

# Werner Park



## A sturdy storm shelter with all the comforts of home

*By Joe Mock, Webmaster of Baseballparks.com. Reprinted by permission.*

There's quite a story behind the new park for the Omaha Storm Chasers of the Pacific Coast League. It's a story of high hopes, then eviction, long shots and, finally, a very happy ending.

The team known as the Omaha Royals had played at venerable Rosenblatt Stadium on the south side of Omaha for 41 years, every one of them as the Triple-A farm team of the KC Royals. Every June, the team would have to go on an extended road trip so that the spectacle of the College World Series could descend on the ballpark. As the CWS grew over the years, expansion after expansion occurred at The 'Blatt, finally resulting in a capacity of 24,000.

This wasn't ideal for the O-Royals, as their home park was anything but intimate. And since there were so many seats available for every game, fans typically didn't bother buying tickets in advance, because they knew no game would sell out.

Would the O-Royals have liked a new ballpark? Probably, but they made the most of the situation in mammoth, aging Rosenblatt. Besides, the team knew that Omaha was definitely a market that could support a Triple-A team, and the relationship with their parent club in Kansas City was solid -- as evidenced by a Player Development Contract that dated back to 1969, the first year the expansion Royals came on the American League scene.

Then everything changed when the City of Omaha decided they wanted to lock in the College World Series for the long-term. Other cities, noticeably Indianapolis, had started making noises that the NCAA should permit other markets to host this premier event, just as basketball's Final Four moves from city to city each spring. Omaha had been the host of the annual event since 1950, and they knew that the CWS meant millions of dollars to the city's hotels, restaurants, rental-car companies, etc. They weren't about to give up the event without a fight.

That fight meant improved facilities. For all of its expansion over the years, Rosenblatt simply didn't possess the niceties that modern-day fans and the press demand. The City decided to do one of two things: rebuild Rosenblatt at a projected cost of about \$80 million, or build a brand new park in downtown Omaha at a cost that would exceed \$100 million. In May of 2007, the City chose the latter. This surprised quite a few people familiar with the situation, such as Paul Fiarkoski, a blogger for Collegebaseball360.com who grew up in the Rosenblatt neighborhood. "In my opinion, the Rosenblatt facility was in as good a shape as I have ever seen it" at the time the city made the decision to jettison it. "You have to remember that the stadium just had a several-million-dollar makeover in 2002."

Also, in a news story on local station KETV, it was reported the City included lease revenue from the O-Royals' use of a new stadium in their initial projections to justify constructing a brand-new facility. However, it appears the City might've made this assumption without first discussing the matter with the O-Royals.

Hindsight being 20/20, it certainly appears that the city was much more concerned about what the NCAA thought than how the pro team (that had played seventy-some games a year there for the past four decades) felt. In September 2007, when the O-Royals were finally invited to participate in the discussions regarding a new stadium, the team was told that if they were

### Ballpark Stats



**Team:** Omaha Storm Chasers of the Triple-A Pacific Coast League

**First game:** April 16, 2011, a 2-1 win over Nashville

**Capacity:** 9,023, of which 6,434 are fixed seats

**Architect:** DLR Group

**Construction:** Weitz

**Price:** \$30 million, not including the land (which was donated)

**Home dugout:** 3B side

**Field points:** Northeast

**Playing surface:** Kentucky bluegrass

**Betcha didn't know:** Fans have a choice of parking in a free lot, or paying \$2 to park closer to the stadium's entryway

interested in playing in the new facility, they would receive no money from the naming rights, the parking or the concessions. In short, even though they would be using the facility for five months each year, they would be second-class citizens to the NCAA, who would use the park for two weeks each June. The team said no thanks to that deal, and I can't blame them.

"Back in the 1990s, it was the Omaha Royals' owners -- Warren Buffet in particular -- who pumped millions of dollars into Rosenblatt to help keep the College World Series in Omaha," recalls Fiarkoski. "If you fast forward to 2008, the City of Omaha's leaders were working to make a deal with the NCAA to keep the College World Series in Omaha at taxpayer expense. It seemed like the needs of the Royals, the more loyal long-term tenant, were a complete afterthought then.

"The Royals were a great community partner, too," he added. "They did a lot to give back to local schools and non-profit groups and I think their efforts were completely discounted by the City of Omaha. It's only odd the way things turned out if you don't understand Omaha politics. For the rest of us (who have lived there), it's crystal clear."

