

THE SALEM AVALANCHE

*Rumble Along
With Mascots:
Mugsy, Misty
and Big Mo*



Photographs Courtesy of the Salem Avalanche

Question: What do the Utah Jazz, Arizona Cardinals, Los Angeles Lakers, and the Salem Avalanche (Houston Astros advanced Single-A affiliate) all have in common?

Answer: None of the teams have nicknames with any connection to their home city!

>>> **NESTLED IN THE SHADOWS of the Blue Ridge Mountains in south-central Virginia, the idea of an avalanche obliterating the city of Salem would be as preposterous as proposing a tsunami wiping out Topeka, Kansas.** Even Mount Rogers (Virginia's tallest peak), standing at 5,792 feet, presents an infinitesimal probability of witnessing an avalanche simply based on its relatively mild climate and small stature.

So how exactly did Salem, Virginia, adopt the name of Avalanche? To uncover the answer, one only needs to look back to last season when the team was the Colorado Rockies Single-A affiliate.

"The Avalanche was actually chosen when we were Rockies affiliate—and obviously the Rockies, Avalanche, Colorado," explains Salem's assistant general manager Chris Allen regarding the choice of the name in 1995. "We have the Blue Ridge Mountains, but honestly the Avalanche name really doesn't fit in this area. There's not going to be any ava-

lanches or anything. It's just kind of a name that took in this area."

With the Houston Astros replacing the Rockies as Salem's parent team, the question now is; how many more seasons will the Avalanche name endure? According to Chris Allen, a name change is most likely imminent.

"...I would say there is definitely going to be a name change. It's not going to be the Avalanche forever... It's just one of those things that really, until this past off-season, had never been thought of much."

At this point, it is anyone's guess as to what Salem will select as a new identity in the upcoming years. However, by looking back on both the region's baseball and historical heritage, one could probably formulate an insightful educated guess.

The Salem Friends would be a sentimental choice. Not only was Salem's first professional baseball team in 1939 dubbed the Salem-Roanoke Friends; the

city's nickname in the early twentieth century was "Friendly Town." Reusing the Red Birds is also a possibility. When Salem changed from a Pittsburgh Pirate to a San Diego Padre affiliate in 1981, Red Birds was the winning submission from a 'Name the Team' contest held by management.

On the same token, it is highly unlikely that Salem will undertake the title of Pirates (used from 1972-1980) or Buccaneers (1987-1994), unless the franchise re-establishes a relationship with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

If any name were to re-emerge from Salem's past, it would be the Rebels. When Rebels was initially used in 1955, the name served a greater purpose; it was a literal metaphor to describe the club's players.

Due to the Second World War, the United States government instituted strict rationing of gas and tires. In 1943, the subsequent decrease in automobile use forced the Salem Friends to relocate





REACHING OUT: A young Avalanche fan reaches back to say hello to Mugsy.

to nearby Roanoke, North Carolina, where more people could reach games by foot.

Over the next decade, 1946 would be the only season Salem would field a professional baseball team. Even that team did not last the full year in “Friendly Town.” At the conclusion of the season’s first half, the Salem Friends were transplanted to Lenoir and became the Red Sox.

When the Roanoke team folded in 1953, a group of old Friends’ fans, still spiteful toward Roanoke for stealing baseball from Salem, decided to show up their neighbors. Like a group of rebellious teenagers trying to send a message, the Salem Athletic Club assembled something to the likes of a professional local pickup team: the Salem Rebels.

The Rebels’ inaugural 1955 lineup card boasted an unlikely bunch of men: native ball players, an ex-minor league manager, and even African Americans in a pre-Jackie Robinson era. In fact, fans voted African-American Charlie Weatherspoon the Rebels’ most popular player at season’s end.

Despite its generally inexperienced components, the Rebels were expected to live up to their name and make a statement to local rivals: “We are winners.” After posting two impressive seasons, the independent league team had already attracted major league attention. In 1957, the Pittsburgh Pirates assigned Salem to

the rookie level Appalachian League. The Rebels continued to roll, and were soon promoted to advanced single A baseball in the Carolina League—a position Salem professional baseball has maintained ever since 1968.

Of course, it is almost (if not more) likely that management will employ a completely new identity when it eventually resolves to rename its ball club.

“Norfolk Southern is a big train railroad industry here. We could always go off the name, the Express,” envisions Allen in reference to a potential nickname that would suitably represent the history and heritage of Salem and its surrounding areas.

