas League-65.68% (A)	Carolina League-57.66% (A)
Northwest League-64.87% (A)	Pacific Coast League-55.36% (A)
Frontier League-64.86% (I)	California League-50.19% (A)
South Atlantic League-63.41% (A)	Southern League-46.18% (A)
International League-63.20% (A)	Florida State League-21.38% (A)

I-Independent, A-Affiliated

(American Association, "American Association", "Atlantic League", "Ball Parks", "BallparkReviews.com", "Baseball Pilgrimages", Canadian American Association,

“CanAMLeague.com”, Frontier League, “Frontier League”, Midwest League, “Official Site of Minor League Baseball”, “Pacific Coast League”, Werner Park)

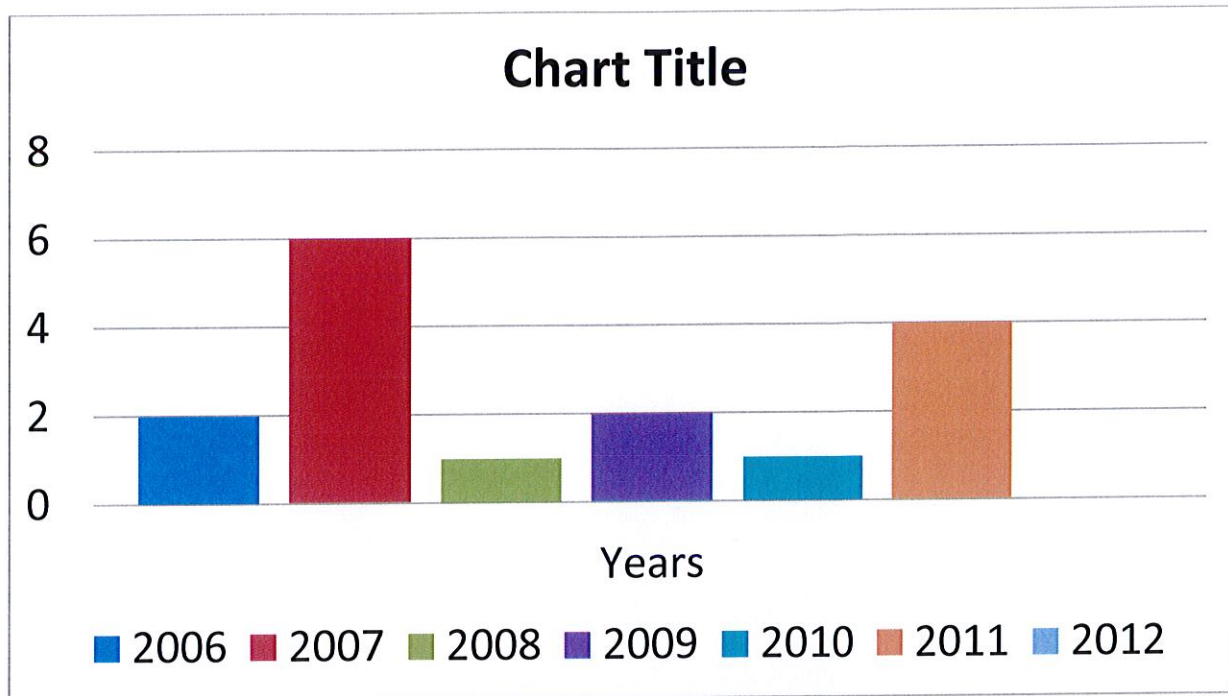
Independent leagues were more successful in drawing in fans than the affiliated league. Based on the seven-year average for each league, the four independent leagues drew 65.42% of stadium capacities to their games, while the twelve affiliated leagues came in at only 56.81% of stadium capacities. It should also be noted that all four of the independent leagues came in the top ten of leagues surveyed, and all came in over 60% of stadium capacity for the seven-year period.



