

# A Home Run of Fun

Why Spokane Indians Baseball is the hottest ticket this summer

by Blythe Thimsen  
photos courtesy of Spokane Indians

According to calendars and *The Old Farmer's Almanac*, June 21<sup>st</sup> is the first official day of summer, but anyone living in Spokane knows that summer *really* starts on Thursday, June 18<sup>th</sup>. At 6:30 p.m., to be precise. That is when the crack of the bat and roar of the crowd will erupt from Avista Stadium, in the first minutes of the opening game of the Spokane Indians' 2015 season.

Baseball and Spokane. The two go hand-in-hand, celebrating a rich history, since the first baseball game was played in Spokane on May 3, 1890.

According to *Spokane Indians Baseball: Glamour, Scandal and Tragedy* an article by local writer Rocky Wilson, "When the first professional baseball game was held in Spokane on that spring day, about 1,500 spectators from a town of 25,000 people crowded into the stands to cheer on the team that was called the Spokanes.

In 1903, a contest was held locally to rename the Spokanes, to give the city a stronger sense of ownership about its team, and the name Inlanders was selected. Within three weeks, however, major newspapers here, without explanation, began using the name Indians instead of Inlanders, and it stuck. Only for three years after that, from 1937 through 1939, after baseball resumed here following The Great Depression, did the Indians operate under another name besides the Spokane Indians. During that short span the team was known as the Spokane Hawks.

Spokane's professional baseball went dormant for many years because of two World Wars and The Great Depression, yet is alive and well today, providing an opportunity for an affordable family outing where fans of all ages enjoy the thrill of the game."



Baseball in Spokane has been a fan favorite for well over 100 years, and the trend continues. But to be completely honest, it is not *just* the game of baseball that draws the fans to the games. Ever since the baseball team was purchased by Bobby Brett and his three brothers, in 1986, the Spokane Indians baseball organization has made baseball games one of the most popular and affordable sources of family entertainment, both on the field and in the stands.

"The culture here is fun," says Otto Klein, Senior Vice President of the Spokane Indians Baseball Club, and part owner of the team, who is now in his 23<sup>rd</sup> season with the team. "We take that very seriously and we want our culture to be about family and kids. We are family oriented environment. We understand who we are, really well. We provide family entertainment. Our prices reflect it, our cleanliness reflects it and our employees reflect it. We have a low price point. A child can still come to a game for \$5. That is significant. An adult can come for \$6. That is significant. It is

really important for us to hold those prices constant. That is what affordable family entertainment is about."

One reason for the emphasis on making it the best experience possible in the stands, for families and guests, is because the front office at Spokane Indians has very little influence on what happens on the field, and in the game. That is left up to the Texas Rangers, which is the Major League Baseball team with which the Spokane Indians are affiliated. During the Major League draft, players who are hoping to make it to the majors are assigned to one of the teams affiliated with their Major League team, and they work their way up the baseball ladder.

There are seven levels within the Texas Rangers organization: Major League (Texas Rangers, Arlington, TX), AAA (Frisco RoughRiders, Frisco, TX), AA (Round Rock Express, Round Rock, TX), Full Season High A (High Desert Mavericks, Adelanto, CA), Full Season Low A (Hickory Crawdads, Hickory, NC), Short Season A (Spokane Indians, Spokane WA),

and Rookie (AZL Rangers, Surprise, AZ).

"We don't have any control over anything that happens on the field; we don't control the starting lineups, we don't have a say in who is the starting pitcher, and we don't have a say in the manager," says Dustin Toms, director of public relations for the Spokane Indians. "All of those are decisions made by the Texas Rangers."

The goal for players is to keep climbing the ladder until they can get up to the Texas Rangers. Many Spokane Indians players are college athletes or high school kids that just got drafted. "That's why we have such a quick turnaround from when we get our roster to when opening day is," says Toms. "The Major League draft starts on June 8. Our players get here between June 8 and June 18 on opening day. There are 10 days in between, but it's kind of a whirlwind for them."

With little control or certainty over who makes up the team, how well they will do, or how long the players stay before moving up the ranks, the one thing that can be controlled is how great the experience is in





the stands.

One person who has a particular passion for making the experience in the stands, outstanding, is General Manager Chris Duff, who has worked with the Indians for 14 seasons. “People always say, ‘Oh you must watch a lot of baseball,’” he says. “No, I don’t watch any baseball. That’s not my job at all. I’m the general manager of a small business — a small entertainment business. I happen to go to a baseball stadium each day for work. I was much more of a baseball fan when I started. Now, I am a fan of entertainment and customer service and, really, affordable family entertainment is what my passion is now. It totally sounds cheesy, but that is what my passion has become. I didn’t know that when I started, I

had no idea. I just wanted a cool job and to be around baseball.”

When Duff is in the stands, his primary focus is the crowd, making sure they are safe and having a good time. It just so happens that there is a baseball game going on at the same time. “If I hear the crowd cheer, absolutely I turn around and watch what is going on, but I never really sit and watch a game,” he says.

The crowds *are* watching the games, however, and they are also enjoying the activities, the food, the people-watching and the bonus offerings, such as the \$1 Family Feast Nights, and the Firework Nights. Exactly how many people are watching? Well, last season, 193,865 people attended games, meaning an average of 5,240 fans

per game. Those numbers are impressive on their own, however, they grow even more impressive when you consider that fan attendance and participation at Spokane Indians games in 2014 surpassed attendance at WSU Football games by more than 55,000; Gonzaga University Men’s Basketball games by more than 97,000; Bloomsday by 146,700; and Hoopfest by 165,969. The numbers don’t lie; Spokane Indians baseball is a fan favorite. The 2014 Spokane Indians season drew the second largest total attendance, nationally, at the Rookie and Short Season Single A levels of Minor League Baseball, second only to the Brooklyn Cyclones. With a metro population of 2,592,149 from which to draw, the Cyclones only had 8.93% of their

metro population show up at games to cheer them on, compared to 36.19% of the metro population of Spokane attending and cheering at Indians’ games.