You might think that the City would've been content to let the O-Royals stay at Rosenblatt, but they had no interest in that. The City wanted to demolish the old stadium so the renowned zoo next door could expand. "Even though the City hadn't talked to us yet, we knew as early as May of 2007 that 2010 would be our last year at Rosenblatt," said Martie Cordaro, Vice President and General Manager of the newly named Storm Chasers. He was the O-Royals' assistant GM in 2007 before becoming GM in 2008 and adding the title of VP in 2009. In August of 2009, when the team formally told the City that they weren't interested in moving into the new downtown park, "a dozen inquiries from cities around the country poured in," Cordaro said. Three cities stood out because they either had a Triple-A-level stadium (Tucson and Vancouver) or were willing to build one (Sugar Land, Texas). At that point, "we felt that it was a 70-80% likelihood that we would be leaving the Omaha market." They didn't want to vacate this metro area of 865,000 residents, but they knew that they were being evicted from Rosenblatt and had nowhere else to play.

Enter Sarpy County, an area of 247 square miles, making it the smallest county in the state of Nebraska. Its geography might not be the biggest, but its population is growing rapidly, and they were interested in developing an entertainment/retail complex. They felt a new ballpark would be the perfect centerpiece for it. Following an independent feasibility study that showed that Sarpy County (which is just south of Omaha) could indeed support a 10,000-seat ballpark that would cost \$41 million to build, 13 possible locations were considered. At this point, "we still felt it was about 50/50 that we were going to have to leave the area," Cordaro now admits.

Noted sports architect DLR Group was brought on to help the process. When they helped reduce that list of 13 down to five by "eliminating sites that were too small or that didn't have sufficient accessibility," according to DLR's Design Leader Greg Garlock, things became a little clearer for the team. When a cornfield along Highway 370 about three miles east of Interstate 80 was chosen as the site with the best potential, the O-Royals could clearly see the future. In March of 2009, the team signed an agreement with the Sarpy County Board of Commissioners to play in the to-be-built ballpark for the next 25 seasons.



## The setting

A total of 31 acres was devoted to the ballpark and its parking lots, which was a nice, expansive piece of ground. Not only that, the land didn't cost the County or the team any money. That's because this 31-acre parcel is actually a piece of a 310-acre tract that is slated for "mixed use," and the land for Werner Park was donated by its owners so the facility would be the centerpiece of the development. Roger Langpaul and his company 360 Real Estate envision a mixture of retail stores, entertainment venues and residences, all surrounding the ballpark. This tract is owned by Langpaul's wife's family, and they selected a wonderfully appropriate name for the development: Pennant Place.

As the park opened in April of 2011, none of the development around the park had yet been constructed -- although a fair amount of grading work is going on. That means that the acres and acres surrounding the ballpark and its parking lots are rolling pasture land ... which is nice because that's how much of Sarpy County looks anyway. It's a lovely setting, and if the development is done in a tasteful way (and all of the renderings and site plans seem to indicate it will be), it could end up being a gorgeous commercial area.

"We couldn't be more excited to have a first-class, state-of-the-art ballpark here," Langpaul told me. "It's a huge plus for the rest of the development because with at least 72 baseball games and an additional 50 or 60 events every year, it will be a big traffic generator for the restaurants, bars, family-entertainment venues and retail stores that we'll have here. Plus Highway 370 is a major, major thoroughfare. We really believe this (development) will have an economic benefit for the entire area."

In addition to a small stream that flows just over a rise beyond the park's right field, the exact site of the ballpark is well-chosen for another reason: it's on a slight hill. This gives the ballpark great visibility from miles away -- including along heavily traveled I-80. And when the lights are on for a night game, the park is like a beacon that can't be missed from the Interstate. When clouds are hanging low, the scene is even more impressive.

However, I don't advise you to do what I did, which was to stop on the shoulder of I-80 to take a picture. You see, a state trooper pulled over to see what I was up to. No, I wasn't arrested or given a ticket (the officer couldn't have been nicer, as almost everyone in the Midwest is), but pulling over at night wasn't the safest thing for me to do. But I just *had* to capture the striking scene!

When Pennant Place is completely built out -- and Langpaul said that "it could be five to seven years to complete the development, and we're prepared to see it through" -- there will be single-family homes on the north side, a recreation area to the west, condos just north of the ballpark, an office park, a retirement community, a health club, a theater, and a number of shops and restaurants. "And accessibility will be excellent," Langpaul added, "because there will be five different avenues of entrance and egress. Some of the sites they looked at (for the ballpark) only had one."