Yet, while “Express” is yet to be associated with America’s favorite pastime in Salem, the name would be no stranger to local sports aficionados. From 1993 to 2004, the Roanoke Express skated in the minor league East Coast Hockey League.

While a change may be imminent, Salem continues to retain their Avalanche identity for the time being.

“We thought about changing the name last year, but everyone seems to love the Avalanche name,” says Allen of a potential outcry over a name change. “We have developed such an identity with [the Avalanche] so it’s really going to be tough.”

Unlike other Minor League teams whose individuality is centered on an eccentric logo or team name, Salem can be distinguished by its unique Americana traditions.

On most nights, the Avalanche sport a brand new, yet relatively classic emblem on their black hats: a baseball leaving a white wind current streak across a dark-red snowcapped mountain resembling a capital ‘A’. For Wednesday and Friday night home games, however, Salem’s logo gets an extreme makeover to coincide with that evening’s promotion.

“Throughout the course of the winter months, you announce your promotional schedule and it’s something we all put together,” says Allen of Salem’s two regular-

HATS OFF!



New Era Fits™





TWO OF A KIND: Mugsy (left) launches T-shirts to the fans between innings, while Misty (right) shakes hands during a trip through the stands of Salem Memorial Baseball Stadium.

ly scheduled promotions. “Wednesdays we have a ‘Tribute to the Troops Night’ out here and we donate a percentage of our gate to families if their husband or spouse, whoever it may be, is currently serving in the military.”

To further express gratitude to our service members on the philanthropic ‘Tribute to the Troops Nights’, the usually black crown on Salem’s hat becomes a desert camouflage—a wide assortment of tan shades with black and gray marks resembling rocks. Fortunately, these caps are not required for military use; the dark red Avalanche ‘A’ would expose anyone attempting to remain concealed.

“Every Friday night is ‘All-American Friday Night’ here at the park,” continues Allen. “We do our fireworks shows those nights.”

The Avalanche’s Patriotic logo is bursting with American pride. With a majestic royal blue crown as a backdrop, the normally dark red insignia erupts into a pattern of red and white stripes on the mountain’s base, while snow tops a royal blue summit. The streaking baseball also bears a greater resemblance to a shooting star.

While Salem’s attire may vary night to night, there are three constants at every home game—no matter what

their favorite baseball team is wearing. Meet the Avalanche’s three mascots and three biggest fans: Mugsy, Misty, and Big Mo.

“[Mugsy] is a dog... I guess if he was any type of dog he would be a Saint Bernard... We introduced Misty last year who is a female dog. And then we have Big Mo this year, which is an abominable, inflatable-type snowman.”

“Our main mascot though is Mugsy,” emphasizes Allen. “He participates in just about every promotion we have; mainly just running through the crowd being hectic with the kids and having a good time with the families.”

While Avalanche management claims Mugsy is a Saint Bernard, skeptics familiar with the “dog’s” biography, propose he is a sophisticated, baseball-loving form of extraterrestrial life. After all, the seven-foot, 300-pound furry animal was deposited in the Roanoke Valley by the Hale-Bopp comet on April 4, 1997.

Following seven years of leading “Let’s Go Avalanche” cheers all alone, Mugsy gained a companion in Misty; his female equivalent. Misty’s origins are unknown, but once she arrived in Salem, she immediately discovered a passion for baseball. When asked if Misty discovered a similar passion for

Mugsy, the Avalanche assistant GM became suddenly secretive.

“That’s a good question. I’ll plead the fifth on that one,” Allen quickly added.

Big Mo, Salem’s third and final mascot, is the primary mascot of the Kids’ Club. Whereas most mascots suit up in a standard costume, Big Mo’s suit actually inflates.

“He’s a lot like the Superstars—the big inflatable mascots,” says Allen. “He participates in as much as he can with the other mascots, but he’s a little less mobile.”

Although Big Mo looks like sketchings of a stereotypical abominable snowman, all young Avalanche fans adore the huge playful hunk of “snow.”

After finishing in Southern Division’s cellar for the first half of the season, the Avalanche—true to their name—began to pick up some momentum in the season’s second half and kept on rolling. Unfortunately for Salem, the rival Winston-Salem Warhogs heated up toward the close of the season and melted the Avalanche’s pursuit for the playoffs. Losing 6-5 in a one game playoff for the division title, the Avalanche hope 2006 will end with a better result. ■ Eric Karlan