

ASU veterans chase baseball dreams with the Padres at spring training

Partnership with Pat Tillman Veterans Center provides volunteer opportunity to shag balls

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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Jocelyn South has a spring ritual.

For the last four years, the Arizona State University alum has boarded a flight from San Diego to Arizona with a singular purpose. Not a vacation. Not a reunion. Not even just baseball. She comes to pull on a brown Padres shirt and hat, step onto the grass at the Peoria Sports Complex and shag fly balls for the San Diego Padres during Cactus League spring training.

On Friday, March 6, with the Padres set to face the Chicago Cubs, South was back where she believes she belongs — on the field, glove in hand, part of something bigger than herself.

“I almost died,” South said with a laugh, recalling the first time she was selected. “Being a part of this program is such a huge, wonderful opportunity for someone like me. It’s like the three things I love the most, Arizona State and Padres and military, all meshed together. Sharing a field with the team I love is huge.”

For South, whose father is a retired Air Force airman and whose husband is a retired Marine, the annual trip blends three defining parts of her life: her pride as a Sun Devil, her deep roots in the military community and her devotion to Padres baseball. The opportunity is made possible through a partnership between ASU’s [Pat Tillman Veterans Center](#) and the Padres, who host about 30 spring training games each year in Peoria.

“The partnership between the San Diego Padres and the Pat Tillman Veterans Center is truly a special one,” said [Michelle Loposky](#), director of development and strategic partnerships for the Tillman Center. “The mutual respect and admiration are evident as players, coaches, students and alums come together for the love of the game. I cannot thank the Padres enough for this amazing opportunity for our students and alums. Going into our fourth year, it just shows how much the

Padres organization truly appreciates all those who served and continue to serve.”

South calls it the best VIP access she could ever imagine.

In past years, she has chatted with players, watched Manny Machado sift through a snack pile in the dugout and even struck up conversations with team president A.J. Preller.

“I’m 44 years old, but I’m like a giddy little girl,” she said.

This season, she flew in just for the experience, then planned to head back to catch her son’s baseball tournament later that night. That is the kind of devotion this day inspires.

South was not alone.

Five other ASU veterans and military-connected students joined her on the field against the backdrop of sun and wind, the crack of bats echoing across the complex.

Nick Cabalo, an ASU student in the [Air Force ROTC program](#), took a deep breath and tracked a towering fly ball off the bat of Cubs slugger Nick Castellanos. He got under it, then watched it pop out of his glove.

“I did drop it,” Cabalo admitted with a grin. “You have major league hitting, absolute tanks. It’s not like your average high school ball. The ball’s going a lot farther and a lot harder, so you really have to figure it out.”

He later snagged a couple cleanly and worked up a sweat chasing line drives in the Arizona sun.

“Just being on the field with major leaguers, shagging balls, catching from them; it’s kind of cool. Not many people get that opportunity,” Cabalo said.

Timothy Hewitt, a fourth-year student in ASU’s professional flight program and an Air Force dependent, described the speed of the ball as surreal.

“I’ve done this maybe a dozen times,” Hewitt said. “It’s just as fun as it was the first time. The speed the ball comes at you, the slice. It’s definitely a challenge.”

Hewitt grew up playing baseball and now spends his days [studying aviation](#) at ASU’s Polytechnic campus. Being on the field with players he has watched for years never gets old.

“They’re the best of the best,” he said. “Just to be on the field with them, experience that, I wouldn’t get that anywhere else.”

Jaelin Howell, a financial planning major at ASU’s [W. P. Carey School of Business](#) and the daughter of two Air Force parents, blamed the wind for a few misjudged fly balls.

“One minute I’m like, it’s totally in front of me, and then it goes way behind me,” she said, laughing.

Still, she called it exhilarating.

“You’d never assume that someone like me could track a ball from a professional and catch it,” said Howell, who played softball for many years. “It’s so much fun.”

[Savino Anguiano](#), an ASU student veteran who helps facilitate the partnership through the Tillman Center, sees the experience as more than just a day at the ballpark.

“It’s not every day you get to come out here and interact with players, field some fly balls and line drives,” said Anguiano, who served in the Army. “It’s truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. And it’s that sense of community. We’re all here doing it together.”

Anguiano said the Padres go out of their way to make the veterans feel welcome. From custom shirts to pre-spring training briefings for players, the organization makes sure everyone knows who the special guests are.

“From my understanding, players and coaches get a briefing before spring training starts,” Anguiano said. “They’re told, those guys in those Padres shirts, they’re all veterans or connected to the military community, so go say ‘what’s up’ to them.”

That appreciation flows both ways.

Freddy Ochoa, the Padres clubhouse assistant, has been part of the initiative all four years.

“They love it,” Ochoa said on behalf of the Padres franchise. “The players and management enjoy it so much. They appreciate the veterans and military connected participants coming out, and it works out for all of us.”

David Macias, the Padres first base and outfield coach, has formed lasting friendships through the program.

“I got to know Josh Abbott,” Macias said of a previous participant at ASU. “He’s a dear friend of mine to this day. If it wasn’t for baseball, I probably would’ve been in the military. So anytime I meet somebody in the military, I always have a fond respect for that.”

Padres pitching coach and associate manager Ruben Niebla echoed that sentiment.

“The fact that they’re out here with us makes us really proud,” Niebla said. “We are an organization that supports our military 100%. Watching these men and women enjoy themselves is really an honor for us.”

As batting practice wound down and players filtered back toward the clubhouse, one final voice captured the spirit of the day.

Jason Adam, a Padres pitcher, paused when asked about the veterans shagging balls in the outfield.

“I just love our veterans. They sacrifice so much for our country so that we can come out here and play a game for a living,” Adam said. “So anytime they can come out here and have a little fun, hopefully it makes them feel like a kid again, like we get to feel every day.”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Timothy Hewitt, a fourth-year professional flight student and Air Force dependent, chases a ball in right field during a spring training practice for the San Diego Padres at Peoria Sports Complex on Friday, March 6. Half a dozen ASU veterans or veteran dependents arrived a few hours early that day for the Cubs vs. Padres game to shag balls for players during batting practice as part of a partnership between the Padres and the Pat Tillman Veterans Center. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



ASU alumna Jocelyn South (left), who now lives in San Diego, chats with Savino Anguiano, a project management graduate student and Pat Tillman Veterans Center worker, at the start of a spring training game after shagging balls for the Padres during practice as part of a partnership between the team and the Pat Tillman Veterans Center. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



San Diego Padres take their turn at live batting practice before their spring training game against the Chicago Cubs on Friday, March 6, at Peoria Sports Complex. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Timothy Hewitt (left), an Air Force dependant and ASU professional flight program student, looks at Nick Cabalo's signed baseball card collection during their volunteer opportunity with the San Diego Padres on March 6 at Peoria Sports Complex. Cabalo is a fourth-year air transport management student and Air Force ROTC member. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Savino Anguiano (right) and fourth-year financial planning student Jaelin Howell, the daughter of two Air Force parents, start to chase a ball that ends up clearing the fence during a Padres spring training practice on March 6. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Ruben Niebla (left), Padres pitching coach and associate manager, and David Macias, Padres first base and outfield coach. Photos by Charlie Leight/ASU News



San Diego pitcher Jason Adam signs a baseball for a young fan following batting practice during spring training at Peoria Sports Complex on Friday, March 6. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News