



**USA
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- **Six reasons why the Bucks should fear the Hawks**
- **Lighting the 'FUZE' on a dream ballpark in NC**

HOW'S DAK?

Prescott says he's fine. Dallas holds its breath the QB is right.

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Sam Darnold gets a shot with a new team. JIM DEDMON/USA TODAY

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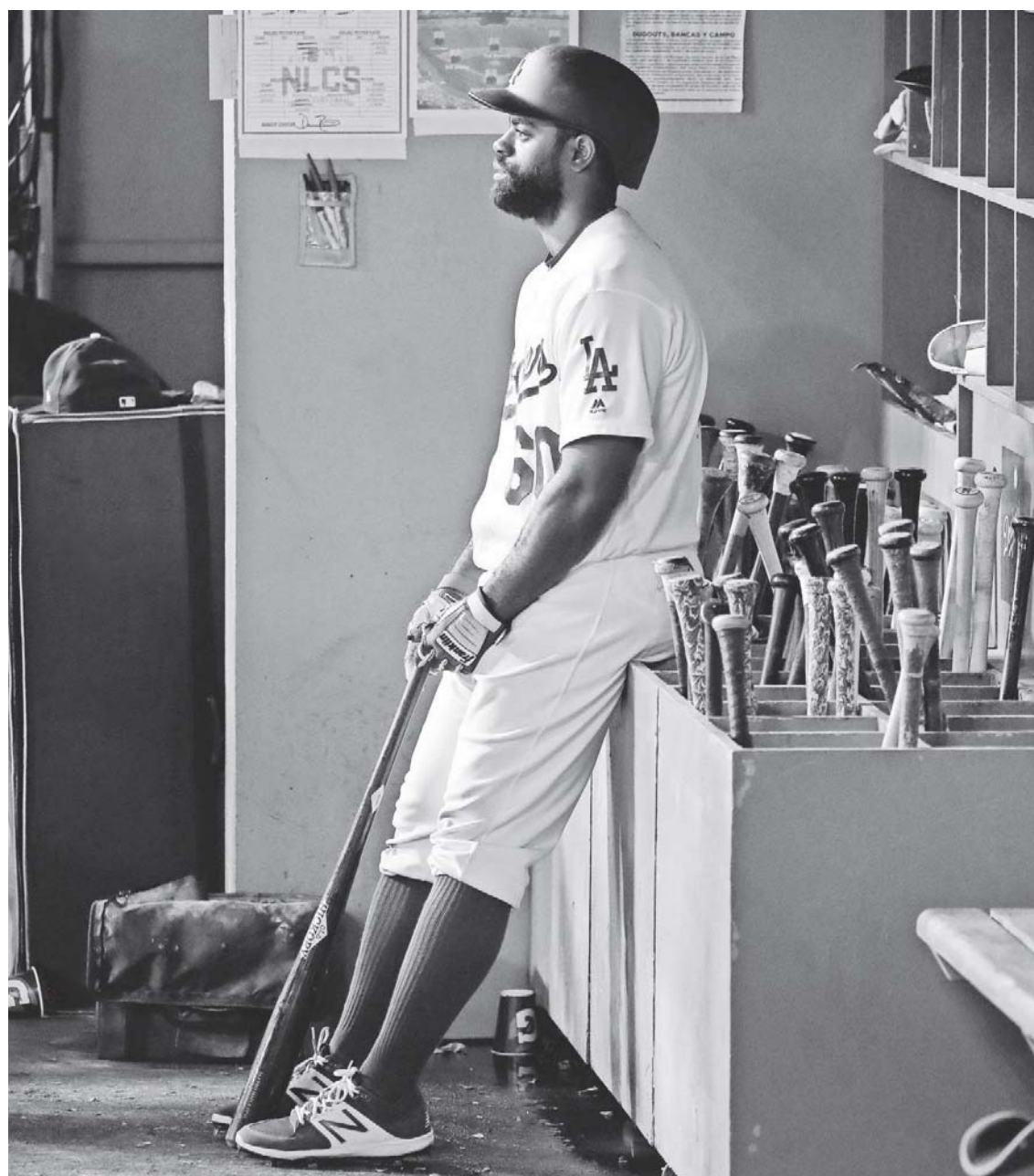
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Dak Prescott by LM Otero/AP; Jimmy Garoppolo by Josie Lepe/AP; Daniel Jones by Danielle Parhizkaran/NorthJersey.com; Trae Young by Bill Streicher/USA TODAY Sports.

- The Tampa Bay Rays' player statistics were listed incorrectly in the June 16-22 issue. You can find the updated ones on Page 21 of this week's issue.



A father who won't give up on his grown-up son

Andrew Toles once hit .462 in the 2016 NLCS. Now he suffers from a debilitating mental illness that has fractured his family. Through the tears, Alvin Toles still sees hope. Story on back page. AP PHOTO



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MINOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

FUSE is lit for lively parks on a budget

Joe Mock

Special to USA TODAY

GASTONIA, N.C. – For the past two decades, the city of Gastonia has been planning ambitious rehabilitation of specific neighborhoods that need some TLC. One area is called Loray, after the Loray textile mill that closed in the 1990s. In 2001, the 35-block area was officially recognized by the National Register of Historic Places.

