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BASEBALL

'It breaks my heart.' Lexington could lose the Legends. What that means for the city.

BY BETH MUSGRAVE AND DANIEL DESROCHERS

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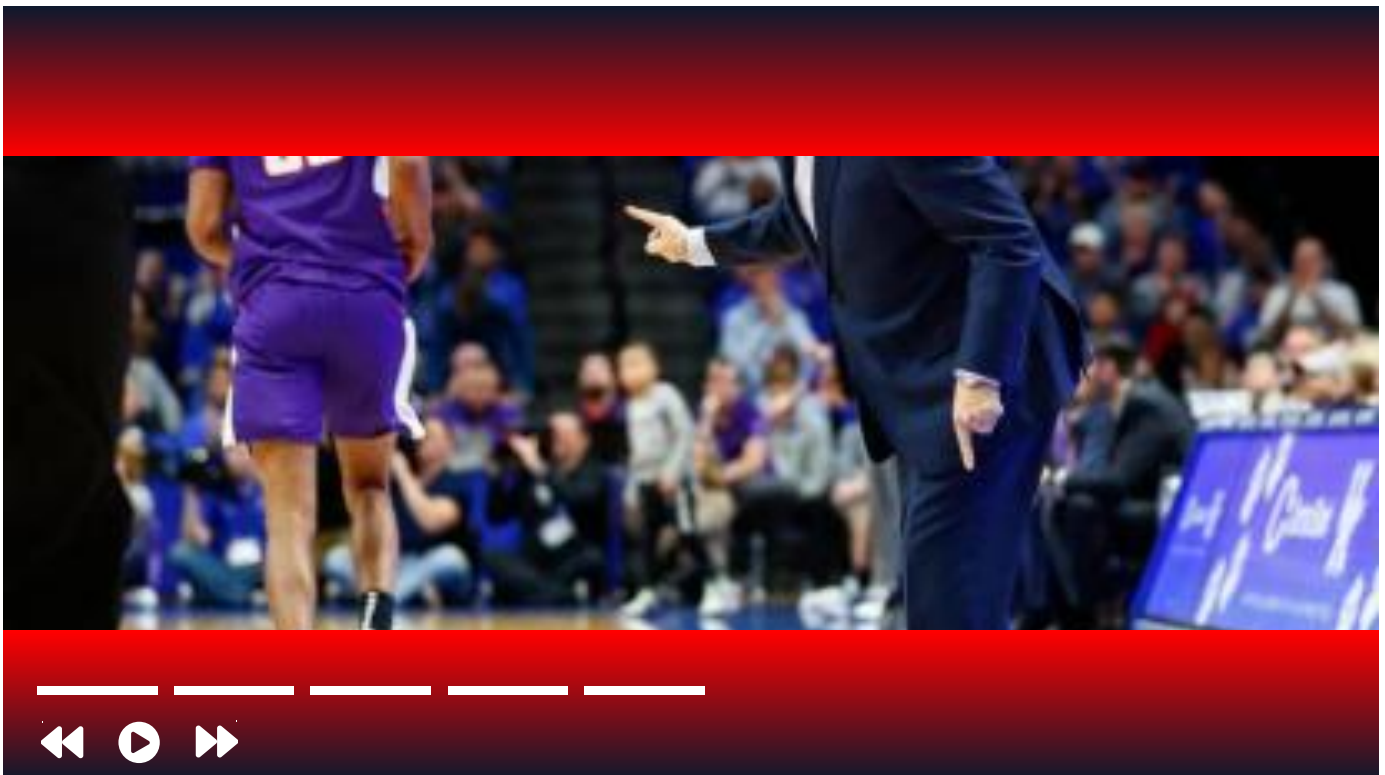
The Lexington Legends took to Whitaker Bank Ballpark on April 2, 2019, to practice for their upcoming season. The Legends play their season and home opener Thursday night, April 4, against the Delmarva Shorebirds. BY [MARCUS DORSEY](#) 

The Lexington Legends are bracing for an uncertain future in 2021 as Major League Baseball considers axing the Legends and 41 other minor league teams.

The Legends were on the proposed list of 42 minor league teams that would be cut under a proposal by the MLB to overhaul minor league baseball under increasing pressure to boost minor league player pay, among other concerns, The New York Times [reported Nov. 16](#)

The contract between the MLB and the minor leagues expires after the 2020 season. If nothing changes, that means the Legends, a Class A affiliate of the [Kansas City Royals](#), could lose their minor league status in 2021. The Legends have called Lexington home since 2001.