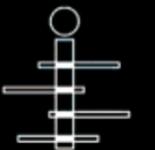
Perhaps one of the reasons there is such a connection between the team and its fans is because of the connection to our region’s history. In 2014, the team started wearing a jersey that had Salish script across the front. Salish is the native language of the Spokane Tribe of Indians, after which the team is officially named. “We have a very close relationship with the Tribe,” says Duff. “We started using that jersey, written in Salish, as an alternate jersey for 2014. It was really positively received, and the tribe is really proud of it. So for 2015, one of the changes the fans will see on the field is that will

be our primary jersey. You’re not going to see any English; you’re going to see Salish across the chest of Spokane Indians baseball players.”

Salish is a language that is anchored in our history, but runs the risk of not being a part of our future if it is not cherished and embraced now. “I don’t know the exact number, but it is in the neighborhood of 10 people or less on the planet who speak Salish fluently,” says Duff. “It is just some tribal elders. One thing we are trying to do is teach some of their youth it can be cool having your local baseball team wear jerseys that have your language on them.”

There are a few areas in the ballpark, such as the restrooms, that now have identifying words written in both English and Salish.

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"We're trying to go down that path that, when you come to the stadium, you're in a different place and it feels different. It's about honoring what we are about and where we came from," says Duff.

Not only will fans note the Salish around the stadium and on the jerseys, but so too will the top players from the Northwest League, and the Pioneer League, when they descend on the stadium on August 4, 2015 for the All Star Game. Previously, the All Star Game was the Northwest League's North vs. South Division All Stars, "but this year, eight other teams, scattered through Montana, Colorado, Utah and Idaho will be a part of it, with the Pioneer League All Stars vs. Northwest League All Stars," says Toms. "We're branching into eight more markets, eight more teams and six more major league baseball affiliates, so it's going to be a very, very large event, one of the largest Spokane has seen in recent years."

Right now, the only way to get a ticket to the All Star Game is by purchasing one of the mini season ticket packages. "We're not going to ask you to come out to all 38 games, that is tough in the summer," says Toms, "so we have mini packages with seven, 14 or 21 games, and included in all of those packages is a guaranteed seat to the All Star Game. It won't be back in Spokane for at least a decade."

Whether it is opening night, the All Star Game, or any other game, a day at the ballpark is magical. "When you step through our gates, you are now in our world," says Klein. "We want you to forget about your job, or the hard times at home. For three hours you get to escape into our world. And people need that! You forget about your problems when you come to the baseball stadium."

Forgetting about your worries, enjoying the fun, the crowds and the game. It is a home run of fun. **S**

To learn more about the Spokane Indians, visit [www.spokaneindiansbaseball.com](http://www.spokaneindiansbaseball.com)

## ROYAL UPHOLSTERY & DISTRIBUTING

**ROYAL UPHOLSTERY** originally began in 1957, when installing seat covers was the standard way to re-do car seats. It was bought in 1980 by Bill Bartlett, who at that time was a commercial realtor. Royal Upholstery has since become the Inland Northwest's largest upholstery supplier, stocking thousands of upholstery fabrics, supplies and all types of foam. Their showroom is open to the public. They have an on-site upholstery shop where they reupholster cars, boats and all kinds of furniture. They install convertible tops, cover golf carts, fabricate custom boat tops, and do complete boat interiors. When you take them your dining chairs, sectionals, recliners or heirlooms, they will treat them with care. They also service the medical community and restaurants in the Spokane Area, as well as distribute upholstery products across the Northwest to other upholstery shops.

Through the years, the biggest challenge has been educating consumers about the value in reupholstering versus buying new furniture. "Reupholstering an old piece of furniture will usually result in higher quality than buying new," says Krista Featherstone, second-generation owner. "Just like fabricating a custom boat top will yield greater results than purchasing ready made."

After 57 years, Royal Upholstery's service and commitment to their customers remains



**Owner:** Krista Featherstone  
**Year Founded:** 1957  
**Location:** 226 E. Sprague Ave. | Spokane  
**Phone:** (509) 624-0886 | (800) 777-0884  
**Web:** [www.royaluph.com](http://www.royaluph.com)



Krista Featherstone, Owner



Krista and her father Bill Bartlett

timeless. "Our trade is our craft," says Krista. "We are invested in the outcome of our customer's project, doing whatever it takes for customer satisfaction."

The work the Royal Upholstery team does is an art, not a science. Achieving a specific look and feel often requires creative problem solving. "We focus on a quality end product, and high customer satisfaction. This requires more time, increased communication and attention to detail, but the pay-off is happy repeat customers."

Krista lost her dad and business partner, Bill, suddenly last August. "I am proud to carry on the family business that I grew up in," she says. "I am proud that my dad grew this business into what it is today and am excited to carry on that commitment and loyalty to our customers. As long as people continue to care about quality, and unsurpassed customer service,

Royal Upholstery will remain relevant to this community." Krista and her team enjoy a reputation of honesty, integrity and quality work and they look forward to many more years of offering upholstery products and services.

## LEGACY 2015 CLOSEUP