

## **The Top Ten Largest Baseball Game Crowds at Frontier Field**

By Paul Bielewicz

Orioles exhibition games. Clever promotions. Well-known players on rehab assignments. Opening day. These are all among the things that bring Rochester baseball fans out in droves to beautiful Frontier Field. This article counts down the top ten regular season crowds in the 21-season history of Frontier Field—all over 13,000 fans—and provides insight on what made each of these games noteworthy enough to draw such large crowds.

### **#10 Friday, June 15, 2007: 13,114**

Sometimes the promise of baseball on a summer's night all it takes to draw a huge crowd to the ballpark. Warm early summer weather and post-game fireworks didn't hurt either, and were enough to draw a standing-room-only crowd of 13,114 for the game against the Louisville Bats, the sixth largest regular season baseball crowd in the 11-year history of the ballpark to that point.

### **#9 Saturday, September 05, 2009: 13,120**

The season finale is often enough to draw a large crowd. A warm late summer Saturday evening on September 5, 2009 witnessed 13,120 pass through the turnstiles at Frontier to see baseball one more time before the long offseason. The game did not go well—the Wings lost 10-0 to Scranton Wilkes-Barre—but what was much more stirring for the sellout crowd was seeing Police Officer Anthony DiPonzio throw out the ceremonial first pitch, reprising his opening day performance. DiPonzio, who had been shot in the head while on duty earlier that year, had made a steady and significant recovery, and still serves as an inspiration to many.

### **#8 Saturday, April 9, 2005: 13,158**

April 9, 2005, opening day, treated 13,158 fans to sunny weather with temperatures in the low-60s. Opening day festivities included a salute to the military, which honored several hundred uniformed personnel from seven branches of the armed forces. 2,400 tickets were donated to military personnel and their families by 61 area businesses, and the resulting display was believed to be the largest gathering of uniformed military ever at a Rochester sporting event. Even the players took part, as both teams paused their pre-game warm-up activities to stand and applaud the soldiers in uniform. The Red Wings 2-1 win over the Syracuse SkyChiefs was a nice bonus, but probably not the part that will be remembered by those who attended.

### **#7 Tuesday, July 4, 2017: 13,167**

The fourth-of-July is always a well-attended game. The Red Wings sport patriotic stars-and-stripes uniforms, and dazzle fans with a fireworks display celebrating all things America. On July 4, 2017, 13,167 fans attended Rochester's 5-3 win over Pawtucket, improving their record to 45-37.

### **#6 Friday, April 11, 1997: 13,227**

April 11, 1997 wasn't just any home opener, it was the long-awaited inaugural game at brand new Frontier Field. Frontier Field was not only a long time coming—it suffered delays at many steps along the way—but it was still viewed with skepticism by many Rochester baseball fans who had grown up

attending games at beloved Silver Stadium over the previous 68 years. Despite chilly weather, including predicted rain and snow that mercifully held off, 13,227 fans made the pilgrimage to Rochester's new baseball mecca. For those who had been used to the venerable old ballpark, Frontier offered more of everything - more food options, more bathrooms, and more modern amenities. Opening day festivities included a balloon launch, Wings' new mascot Spikes parachuting in, and Rochester's own Lou Gramm singing the national anthem to an accompaniment of fireworks.

#### **#5 Thursday, August 10, 2017: 13,281**

The Rochester Red Wings didn't originate the minor league baseball trend of "name-the-team-after-a-local-food," but they may have perfected it. On July 4, 2017, it was announced that the team would play the August 10 game as the Rochester "Plates", paying homage to the garbage plate, a local delicacy. "Plates"-based jerseys and hats almost immediately sold out on the Red Wings' website and in the team store. In the month leading up to the game, as the team struggled to fill the backlog of merchandise orders and social media buzz continued to grow, they knew they might have the makings of a successful promotion.

The success of the event turned out to be bigger than anyone could have imagined. 13,281 fans—the second-largest regular season crowd in Frontier Field history—turned out for an evening of "Plates"-themed fun, including a Nick Tahou's food truck, plate-based food items, in-game promotions, and the team wearing specially-designed Plates jerseys and hats.

#### **#4 Monday, June 28, 1999: 13,307**

For many years it was common for minor league teams to play an annual exhibition game against their parent team, especially in cities with long affiliations like Rochester had with the Baltimore Orioles (1961-2002). The first Red Wings - Orioles exhibition game was played in 1961, the first year of the affiliation. By 1999, with players' salaries rising, higher incidences of injuries, and precious few days off built into major league schedules, playing an exhibition in a Triple-A city was a low priority for most major leaguers. Outspoken player Albert Belle began a movement amongst the Orioles to boycott the game, and the cause was taken up by a few of his teammates. In the end, the game was played, and was a resounding success, drawing 13,307 to young Frontier Field. While Belle pouted in the visitors' dugout, fan favorite Cal Ripken Jr. signed hundreds of autographs for adoring Rochester fans. Unfortunately the 1999 game would prove to be the last Orioles - Red Wings exhibition game.

#### **#3 Monday, June 30, 1997: 13,485**

In the summer of 1997, Japanese pitching sensation Hideki Irabu was signed by the New York Yankees. Touted as "The Nolan Ryan of Japan," with a 99 MPH fastball, Irabu caused a major stir when he first arrived in the U.S. Before he pitched for the Yankees, he had a short minor league stint, including a few starts with the Columbus Clippers (the Yankees' AAA farm team at the time). One of his last starts before his debut with the Yankees was a June 30 Columbus visit to Frontier Field to face the Red Wings. The excitement that surrounded Irabu resulted in a standing-room-only crowd of 13,485. Undaunted by the hype, the Red Wings batters looked forward to the opportunity to face a highly-touted major-league caliber prospect. Their bats did not disappoint, tagging Irabu for eight hits and three earned runs over five innings. The Wings won 8-7.

#### **#2 Sunday, May 6, 2012: 13,584**

In 2012, the Scranton Wilkes-Barre Yankees undertook a major renovation of their Moosic, PA stadium. During this time, the team's "home" games took place at sites throughout the northeast, many of which were in upstate New York. Because of this, the team adopted the one-year moniker "Empire State Yankees." Over half of their home games were played at Frontier Field, including a May 6<sup>th</sup> pitching assignment by Yankees' veteran Andy Pettitte, who was on his way back to the majors after having announced his retirement more than a year prior. Pettitte's long and productive career was nearing its end, but the pitcher's name recognition was enough to draw 13,584 eager Yankees fans to Frontier to see him pitch against the visiting Pawtucket Red Sox.

### **#1 Thursday, July 10, 1997: 13,723**

The 1997 Red Wings – Orioles exhibition game packed in 13,723 fans, the largest crowd in Frontier Field's history. The highlight for many fans was Cal Ripken Jr.'s presence—at the time, 2,401 games into his 2,632 consecutive-game streak. Ripken was quoted in the next day's Democrat and Chronicle touting the importance of these games for Orioles and Red Wings players alike, recalling his time with the 1981 Red Wings, and how young players look forward to these games as their biggest game of the year.

Will any of these 13,000+ attendance marks be broken any time soon? Unfortunately major league / minor league exhibition games are a thing of the past. But minor league rehab assignments continue regularly, and up-and-coming prospects often make AAA stops on their way to the majors. And with the Red Wings' promotions team always hard at work dreaming up new ideas to put fans in the seats, it seems likely that the attendance top ten list will constantly be evolving with ever-higher numbers.