## The exterior

Once the commercial development occurs around the park, people will start to notice all aspects of the stadium's exterior -- even the areas beyond the outfield. Until then, the area around the ticket windows and entryway will attract all of the attention.

Good thing a lot of thought went into it -- although there's one element that the architects *didn't* intend!

Aside from a mild case of monotypographic disharmony (the fonts of the various signs aren't similar enough for my taste), the main entryway is a fine look for the part of the park that most fans will see first. That's because the majority of the parking is on the third-base side of the facility.

The first time you take a good look at the park's construction materials, you'll notice that there is certainly a good amount of Nebraska limestone, with a pattern that is reminiscent of Round Rock's famed Dell Diamond. But there is also a heavy dose of corrugated metal, and this makes many think of a sturdy storm shelter, which is appropriate with a new team nickname of Storm Chasers.

DLR's Garlock prefers to think of the look as "agrarian," to remind fans of all of the storage buildings and silos on the farms that dot the landscape of Sarpy County. "We definitely didn't want a red-brick ballpark at this location," he said. And as you look around and see nothing but pasture land for miles around, he added quite an understatement: "We're not downtown here."

"The look and feel of this park blends with Sarpy County perfectly," is the way team GM Cordaro looks at it.

Just to the left of the gates themselves are the ticket windows, and towering over them is, well, a tower. Half masonry and half corrugated metal, it houses a stairwell that leads to the suites and press level. Next to this tower is a small structure where you'll find the will-call windows. This little building does not look anything like the rest of the ballpark's exterior. As Garlock and I were leaving the ballpark that day, he pointed to the structure and started chuckling. "That was *not* part of our (architectural) design!"

The outside plaza just in front of the gates is a perfect size, especially when it's a day game with lots of kids from schools or camps. To the right of the gates is the souvenir store called, cleverly, Storm Front. Too often, the shops in new parks are well inside the stadium. Not here. There are doors that open to the inner concourse and to the outside of the park, facilitating fan access when there is no game going on.

Around on the first-base side of the exterior is sturdy fencing that surrounds picnic tables, one of the seven areas where groups can congregate at Werner Park.

And if you attend a night game, you'll notice that the words "Werner Park" and "Storm Chasers" near the entryway have very striking lighting. Nice touch -- a touch that you don't find on many other buildings in Sarpy County, whether they be farm buildings or storm shelters!

I wouldn't characterize Werner Park as having a stunning, ground-breaking exterior, but it works extremely well considering where the park is located.

Now let's look inside the park.



## The design

Not only does the "sturdy storm shelter" look continue on the inside of Werner Park, there are some design elements that I really love.

One is the concourse. When you first walk in through the main gates, there is a large plaza where you can meet your friends. To your right is the souvenir store, and next to it are concession stands. Right in front of you is a great view of the field as you look under the upper level.

When a new ballpark fails to have a 360-degree concourse, I think it's a mistake. Never fear, because Werner Park's concourse circles the entire field, giving you a very pleasant third-of-a-mile walk. On the outfield side, you can look beyond the park at the meadows, and as you look in toward the action, you'll notice my very favorite design element of the ballpark.

That outstanding element is actually "elements." At the rear of the seating bowl behind both dugouts are two two-story structures housing 14 luxury suites, all named for former players or managers. Almost always, suites in Minor League parks are on the upper level, extending far down both foul lines. Not here. By stacking them, the suites are closer to the batter, thereby negating the most common complaint about suites: they are too detached from the action. Here, you really feel like you're part of the game even if you are with a group in one of the suites.

This provides the added advantage of making the entire park much more intimate ... and therein lies the key difference between Werner Park and its predecessor, Rosenblatt Stadium.

Say what you want about The 'Blatt's sense of history, you could never describe it as intimate. It was expanded and expanded to accommodate the ever-growing crowds that were clamoring for College World Series tickets every June. At Werner Park, though, you feel like you're part of an intimate gathering, even when there's 6,000 or 8,000 fans in the place.

So you could probably think of Werner Park as the "Anti-Rosenblatt." Not only is it more intimate (while still offering more legroom and wider seats), it also differs from The 'Blatt in another hugely important way, especially if you're the front office of the Storm Chasers.