(American Association, “American Association”, “Atlantic League”, “Ball Parks”, “BallparkReviews.com”, “Baseball Pilgrimages”, Canadian American Association, “CanAMLeague.com”, Frontier League, “Frontier League”, Midwest League, “Official Site of Minor League Baseball”, “Pacific Coast League”, Werner Park)

There was an even split of leagues that had their best year occur before 2008, and those that saw their best year come in 2008 and after. All independent leagues had their best year come

before 2008, while eight out of twelve affiliated leagues saw their best year come in 2008 or later. The year that was the best for leagues was 2007, when six leagues saw attendance average highs over this period of time. 2011 was the next best year, as four leagues saw their attendance average hit the highest point over the seven-year course.



(American Association, "American Association", "Atlantic League", "Ball Parks", "BallparkReviews.com", "Baseball Pilgrimages", Canadian American Association, "CanAMLeague.com", Frontier League, "Frontier League", Midwest League, "Official Site of Minor League Baseball", "Pacific Coast League", Werner Park)

Discussion

There were some interesting notes that came out of the results from doing this survey. One was the fact that those leagues that saw their best year before 2008 averaged 63.35%, while those that saw their best year come in 2008 and after only saw an average of 54.57%. This leads to ask the question that, if this survey was done in another five years, with the new data available and removing the old data, what shift would we see in terms of attendance figures? Would leagues that had struggled in this survey rise to the top in the new survey? Would independent leagues fall behind their affiliated counterparts? This opens up questions that can be answered sometime in the future. Not every league that saw their best year come in 2006 or 2007 saw a huge drop in attendance between then and 2012. However, it was more common to see larger drops in the independent leagues than in the affiliated leagues. This may be due to the fact that the independent leagues were more likely to see teams move into their league than their affiliated counterparts.

Also, there are other interesting facts brought up from this survey that affected the survey in terms of stadium capacity. While the Omaha Storm Chasers had seen slight increases in attendance, they saw a large jump in terms of attendance as a percentage of stadium capacity from 2010 to 2011. This was due to the fact that they moved from the 22,000-seat Johnny Rosenblatt Stadium to the 9,023-seat Werner Park in 2011 ("Pacific Coast League", Werner Park). By losing nearly 13,000 seats in their home stadium, this allowed the Storm Chasers' percentage to increase from 26.76% to 65.91% in just one year. In looking at this figure, it goes back to asking the question of, if we were to eliminate any data collected from Johnny Rosenblatt Park, how much of an effect would it have on the league as a whole, considering Omaha is just one member of the sixteen-team Pacific Coast League.

Also, in looking at the city of Wichita, Kansas, the team that called Lawrence-Dumont Stadium home for the 2006 and 2007 season seemed to draw lower numbers than the team that is currently based there. Wichita was home to two separate teams at that ballpark during this study, the Double-A Wichita Wranglers of the Texas League, and the independent Wichita Wingnuts of the American Association. In looking at this data provided for the city of Wichita, there are some questions that can be asked. Why did fans stop supporting the Wranglers, and were willing to support the Wingnuts? This question would need to be answered by surveys from fans of both teams, to get an understanding of the Wichita fan base.

There is also the question of what teams can do in order to draw more fans to come to their games. Although most leagues are successful in getting fans to come (as the fourteen of sixteen over 50% indicated), there is still room for improvement. There are individual franchises in each league that are doing well in drawing attendance. However, there are also franchises that are struggling to draw fans to the gate. Leagues need to work with the struggling franchises in order to help boost the league as a whole. This is especially true in affiliated baseball, where franchises are needed for the major league clubs, and thus are more likely to be moved if not successful in one area.

Also, there are those franchises that are playing in stadiums that may be too large for them to fill up. For example, all but one of the Florida State League stadiums is currently in use by a major league club during their spring training. This leads to having larger stadiums left for the Class A teams to fill up with once the major league club heads back to its home city for the season. However, Florida State League teams could use this to their advantage. They could use marketing tools to state that the players currently out on the field now could be playing for the

major league club someday. Of course, this would only be successful if the spring training base already has a large number of fans for the major league club, but it is still a possibility.

