



FORTIFYING DODD MEMORIAL STADIUM CUTTER AND THE DEFENDERS WARD OFF EASTERN LEAGUE OPPONENTS

After eleven years of navigating, the Norwich nine embark on their inaugural season as the Connecticut Defenders.

Battling fellow Eastern League enemies since 1967, the Defenders' earliest ancestor was the Binghamton Triplets. After two seasons in upstate New York, the

Yankees' Double-A affiliate began a progressive southward migration, playing in Manchester, New Hampshire, and continuing on to West Haven, Connecticut in 1972. Ties with the nearby Bronx Bombers were cut in 1979, and the Oakland Athletics assumed parental authority. In 1983, the franchise proceeded to once again relocate, this time to Albany, New York.



Kevin Pataky



DODD STADIUM: The new Defenders logo joins their affiliate San Francisco Giants logo at the entrance of Dodd Stadium in 2006.

In 1985, the Albany-Colonie franchise reestablished ties with the Yankees, assuming their namesake. After a decade in the New York capital, the franchise moved back to Connecticut, taking roots in the small eastern metropolis of Norwich—the smallest Double-A market, sporting a population of 40,000. This marked the first time Norwich had seen professional baseball since the Norwich Bonbons took the field as part of the Connecticut Association in 1910. The new Norwich team was dubbed the Navigators; stitched onto the Navigators’ black caps was the image of an alligator, dressed as a sailor, looking through a baseball telescope.

Only months after winning the 2002 Eastern League championship, the Navigators became affiliated with the San Francisco Giants. The team’s success on the field, however, failed to boost progressively slumping attendance numbers. Less than 24 hours before Opening Day 2005, the Navigators were taken over by a new ownership group determined to inject excitement into the fan-base unfelt since Norwich’s inaugural season.

“The new owner was very clear from the beginning that he was going to rebrand the team and give it a more regional approach. It was pretty evident that the team needed to be relaunched,” says Defenders director of media relations/broadcasting Shawn Holliday.

“The name Navigators was certainly something people could identify with in this area because of the rich whaling

history, especially for this part of Connecticut—Mystic Seaport and everything along the shoreline. However, the problem was that the identity of the team became the mascot.”

Unable to implement changes on a 24-hour timetable, ownership planned for an extreme makeover in the coming off-season, highlighted by a “name the team” contest and a new mascot. Many submissions copied the nicknames of New England’s most popular sports teams: the Huskies, the Patriots, even the Red Sox—whose Double-A affiliate is the Eastern League rival Trenton Thunder. Sox suggestions did not stop at red, though.

Says Holliday: “I think just about every color of sock was suggested, from green to yellow to brown.”

Another popular submission called for the Nutmeggers, in honor of Connecticut being the Nutmeg State. While Nutmeggers may have rivaled the Lugnuts for silliness, management did not envision the nickname being nationally marketable to the degree of success that Lansing has enjoyed. Thus, the front office brass opted for another nickname that aptly represented the state as a whole: the Defenders.

The defense industry in southeastern Connecticut is a prevalent local force, with a submarine base, Fort Trumbull, and the only United States Coast Guard Academy all within an hour drive from each other. The Defenders logo recognizes the sub base: a black bat resembling a sub-





GOING MOBILE: A picture of Cutter and the new Defenders logo adorn the team's van.

marine breaches the surface of the water against the background of baseball sky.

One military vessel off the Connecticut shoreline, the Eagle, serves as a ship where officer candidates and cadets are trained by the United States Coast Guard Academy; it also served as the namesake of the Defenders newly hatched mascot: Cutter the eagle.

A bald eagle sporting his favorite team's cap and jersey, it only made sense for the Defenders—a team named in honor of the American military—to be represented by America's symbol of pride and honor. Hatching at Fort Trumbull, only miles away from the U.S.S. Eagle, the Defenders patriotic mascot was born without a name. For

three months, Connecticut ran a "name the mascot" contest. In the meantime, the giant bald eagle was referred to as "The Defender." After much debating, the Defenders resolved what Holliday describes as "maybe the toughest decision we had to make."

"We kept coming back to Cutter because of the duality of the meaning. It was the type of ship from which the mascot was inspired, and it is also a type of pitch—a cut fastball."

Ironically, with only a pair of brow-feathered wings, Cutter will find it impossible to grip a baseball to throw the side-spinning four-seam fastball he is named after—let alone catch or bat. Nevertheless, Cutter has already received a book offer from local author Ruth Higgins. The yet-to-be-titled children's story will be written over the course of the Defenders season, with monthly installments posted on www.ctdefenders.com. Higgins will turn to the Defenders Kids Club for illustrations to supplement her story.

With a 5-1 victory on Opening Day, the first chapter of the Defenders saga is officially in the books. Hopefully for Connecticut fans, their season will end with an Eastern League championship and 'happily ever after.'

■ Eric Karlan

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