That essential difference is the ability to accommodate groups. "This is a market where a lot of fans like to come to games as part of a group," Cordaro explained. "Our ability to accommodate groups was very limited at Rosenblatt." Obviously rectifying this was a key objective in designing Werner Park. I counted no fewer than *seven* such areas in the new park: on the upper level on each side of the press area are party decks; the picnic area way behind first base; in a large tent beyond the right-field foul pole; in another tent on the left field side; the Village Inn Birthday Village at the base of the left-field foul pole .... and one more, that is indeed unique.

That wonderfully unusual group area is the Mike Jirschele Dugout Suite. It is exactly like the area where the players sit, except: 1. It is farther down the third-base foul line; 2. It is completely wrapped in netting so a screaming line drive doesn't ruin someone's evening; 3. It has its own bathroom; 4. You have a counter top on which you can set your food and drink. Jirschele, by the way, is the current Storm Chasers manager. He's been the skipper of Omaha's team for the past 11 seasons.

And in counting seven areas for groups, I didn't even include the Club Bar which is on the ground level of the suites structure on the first-base side. Here you can bring in food from another concession stand and combine it with the beverage of your choice. There are even garage-door-like devices that are open when it's pleasant outside or closed when it's not -- and it was frightfully cold the day I was there, so those doors were closed.

The storm shelter look is continued in clever ways around the park's interior, such as at the entrance to the men's room. And if you look closely here, you'll see that the walls around the rest rooms don't go all the way up to the ceiling. That's one of the many, many ways the park's construction is considered to be "sustainable." Examples include utilizing building materials that didn't have to be trucked over long distances, and instead of electric ventilation for the rest rooms, the areas near the ceilings are open. I'll be curious to hear how well that is working out when the weather gets really hot and the breezes aren't blowing as much as in the early spring.

Finally, the outfield walls need to be addressed. First, the two bullpens are "stacked" -- which isn't so unusual these days, but putting them in dead center field *is* unusual. Second, the right-field wall is quite "wavy" as it makes its way from the foul pole to center field. "Beyond right field is a draw, and just on the other side of that is a stream," said Garlock, the park's lead designer. "We wanted the park snuggled up against that small hill, and we wanted the right-field wall to meander, much like the stream beyond it does."



## The essentials

So the design of Werner Park has some different elements than most other new parks, and that's a good thing. Plus it works extremely well in a market where there is heavy demand by groups. But what is the game-day experience like?

Let's tackle the question of "cost" first. I never like to pay for parking at Minor League facilities, but at Werner Park they give you a choice ... and I can't think of another facility where this is the case. If you don't mind spending \$2, you can park your car fairly near the main entryway (\$5 buys you a spot right by the entry). If you don't want to spring for the \$2, you'll have to park a little farther away -- but still within the park's acreage. I love giving fans the choice.

Ticket prices are really reasonable for a new park, especially one at the Triple-A level. Seats on Fridays and Saturdays cost \$16.50 in the Club area, \$12.50 for Field Boxes, regular Boxes are \$10.00 and the AT&T Homerun Porch in left field costs \$6.50. The Club, Field and Box seats all cost \$1.00 less the rest of the week. And while I'm not crazy about the aesthetics of doing this, the color of your seat tells you which price category you're in: blue is for Club seats; the Field Boxes are dark red and the regular Boxes are green.

Sitting on the berms is actually cheaper (\$6, regardless of the day of the week) than the cheapest O-Royals ticket at The 'Blatt -- plus the first 50 kids brought to the ticket window at each game will get in for only \$1. By the way, for most Storm Chasers games, you won't need parkas and blankets like the fans at mid-April games!

And if you're curious about the dugout suite, it costs \$575 before you add in food. It can accommodate up to 18 people. And it really is a memorable vantage point.

If you're looking for souvenirs, team Merchandise Manager Jason Kinney will gladly show you around the Storm Front store. "Our new store is four times the size of the one at Rosenblatt," he said proudly. "We can offer a much bigger selection now." Like the ticket prices, the cost of the merchandise is easy on the wallet. Adult T-shirts range from \$19.99 to \$29.99, with a lot of them coming in at the low end of that range. Fitted and adjustable caps are both \$23.99, and kids' t-shirts cost from \$14.99 to \$19.99.

I'm delighted to be able to say that Ovations, the same company that does such an outstanding job handling concessions at new Salt River Fields in Arizona, also does the food here in Nebraska. And like at Salt River, Ovations carefully selects local eateries to provide the concessions at Werner Park.