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Andy Shea, the president of the Legends, said Monday the team remains hopeful MLB will reverse its decision. It's too early to say what will happen to the team and Whitaker Bank Ballpark on North Broadway.



“We are very much focused and have a high degree of confidence that there will be a mutually beneficial agreement between the major league and minor league,” Shea said.

HOW DID THE LEGENDS END UP ON THE LIST?

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Shea said he and his family, which owns the Legends, are still trying to figure out why the Legends were targeted for closure as part of the MLB’s overhaul plan. The Class A Legends, [who are coming off back-to-back South Atlantic League championships](#), have also just received an award for best Class A minor league team.

The proposed re-organization would take the number of minor league teams from 160 to 120, according to multiple news reports. Several factors determined what teams and franchises would be cut including proximity to its parent club and its opponents and the availability of hotels. The condition of the stadium was also a factor, according to the [New York Times and other media outlets](#).

“We have put more than \$500,000 into the stadium over the past five years,” Shea said. However, Whitaker Bank Ball Park, which opened as Applebee’s Stadium in 2001, is almost 20 years old.



“We have no idea how we ended up on the list,” Shea said. Attendance figures have remained the same over the past few years, he said. But Shea said from what they have been told and read in news reports, it does not appear that attendance or ticket sales were part of MLB’s decision-making process.

Under the current proposal, the Legends and the 41 other franchises on the list would be offered an opportunity to be part of a Dream League, which would not be part of the minor league system but would have some type of financial support from MLB. Typically, MLB pays for the salaries for minor league players and managers. The team owners pay for infrastructure such as the stadiums.

Shea said it was too early for the Legends to say if they would join the proposed Dream League, which some say would be [financially untenable without ties to the majors](#).

Shea also could not say if the Legends were pursuing other affiliations such as one with the Cincinnati Reds. Cincinnati is close to Lexington, one of the factors the MLB allegedly considered in its decision on what minor league teams to ax.

“Candidly, I love being a Kansas City Royal affiliate,” Shea said of the seven-year relationship with the Royals. Prior to the Royals, the Legends were an affiliate of the



Alan Stein, who spearheaded efforts to bring the Legends to Lexington in 2001, said the move by the MLB has been in the works for a while.

“This breaks my heart,” said Stein, who left the Legends in 2011 and sold out his share of the team in 2015. “It breaks my heart for Lexington. It’s not a sad day yet but it is certainly one of great anxiety.”

Stein served on the board of minor league baseball during previous negotiations between the minor and major leagues. Stein said he has been told MLB came into this year’s negotiations with the list of the 42 teams.

“They said this is non-negotiable,” Stein said. “We are doing it.”

“What they are not considering is the tremendous economic impact it has on all of these communities,” Stein said. “These are often smaller communities and these franchises have out-sized impact on those communities.”

Shea said during the season, the Legends employ between 150 to 200 people. The ballpark employs an additional 200 people through contract work such as food vendors.

Smaller-town franchises not only develop baseball talent, but they also expand baseball's fan base, Shea and Stein said. Tickets for minor league teams are more affordable than for major league teams, Stein said.

“What baseball is ignoring is how they create and develop new fans through these minor league teams,” Stein said.

Lexington-Fayette Urban County Councilman James Brown, whose district includes Whitaker Bank Ballpark, said he was meeting the Legends management later Monday.

“We don't want to lose them,” said Brown. “They are a great partner and a huge community benefit as a whole. They have become part of Lexington's identity. Anything that we can do as a city, we should explore.”

Shea said the Legends have given millions of dollars in in-kind or monetary donations since 2001. Some of those outreach programs include giving two free Legends tickets to any donor of the United Way of the Bluegrass and its “Hit the Books” program that provides Legends tickets to hundreds of schools and kids in central, eastern and southern Kentucky as an incentive to read more books.

COULD THE FIGHT END UP IN CONGRESS?

Congress may intervene in the fight between major and minor league baseball.

Several members of the U.S. House of Representatives are considering forming a minor league caucus to encourage Major League Baseball not to nix the 42 minor league teams.

U.S. Congressman Andy Barr, R-Lexington, said a letter to MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred asking Manfred to reconsider could be sent out as early as Tuesday. Barr and several other members of Congress are signing the letter.

