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SPORTS STUDIES

The Albuquerque Dukes and the Summer of 1981: The Best Baseball in America

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For many Americans the summer of 1981 was a period of labor unrest as President Reagan's massive firings broke the back of the airplane controllers' union and the baseball season was marred by a strike focusing on the issue of compensation for the signing of free agents. While the Major League Baseball Players Association conducted a strike which stretched from June until a settlement on August 1, baseball fans starved for their summer passion found an unlikely focus for their attentions: Albuquerque, New Mexico and the Triple A affiliate of the Los Angeles Dodgers - The Albuquerque Dukes.

While much of the nation followed issues of labor negotiations, the summer sun in Albuquerque was shining on the spectacular achievements of a minor league baseball franchise. The Albuquerque Dukes of 1981 swept to the crown of the Pacific Coast League, winning 94 games and dropping only 38, for a winning percentage of .712, the highest in the league since 1934. The Dukes batted .325 as a team, scoring 875 runs, for an average of over six runs per game, and were not shut out all season. Managed by former major league catcher Del Crandall, the Dukes were led on the field by PCL Most Valuable

Player and Sporting News Minor League player of the Year Mike Marshall who batted .373 with 34 home runs and 137 runs batted in. Other 1981 Dukes who went on to success on the major league level include Jack Perconte, Candy Maldonado, Rudy Law, Alejandro Pena, and Ted Power.

With no major league baseball to report, the national sports media gave the Dukes considerable attention, and baseball-starved fans from around the country made the pilgrimage to the Sports Stadium in Albuquerque. Sports channels such as ESPN featured Dukes' games, and the highlight of the season was reached when the Dukes defeated the patent Dodgers in an exhibition games played after the strike was settled. Although many would contend that the best baseball in America during the summer of 1981 was in Albuquerque, following the strike settlement national focus shifted back to the major league level and a unique playoff system featuring before and after strike division winners. But it had been a special summer in Albuquerque.

This paper chronicles the achievements of the 1981 Dukes within the unique historical perspective of the major league players' strike. In addition to considering the baseball accomplishments of the Dukes, the impact of the national sports media attention on Albuquerque during the strike is analyzed. The 1981 season in Albuquerque offers an excellent opportunity to examine in microcosm the impact of a minor league sports franchise upon a city. The research for this presentation is derived from periodicals such as the *Albuquerque Journal*, *Albuquerque Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Sporting News*, and *Sport Illustrated*, as well as interviews with such individuals as Dukes General Manager Pat McKernan.