All of the food I sampled was excellent, but as I asked around to find out what stand people liked best, one name came up over and over: Extreme Pizza. Located all the way down in the left-field corner, this stand is worth the walk from any corner of the ballpark. Their slogan is "Extreme, not mainstream," and that is the perfect description, because their pizza is nothing like typical ballpark fare. Their creations have much more flavor (I assume due to the spices they utilize) than any pizza I've eaten at a ballpark, and are a bargain at \$6.00 for a plain, personal-size pizza, \$6.50 with one topping, and \$7.50 for one of their special combinations of toppings.

Other highly regarded food items include an Omaha Dog for \$5.00 at the Dog Nation stand behind home plate, Omaha Steaks' 1/2-pound cheeseburgers at the Grand Slam Grill (behind first base) for \$6.00, either two tacos or a burrito for \$6.00 next door at La Mesa, a Popcorn Chicken Cup for \$5.00 at Chicken Fry Fry and a BBQ Pork Sandwich with chips from Famous Dave's for \$7.00. For those of you who've attended the College World Series at Rosenblatt, you'll know Famous Dave's for its long lines and indescribably delicious BBQ directly across the street from the main gates. Glad to see them at Werner Park!

In case you're keeping score at home, the Storm Chasers play in a Pepsi park, not a Coke park. And 16-ounce domestic drafts are \$5.00 and imports are \$6.00.

While I think the double-deck luxury suites are Werner Park's signature feature, GM Cordaro disagrees. "If we have a signature feature, it has to be our kids' area. Parents can easily keep an eye on the game while their kids play right nearby." You know, he might have a point, because the Centris Family Fun Zone might be the nicest play area I've ever seen at a Minor League park. Where else are you going to find a merry-go-round that was purchased from Universal Theme Park in Orlando, a pitching machine, various inflatable attractions and a jungle gym? For \$5, kids can ride the carousel and play the games as much as they want.

And if that weren't enough, there is a basketball court and a wiffle-ball field nearby in center field. Honestly, as a family entertainment destination, this might be the most complete ballpark (below the Majors) there is.

They didn't scrimp on the scoreboard, either. Not only does it look great in direct sunlight (and not all video screens do), it has a clock, pitch speed, message board, 31-foot-wide high-res video, lots of ad signs, a bar underneath it ... and a banner the size of an 18-wheeler on the top with the name of the company that bought the naming rights of the stadium. And it's appropriate that the sign is as big as a big rig because Werner Enterprises is a global transportation company headquartered just a few miles away, right there in Sarpy County.

Truly, when you add all of its elements together, this is a complete park, one that opened on time and opened in a nicely finished state.

But that doesn't mean that there's no room for expansion. To the contrary, Werner Park was designed with the ability to add new features in the future. "We are always looking forward and an enclosed banquet facility would be on the top of our list," Cordaro said. After all, you can never have too much space for groups to congregate!

## Summary

The gloriously sunny -- but cold -- day when I attended a game at Werner Park was still in the stadium's first week. Have locals had the chance to form an opinion?

"The first three games I attended here represent the best three days of my baseball life," said Jerry Strawn, a resident of Papillion, which is technically the Sarpy County town in which the ballpark is located. Jerry is a first-year season-ticket holder who told me that Werner Park is "so much nicer than Rosenblatt because it's smaller here. Here you're 18 rows from the grass (when you're on the concourse). This is really the way to go. It's more kid-friendly (than Rosenblatt) and really it's easier to get here from anywhere in the area."

When I asked Storm Chasers' GM Martie Cordaro if he's happy that his team is in Sarpy County instead of playing in downtown Omaha, there was no hesitation in his response. "Oh, yes. We would've been in Rosenblatt on steroids downtown (at TD Ameritrade Park). After all the things we've been about -- families, fun and affordability -- it would've been disingenuous for us to be there. And we can now show people what Minor League Baseball is about."

He added that the architects at DLR designed "us a real ballpark. Rosenblatt was what it was, but now we are all about baseball. We didn't have a place before where we could show it. Now we have a physical plant where we can do it right."

Indeed, there is a lot that can be done with a facility as nice as Werner Park. And after all of the storms of uncertainty about where the franchise would end up, the team now known as the Storm Chasers has a sturdy, permanent shelter in which to hunker down for the long haul.