Barr pointed out that MLB benefits from an anti-trust exemption and said because minor league baseball impacts interstate commerce, Congress has an interest.

“You’re not just talking about the tens of millions of fans that attend minor league baseball games each season, but you’re also talking about the significant economic activity that would be negatively impacted in the communities that would lose minor league clubs,” Barr said.

Barr said there are other ways that Congress can exert oversight over the MLB besides revoking its anti-trust exemption.

Stein said all professional sports have similar anti-trust exemptions, allowing them to operate as monopolies.

“I think this can be resolved without going there,” Barr said. “We’d like to have a voluntary agreement or a compromise of some sort that would protect these 42 minor league teams. One possible solution going forward is to freeze the number and not add any minor league teams for at least some period of time.”



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Beth Musgrave has covered government and politics for the Herald-Leader for more than a decade. A graduate of Northwestern University, she has worked as a reporter in Kentucky, Indiana, Mississippi, Illinois and Washington D.C.

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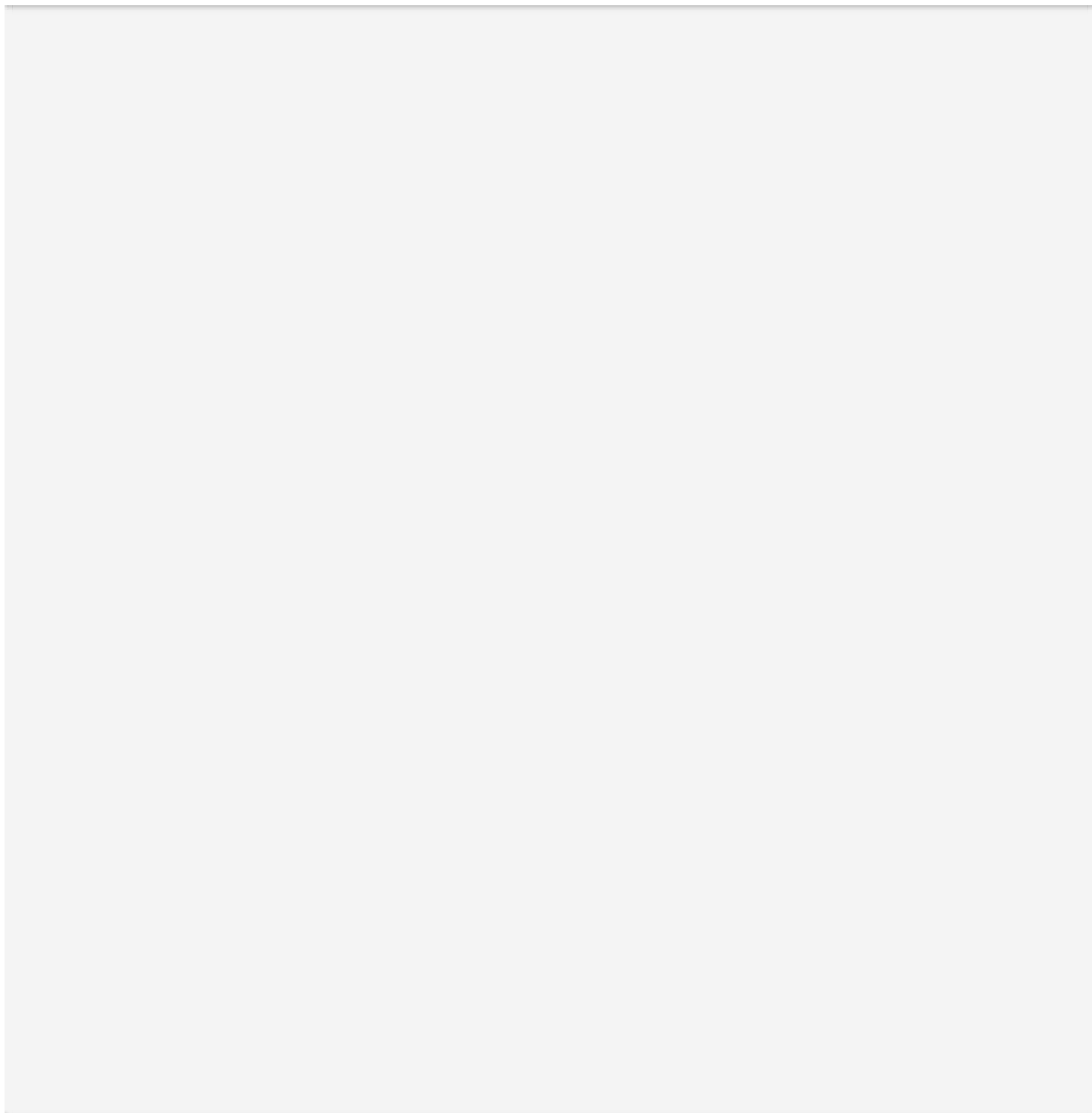
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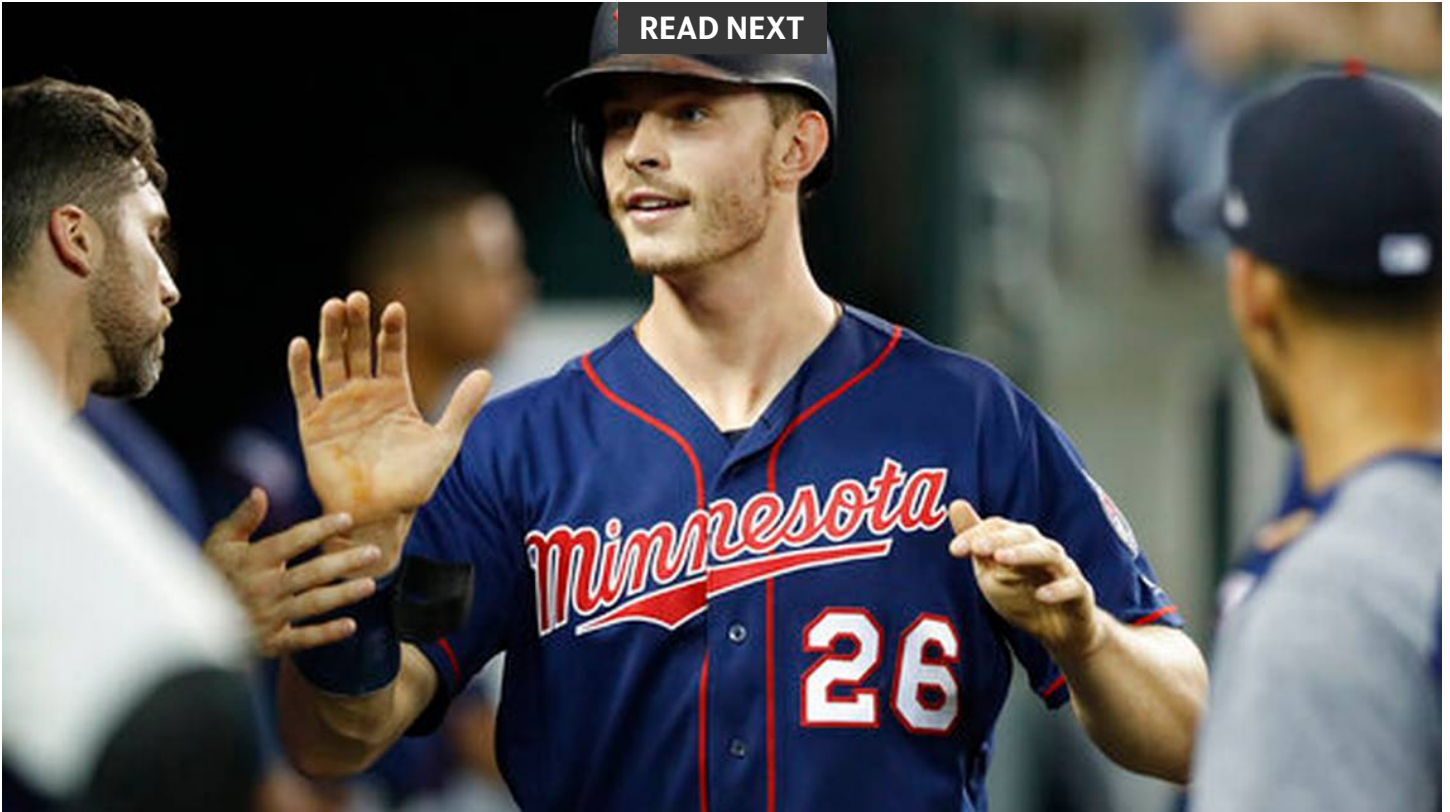
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