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BaseballParks.com's 2023 Ballpark of the Year Award goes to Glacier Bank Park

Glacier Bank Park was named the BaseballParks.com Ballpark of the Year, it was announced Wednesday.

For the second time in three years, COVID had derailed the annual award in 2022. In 2020, the Minor League season was wiped out, so there was no award. Then in 2022, pandemic-related supply chain chaos severely limited the number of new parks. And even though two new pro ballparks opened in 2022, neither was considered to be finished until this year.

So the committee that selects the winner of the award each year decided to push back such a selection until 2023. This allowed there to be three baseball stadiums in the running for this year's plaque, with the winner being the home of the Glacier Range Riders, located in the Flathead Valley of Montana. The team plays in the independent Pioneer League, which Major League Baseball refers to as an MLB Partner League.

The plaque representing this award will be presented to the Range Riders' ownership during an on-field ceremony at Glacier Bank Park early in the 2024 season.

The announcement of the award was made at *BaseballParks.com*, and is featured in the August 30th edition of *USA TODAY Sports Weekly*. Joe Mock, founder and webmaster of the 26-year-old website and a frequent contributor to *USA TODAY* publications, penned the article about this year's honor.

"Glacier Bank Park clearly shows that an indy-league ballpark can be as good as any in the affiliated leagues," explains Mock. "Everything about the Range Riders' facility was done in a first-class manner, with amenities for fans and players that are the equal of any stadium in the upper Minors. It also meets the strict new standards that MLB has imposed on affiliated parks.

"I also want to emphasize that this is – and always has been – a merit-based award," adds Mock. "A ballpark doesn't win this because a team was successful in getting its fans to go online and vote. A park wins because it deserves to, with exceptional facilities, a first-rate gameday experience and a gorgeous setting. Glacier Bank Park has all that and more."

"Winning this award as the best new ballpark is a reflection of the incredible community here and all of the workers who had a part in making the dream of professional baseball in Flathead Valley a reality," says Chris Kelly, president of Ridge Run Baseball, the ownership group for the Range Riders. "We're grateful to *BaseballParks.com* for the recognition of that incredible effort."

Interestingly, the three parks vying for this year's award are in indy leagues, as no new stadiums opened in Major League Baseball or the affiliated Minor Leagues in 2022 or 2023. The other two in the running for this year's award were Wisconsin Brewing Company Park, home of the Lake Country DockHounds of the American Association, and Hinchliffe Stadium, which is where the

New Jersey Jackals play in the Frontier League. The latter is noteworthy because the stadium had been condemned and was being prepared for demolition before civic groups worked to have it rebuilt to honor the Negro League teams that played there in the 1930s and '40s.

The Kelly family owns both the Range Riders franchise and paid to build Glacier Bank Park. They have experience as owner/operators, as they've run the Sunbelt Baseball League, a summer wood-bat circuit for college players in Georgia, for many years. For their stunning new park to turn out so well, you would assume that the Kellys had put in years of meticulous planning on such a well-thought-out facility. But things happened differently in Montana.

You see, the Kellys had vacationed in Flathead Valley in Big Sky Country for 22 years and had always wanted to bring pro baseball to the area. When they were awarded an expansion franchise in the Pioneer League in August of 2021, it came with the caveat that the team had to be ready to play for the 2022 season. The family assumed they could find a temporary place in the area to host games while they took their time finding a location to build a ballpark.

This assumption did not come to fruition, since none of the Legion fields or the local community college had adequate lighting and parking. So they scrambled to buy property just north of the town of Kalispell. The first construction crews arrived at the site on September 23, 2021. "At that time, there were still no drawings of the stadium's design," says Chris.

The Kellys worked with local architectural, civil engineering and construction firms to design the ballpark while construction was underway. "We were building the plane while flying it, looking for fuel, and knew when time would run out," Chris recalls with a grin.

"But ultimately we're very happy with the facility and the way that it turned out." And he should be, especially now that all of the amenities in the beautiful park have been completed. Local fans love it, too, as attendance this year is up 18.5% over 2022.

The list of past winners of the new-ballpark award reads like a Who's Who of standout baseball facilities. Honorees include Pittsburgh's PNC Park in 2001, San Diego's Petco Park in 2004, spring-training facility Salt River Fields in 2011, Las Vegas Ballpark in 2019 and Major League Baseball's Field of Dreams Ballpark in Dyersville, Iowa in 2021.

As in the past, the selection is made by an advisory panel utilized by *BaseballParks.com*. Joining Mock on the committee are Doug Greenwald, baseball broadcaster for the past 27 years, and Graham Knight, author of three books on ballparks and who operates the popular Baseball Pilgrimages website.

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Mock's in-depth review of Glacier Bank Park entitled "Flying the plane while building it" can be found here: <https://baseballparks.com/indepth/flathead-field/>

For more information on this award or on BaseballParks.com, contact Joe Mock at 512-826-0853.

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