In looking at the information collected for this research project, the author found that most leagues are doing relatively well in drawing in fans, but there is still room for improvement. Each league needs to work with the teams that are struggling in order to help bring up attendance figures as a whole. Meanwhile, those teams that are doing well need to keep up their pace of drawing in fans to their games, to keep the average for each league up. Overall, minor league baseball has room for improvement in terms of drawing in fans, but there has not been a huge negative effect in terms of losing fans due to the economic recession.

Conclusion

Leagues have been somewhat successful in drawing in fans, but there is improvement needed. Independent leagues have been more successful at drawing in fans than their minor league counterparts. Finally, the recent economic recession has had some effect on how teams are performing in attendance, although this is not the case throughout every league. In the end, affiliation does not matter in terms of drawing attendance to minor league games. In looking at future research, the author would look at the area surrounding minor league ballparks, in order to see what minor league teams compete against in terms of drawing fans to the ballpark.

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Appendix A

Survey

1. Has your franchise been in its current city since 2006?
 - a. If your franchise has relocated since 2006, please provide previous city in data.
 - b. If your franchise was an expansion franchise, please use data from the inception of the franchise.
2. Has your franchise gone through any marketing changes since 2006? (New logo/nickname, color scheme, etc.)
 - a. If so, please list previous names or marketing changes data.
3. Has your franchise moved to a new stadium in your current city since 2006?
4. What is the seating capacity of your stadium?
5. What are the attendance figures of your franchise for each year since 2006?
6. What has been the record for your team for each year since 2006?
7. Has your franchise had any playoff experience since 2006?
8. Has your franchise won any championships since 2006?

Appendix B

Survey Answers (For full results, contact the author)

Answer to Question #1-There were some franchises that had moved over the seven-year period. The results found that in every case, the move cause a boost of attendance in the new city for the franchise, although the growth would vary from franchise to franchise

Answer to Question #2-In looking at marketing changes and how it affected franchises, I found that there was not a huge effect on how successful a team did in drawing in fans to their games.

Answer to Question #3-There were only a few teams that changed stadiums in the same city over the course of the seven-year study. In these cases, teams saw their stadium size decrease from the move. There was also one team that rebuilt their stadium, which saw an increase in stadium size.

Answer to Question #4-Stadium size varied from team to team, and from league to league.

Answer to Question #5-The information gathered from attendance figures is reflected in the study answers.

Answers to Question #6-Record did not seem to play a huge factor in the growth or decline of team attendance over the seven-year period.

Answers to Question #7/#8-Playoff appearances, as well as championships, did not seem to play a huge factor in how a team did in seeing growth in attendance.

Appendix C

Stadium Capacities Range

Independent Leagues

American Association-3800-10000

Atlantic League-5200-7500

Can-Am League-3000-6200

Frontier League-3200-7365

Affiliated League

International League-8089-18025 (Previous stadiums ranged from 9560-15000 for three teams)

Pacific Coast League-8500-15500 (Previous stadiums ranged from 11500-23105 for three teams)

Eastern League-6000-1000 (Previous stadium capacity was 6270 for one team)

Southern League-5038-11000 (Previous stadium capacity was 6500 for one team)

Texas League-6500-10486 (Previous stadiums ranged from 6111-10997 for two teams)

California League-2468-8000

Carolina League-4000-6600 (Previous stadiums ranged from 4100-6280 for two teams)

Florida State League-4200-11000 (Previous stadiums ranged from 6474-7500 for two teams)

Midwest League-3200-11000 (Previous stadiums ranged from 6315-6600 for two teams)

South Atlantic League-4000-7499

New York-Penn League-2600-7171 (Previous stadium capacity was 4000 for one team)

Northwest League-3000-6803 (Previous stadium capacity was 6800 for one team)

Appendix D

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Appendix E

Information Received

Information was received from the following leagues

American Association

Can-Am League

Eastern League

Frontier League

International League

Midwest League

Southern League

The following teams also returned surveys

Bakersfield Blaze

Corpus Christi Hooks

Eugene Emeralds

High Desert Mavericks

Inland Empire 66ers

Lancaster JetHawks

Spokane Indians

Visalia Rawhide

The author would like to thank these leagues and teams for providing information, and helping in the process of this study.