Many of the small mill homes are being refurbished and the mill building itself now houses the African American Museum of History & Culture.

Between Loray and Gastonia's downtown was another area in desperate need of a makeover. Here the city envisioned a new venue for entertainment and sports, with the land around it being available for private developers to create condos and apartments – and maybe a brew pub, restaurants or other retail outlets.

The city designated this 16-acre sector as FUSE – the Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment District – because Franklin Boulevard runs through this neighborhood. Until recently, the sports-and-entertainment facility being constructed at the area's core was going to be called simply FUSE Stadium. A corporate sponsorship agreement means the venue is called CaroMont Health Park, after a regional health care provider.

Kristy Crisp, a 20-year employee of the city and today its director of economic development, says the site used to be a Sears store, vacant for 30 years. "It was really an eyesore. To remove that and replace it with this is a huge transition. It reflects what Gastonia is going through with all of the investment in development here.

"As a lifelong resident here, I'd say it's perfect."

'Guts of a gunfighter'

It's easy to see that Brandon



Celebrating the opening of CaroMont Health Park, formerly known as FUSE Stadium, are Honey Hunters owner Brandon Bellamy, left, architect Jonathan Cole of Pendulum and Gastonia Mayor Walker E. Reid III. JOE MOCK

Bellamy is an effective entrepreneur. The 49-year-old's communication skills are obvious, as is his ability to inspire others with his vision.

He's the sole owner of a firm called The Velocity Company – which fits, because he seems to operate at full speed. Velocity is a Maryland company that invests in commercial development, particularly in what Bellamy calls "under-invested communities."

The FUSE area of Gastonia landed on Bellamy's radar after a mentor of his urged him to look into it. "I saw that Gastonia is sort of like the stepchild of Charlotte, but the people here have grit and determination,"

Bellamy tells USA TODAY Sports. "And they look to the future."

After meeting with the city's mayor and city council, he was impressed. "They have the guts of a gun fighter. They had committed the bonds to build the FUSE stadium, but they didn't have a team."

The independent Atlantic League had expressed interest in coming, but there were no potential owners to make it happen.

Bellamy had never contemplated owning a sports team, and he didn't realize that if he bought a baseball franchise he'd be the first Black majority owner in the sport. He just wanted to

"investigate the baseball business. I could see that there was a lot of gasoline. We just needed the match."

Isn't that what a FUSE is for?

Bellamy says his development goal is to "build things to make communities come together." And when he looked at the plans for the FUSE Stadium, he saw a facility that could bring people together in ways seldom possible in a city like Gastonia. Baseball. Football. Soccer. Lacrosse. Concerts. Banquets. Weddings. There's room for all these to happen.

He adds that "the city had the good sense to bring on Pendulum to design it. Jonathan (Cole, Pendulum's principal) created a

masterpiece here. It's very intelligently designed."

So Bellamy spearheaded the acquisition of an expansion franchise in the Atlantic League – an eight-team circuit whose teams now have extra value since Major League Baseball began considering it a "partner league." The league acts as MLB's laboratory for rule changes before they bring them into big-league play.

"Honey Hunters" won a name-the-team contest. While the logo shows a hungry honey badger on the prowl, the name also pays homage to a prominent Black landowner in the late 19th century named Ransom Hunter. He's believed to be the

first freed slave in Gaston County. Bellamy met with five generations of Hunter's descendants prior to the stadium's dedication.

Hope – and some magic

Now that the Honey Hunters are playing baseball at Caro Mont Health Park, Bellamy can see the relevance and usefulness of the facility. "It is a physical representation of the things I believe in, which are hope, opportunity and inspiration. That's how I built my company, and that's what I see here. Hope is what pulls you forward. It gives people a sense that the future can be better. This should be a catalyst for even more businesses, more jobs and more taxes for the city."

The investment by a Black entrepreneur in a city with Black leadership with a ballpark designed by a Black architect didn't go unnoticed. One interested party was Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Famer Earvin "Magic" Johnson, minority owner of the Los Angeles Dodgers and majority owner of food service operator Sodexo-Magic. The latter joined forces with national vendor Centerplate and the Honey Hunters to handle concessions and premium dining at CaroMont Health Park.

SodexoMagic bases its business model on the three "pillars" of food, wellness and community. They are particularly committed to under-served populations and make it a priority to purchase goods from minority-owned businesses.

Johnson came to Gastonia for opening night on May 27. During pregame ceremonies, he told the crowd, "When I think of what Brandon has been able to do with this incredible stadium, I had to fly here from LA to see it myself." He also thanked the parents in the crowd for bringing their youngsters, "so they can grow up and dream that they can do something like this, just like Brandon has been able to do."

