

Baseball tourney draws Northern schools

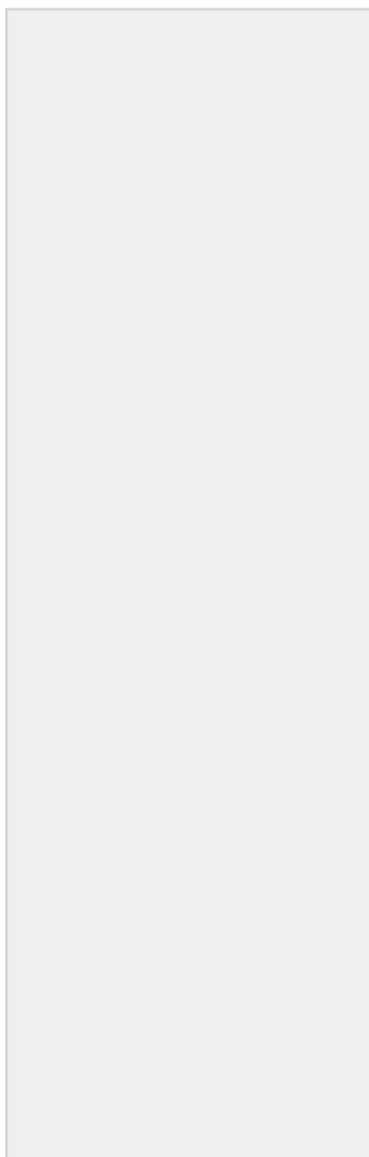
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During the past few years, the area has become a popular winter destination for college baseball programs from the North.

Schools looking to thaw out and focus on baseball have headed south to the Santaluces Baseball Complex in Lantana, which used to be a minor league training facility.



Several major college baseball teams will be visiting the area during the fifth annual Palm Beach Challenge, which started Tuesday and runs through March 29.

The Palm Beach Challenge began four years ago as spring competition for junior college teams, but has since become a popular draw for the bigger college programs.

Executive director Michael Zeff said that there will be an expanded field of Division I schools participating this year. Last year, there were 11 Division I programs, compared with 17 scheduled to participate this year.

Several teams from the Division II and junior college levels also will participate. Altogether, there will be 55 teams.

The teams typically visit during their school's spring break.

The Santaluces Baseball Complex, the weather and local attractions have helped boost the event's popularity, Zeff said.

"Definitely, one of the reasons for its success is the complex itself and what it offers," Zeff said.

"Another thing is the county as a whole. At the end of the day, when they're done playing their games, they're in Palm Beach County and they have everything that Palm Beach County has to offer. All in all, it's a really good experience for them and that's what keep drawing the teams back."

The field for this year's Palm Beach Challenge includes the Air Force Academy, Penn State, Ohio State, the University of Notre Dame and the University of Pittsburgh.

Teams from previous years, including Boston College, the University of Maine and St. Bonaventure University in New York, are returning.

Last year, other venues had to be used for night games because of a fire that knocked out electricity at the Santaluces complex. But all of this year's games will be played at Santaluces, Zeff said.

Admission each day is \$5 for adults and \$3 for kids.

"It's a great thing," Zeff said.

"People come and for 5 bucks, they get in ... and you can watch an entire day of Division I baseball. These guys are only a step away from the big leagues, so it's really quality baseball."