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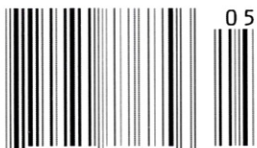
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COURTESY SAVANNAH SAND GNATS

BY ERIC KARLAN

Pesky and Persistent Savannah Sand Gnats

THE MARSHY, LEVEL TERRAIN of Savannah presents a perfect environment for insects to breed, thrive — and annoy. To compensate for their tiny size, certain brown bugs travel in clouds of hundreds, inflicting itchy, painful stings to anything — or anyone — in their path.

Scientifically classified in the family *Ceratopogonidae*, they are more commonly referred to as no-see-ums, punkies and sand gnats. Yet, there is one swarm of sand gnats locals would never swat away.

Since 1996, the Savannah Sand Gnats have unquestionably been the city's most beloved pests. Playing in the

South Atlantic League as a single-A affiliate for the New York Mets, the Sand Gnats are the latest chapter of Savannah's rich baseball history spanning more than a century.

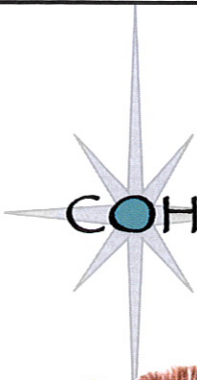
Savannah's first foray into major league baseball came in 1886, with the city having entrants in the Southern League that year and the next. Apparently, neither team had a nickname, but Savannah's next Southern League club, which played in 1893, was called the Electrics, with the nickname being changed the following year to the Modocs — after a Native American Indian tribe.

The city was out of professional baseball from 1894 until 1905, when it fielded a team called the Pathfinders in the fledgling South Atlantic League — with the nickname apparently being a reference to John C. Fremont, an explorer of the American West and onetime presidential candidate who was born in Savannah and was known as "The Great Pathfinder." The next year, the team became the Indians, the moniker most often used by Savannah's baseball clubs over the years.


The franchise switched names again in 1913 — this time to Colts — and remained that way until the League folded in 1915.

After a 10-season hiatus, baseball returned to Savannah in 1926 in the form of the Indians. No sooner had the team settled in, however, than the Great Depression devastated the nation, forcing the Indians to terminate their 1928 season a month early. By the time Savannah had recovered and the Indians resumed play, it was 1936.

Conditions remained fairly stable for the next quarter-century. The Indians nickname remained untouched until



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looking ■ back

1954, when the club decided to share names with its parent organization, the Philadelphia Athletics.

Thus began a Savannah tradition of habitually expressing loyalty to its major league organization through shared identity; the Reds (at the time, in the midst of the Cold War, the Redlegs), the Pirates and the White Sox followed.

Meanwhile, racial discrimination was becoming a major issue at Savannah's Grayson Stadium. Ironically, six seasons after Jackie Robinson's major league premiere in 1947, Savannah was the first team to break the color barrier in the South Atlantic League, starting Al Israel and Junior Reedy on Opening Day 1953.

Amidst the civil rights movement, however, tensions over seating areas among fans escalated. Consequently, the team was forced to vacate Grayson following the 1962 season, relocating to Lynchburg, Va. When relations improved, baseball returned to Savannah in 1968.

Then playing in the double-A Southern League, the new Savannah franchise endured a rollercoaster start, touting three affiliations in three seasons. In 1971, with the major league Milwaukee Braves' move to Atlanta, Savannah changed affiliations once again to become a farm team for its fellow Georgia team. This instate affair lasted through 1983. The following season, Savannah began a 12-season partnership with the Saint Louis Cardinals.

Just prior to the 1996 campaign, Savannah became a farm team for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Instead of adopting the Dodgers moniker, however, management resolved to break a long tradition and seek a unique nickname with local flavor.

Through a "name the team" contest sponsored by a local radio station, fans submitted a variety of quirky nicknames. Several alliterative ideas were seriously considered, among them, the Savannah Shade, the Sharks and the Stoplights, paying homage to the multitude of traffic lights lining Victory Drive — the street on the north side of Grayson Stadium.

"In the end, I think the choice was made for Sand Gnats because that's a good way to picture minor league players: scrappy, hungry pests," said Mike Passanisi, the team's director of media relations and creative services.

Little did management realize that it had just created a national phenomenon.



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looking ■ back

Baseball fans across the nation loved the quirky cartoon Sand Gnat, sporting a green uniform, brown cap and sunglasses, hovering with a bat — awaiting the next pitch.

While minor league logos rarely survive longer than a couple years, the swinging Sand Gnat has remained unaltered for 13 seasons. Still one of the most marketable and identifiable minor league insignias, the Sand Gnats logo has been showcased on "Jeopardy," the "George Lopez Show" and the "Colbert Report."

"I think that's a testament to the Savannah Sand Gnats moniker just sounding and feeling like the archetypical minor league team with a fun localized nickname," said Passanisi.

Gnic, the popular Sand Gnat depicted on the team's apparel, soon became literally larger than life when he became Savannah's mascot. Standing well over 750 actual sand gnats high, Gnic's toothy grin and muscular body were anything but intimidating to local fans. In fact, Gnic looked so built that he almost made the team's squad on several occasions.

This unusual brawn for a mere sand gnat led some to speculate body-enhancing drug use. The ensuing steroids scandal tarnished Gnic's image, leading to his resignation after the 2004 season. Despite a general sentiment that Gnic undoubtedly used illegal substances, he is yet to be found guilty in the ongoing investigation.

The mascot position did not stay available for long. No sooner had Gnic buzzed off than his brother, Gnate, flew in. Bearing little resemblance to his athletic brother, the rounder Gnate wears a backwards hat (so his antennae can stick out) and a constant smile.

Gnate reached superstar status early in his career when he landed an interview on ESPN's "Cold Pizza" morning talk show. Despite the fame, Gnate has maintained his modesty; the giant sand gnat still collects bubble gum wrappers, helps clean up the stadium and enjoys cracker jacks while he roots for his favorite team.

After a rough 2007 campaign, Gnate hopes he will get to witness the first Sand Gnats' league pennant during his tenure — the first since his brother Gnic cheered Savannah on during the 1997 championship season. ■