"We're all for Brandon's commitment to deliver family fun and affordable prices here," says Bobby Dichiaro, regional vice president for Centerplate. "We



Magic Johnson, whose company is partnering with the Honey Hunters on concessions, shares a laugh with owner Brandon Bellamy on May 27. MICHAEL MAXWELL/GASTONIA HONEY HUNTERS



The abbreviation for Franklin Urban Sports and Entertainment (FUZE) greets fans as they enter the stadium now known as CaroMont Health Park. JOE MOCK

want to see folks come back to the ballpark again and again, and not have to take out a loan to pay for concessions." He adds that his favorite food item here is the pulled pork sandwich with BBQ sauce.

A lot of ballpark

The facility is immense for indy ball in a city of just 77,000. And its construction price was \$28.8 million.

Architect Cole has broken the code for creating 5,000-seat ballparks for half the budget of other such facilities. He did it in Utica, Michigan, at Jimmy John's Field, home of all four teams in the United Shore Professional Baseball League.

"What I did there, I perfected here," he says.

There are six covered "cabana" areas behind third base, a picnic area on field level down the third-base line, covered pavilions near both foul poles and an upper-level lounge with room for 300. The artificial turf is practically indestructible so it can take a beating no matter the sport or event.

And the drainage system under the surface makes a tarp unnecessary.

"I like to push the envelope in getting people close to home plate," Cole explains. "It's really important to me. That's where the intimacy is."

A sellout crowd greeted the Honey Hunters on opening night. "I'm delighted with the level of support here," says David Martin, the team's chief operating operator. "And I'm amazed at the level of baseball interest. The sky's the limit."

Through 10 home dates, the team has drawn 2,315, third best in the eight-team Atlantic League. As Bellamy says, "If you draw inspiration from what we're doing, you're a Honey Hunter."

Mock covers sports facilities for USA TODAY Sports.

MLB POWER RANKINGS

Team	LW	Comments by Jesse Yomtov
1. Houston Astros	8	Seven-game win streak coincides with Framber Valdez's return to ace status.
2. San Francisco Giants	2	Bulletproof? They've won nine of 14 since Evan Longoria's injury.
3. Los Angeles Dodgers	4	Buckle up: Nine games in a row against Padres, Cubs, Giants.
4. Tampa Bay Rays	1	Ace Tyler Glasnow lost to elbow injury, team suffers four walk-off losses, summons Wander Franco. Sheesh.
5. Chicago White Sox	3	Just 17-23 against teams with winning records.
6. Boston Red Sox	5	Christian Arroyo (105 adjusted OPS) providing steady production expected of Kike Hernandez (79).
7. Oakland Athletics	6	Now in dead heat with Astros after losing Yankee Stadium series they could've swept.
8. San Diego Padres	7	Hard not to wince every time Fernando Tatis Jr. dives on his shoulder.
9. Chicago Cubs	T-9	Went a week without scoring a run via the non-home run.
10. Cleveland	12	Remember 20-game winners? Aaron Civale well on pace to hit that mark.
11. New York Mets	11	Francisco Lindor's OPS creeping toward .700 for first time as a Met.
12. Milwaukee Brewers	T-9	Josh Hader's ERA, FIP and homers given up all begin with 0.-something.
13. New York Yankees	14	Run differential of zero sums up season of dramatic turns adding up to A Pretty OK Team.
14. Toronto Blue Jays	13	In removing his pal Freddy Galvis from scrum, Vlad Guerrero Jr. makes case for MVB (Most Valuable Bouncer).
15. Philadelphia Phillies	15	In an era of five-inning pitchers, Zack Wheeler averaging seven dominant innings a start.
16. Cincinnati Reds	17	Get hype for that Jesse Winker-Nick Castellanos MVP battle.
17. Atlanta Braves	18	Four games with the Mets may set the tone for summer.
18. Los Angeles Angels	20	There's not a vibe the Angels bullpen couldn't kill.
19. Washington Nationals	23	Kyle Schwarber, Jon Lester sending waves of regret to Wrigley Field.
20. St. Louis Cardinals	16	Treading water at .500 until Jack Flaherty returns wouldn't be the worst outcome.
21. Seattle Mariners	22	Swept the Rays, which is only fair after losing every trade to them.
22. Miami Marlins	21	Jesus Sanchez latest outfielder hoping to stick for good.
23. Kansas City Royals	19	Bobby Witt Jr. on an 11-for-22 run at Class AA, pushing average to .280.
24. Minnesota Twins	24	Byron Buxton and Kenta Maeda are healthy and productive – but is it too late?
25. Detroit Tigers	25	Here come the arms: Matt Manning's steady debut fuels enthusiasm.
26. Colorado Rockies	26	Will Ryan McMahon be lone representative at hometown All-Star Game?
27. Texas Rangers	27	Adolis Garcia would be a fun rep in the Home Run Derby.
28. Pittsburgh Pirates	28	As selling season commences, prices shouldn't be too high in Pittsburgh.
29. Baltimore Orioles	29	Will soon have 10 shots to try to break 18-game road losing streak.
30. Arizona Diamondbacks	30	Can't win at home, either.