

THE MYSTERIOUS ORBIT

Mascot of the Albuquerque Isotopes

“While the fans cheer for their team’s players night in and night out, there is one who has captured their hearts from the beginning...”

WHEN GREG COLLINS OF ESPN.COM LISTED THE TOP 100 SPORTS MOMENTS from *The Simpsons*, the “Hungry Hungry Homer” episode ranked 25th. In this episode, Homer’s hometown baseball team, the Springfield Isotopes, threatened a move to Albuquerque. When Homer uncovers these secret plans, he takes matters into his own hands, starting a hunger strike, and ultimately keeping his team in town.

While the Isotopes may have stayed in Springfield on the tube, they certainly did not give into any hunger strike in the real world.

When the Albuquerque Dukes relocated to Portland prior to the 2001 season, the New Mexican metropolis was left without a Minor League Baseball team for the first time since 1959. The Dukes’ abandonment of the very worn down Albuquerque Sports Stadium was immediately felt by the community,

so the mission was clear—bring professional baseball back to Albuquerque ASAP. In 2001, the city quickly voted and approved the construction of either a new stadium or intense renovation on the old, to attract another ball club.

Meanwhile, in a land not so far away, businessman Ken Young, owner of the Triple-A Norfolk Tides, purchased the Triple-A Calgary Cannons. His intentions were to move the team south of the border to Albuquerque in time for the 2003 season, if an approved stadium was built in time. With a mere 18 months and limited funds, the city resolved to initiate a massive renovation on the old ballpark, keeping part of the bowl’s infrastructure as well as the dugout alleyways beneath the stadium.

While fans from the days of the Dukes can sense the old stadium’s feel, they also enjoy some of the most unique aspects of any minor league field in the nation. For starters, the new stadium placed all 11,124 seats between the foul poles, leaving the outfield as a picnicking area to enjoy the game, while the upper deck seats provide a beautiful scenic view of the mountains in the east. And finally, akin to the Houston Astros’ Minute Maid Park,

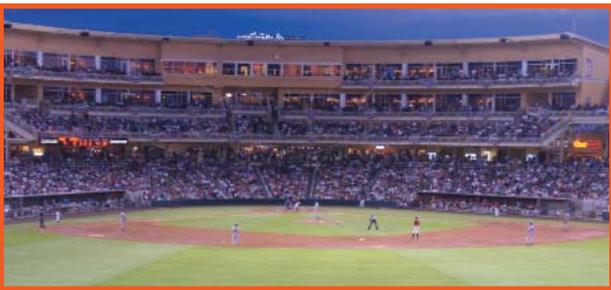
there is a 127-foot-long, four-foot-high hill in center field.

And just like that, in a very impressive architectural feat, the stadium was completely renovated within its allotted 18 months. Only two more issues needed to be resolved—the team’s name and the stadium’s name.

The options for a team name were extensive. Many people favored reviving the Dukes. Others were partial to nicknames like the Atoms, Roadrunners, or 66ers (ironically, the 66ers was taken by San Bernardino in 2004). But in the end, *The Simpsons* showed how influential their show was. In a name-the-team con-



ORBIT



ISOTOPES PARK: The view from center field, where Orbit lives.

Courtesy of Albuquerque Isotopes



test where over 120,000 fans cast ballots, the Albuquerque Isotopes was the clear-cut winner, racking up 57% of the votes, and the stadium was thus dubbed Isotopes Park.

On April 11, 2003, the Isotopes kicked off their inaugural season as the Triple-A affiliate of that year's world champion Florida Marlins. Playing in the Pacific Coast League, the team finished their inaugural season as division champions, capping off an extremely successful return of baseball to New Mexico. The team not only continues to pull in the crowds, but wins as well. The Isotopes are currently in second place in the Central Division.

So, what exactly is an isotope?

According to Webster's Dictionary, an isotope is "any of two or more species of atoms of a chemical element with the same atomic number and position in the periodic table and nearly identical chemical behavior but with differing atomic mass and different physical properties." The official team logo is a model of an atom, with a splash of baseball flavor. A red letter "A" serves as the nucleus of the atom, while orange, yellow, and gray ellipses resemble the orbits—the theoretical paths that electrons travel around the nucleus on. A baseball on the gray orbit sweeps across the "A" to represent an electron.

The logo is appropriate because New Mexico is host to a majority of our nation's nuclear research, which revolves around the splitting of atoms. In fact, the state is a major site for many nuclear experiments, including the explosion of the first atomic bomb in the

1940s. Besides black, the team's primary colors are bright red, orange, and yellow; chosen to represent the bright colors used in New Mexican culture. By no coincidence, the logo is nearly identical to that of the *The Simpsons'* Springfield Isotopes.

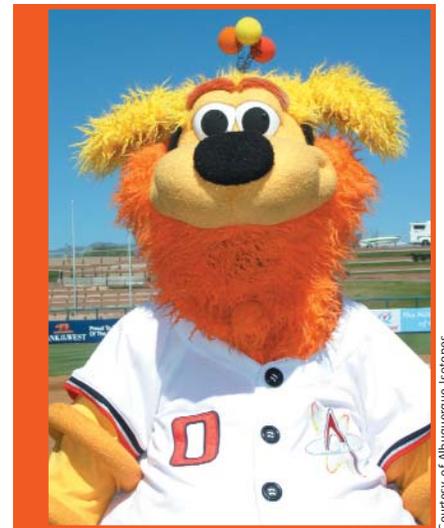
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The Story of Orbit

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Once upon a time, people of New Mexico met with a group of extraterrestrials. The humans offered one of their indigenous animals to the aliens in exchange for information about the universe. After spending a long time with the aliens, the creature yearned to return to his home planet and found Isotopes Park's center field a suitable place to spend his first night back. It was not long until this animal awoke to the sound of bats and balls. At first contact, the creature was shy and scared, but the Isotope players took a liking to him. Soon after, the team's owner, Ken Young, resolved to let this creature, Orbit, stay as the Isotopes' mascot, making his residence in center field.

If you account for Orbit's bright red, orange and yellow antennae, he measures in at 6-foot-5-inches tall, 72 inches around, and weighs a hefty 300 pounds. While many attribute his massive size to his perpetual devouring of Dion's cheese pizza, popcorn, and green chile



THE GREAT MYSTERY: This Goofy lookalike will reveal his heritage sometime this season.

Courtesy of Albuquerque Isotopes

while laying on the couch watching *The Simpsons*, Orbit continues to blame it solely on his abundance of fur. He enjoys karate (he's a black belt!), wrestling, running races, and even baseball, although he looks very silly trying to catch the ball (usually unsuccessfully). Not as shy as when he first returned to Earth, Orbit loves to dance with fans and his MTV favorites include "Baby Got Back" and "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." Orbit's clumsy dancing, love for the Isotopes, and fun and bubbly nature are all reasons that this furry creature is so beloved by all Isotope fans.

There is only one mystery that still remains about Orbit: what exactly is he? Although many perceive him to be either a dog or a big, cuddly stuffed bear, Isotope officials continue to deny these claims. Rumor has it that Orbit's true identity has finally been discovered and will be revealed sometime later this season!

...Just so we have it in print, my guess is the white-nosed coati.

Eric Karlan



Dan Splaine / JASON Foundation

