

A baseball scout and his hotel room: A love story spanning four decades

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(Photo: Joe Camporeale, USA TODAY Sports)

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. - This eclectic 194-room hotel in Old Town has purple carpet, pink doors, and yellow and orange walls.

It has changed names nine times.

It has even changed addresses without moving.

Yet, one man has managed to find his way back to this same joint every spring for the past 38 years.

The Saguaro Scottsdale Hotel: the spring-training home for 73-year-old Philadelphia Phillies scout Gordon

Lakey.

The esteemed scout not only has stayed at this same hotel since stumbling upon it parking his car one morning in the spring of 1980, but if you can believe it, has stayed in the same exact room every single year.

"I remember a couple of years ago the mayor of Scottsdale sees me, runs after me in the lobby," Lakey says, "and tells me, 'I just want to meet somebody who stayed at this hotel longer than I've lived.'"

Did you tell him you stayed in the same room, too?

"No," Lakey says, "I didn't want him to think I'm nuts."

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Lakey opens his door one recent morning to unveil perhaps the most bizarre streak of hotel accommodations in the history of an industry where familiarity and brand loyalty are comfort food for employees who spend more days on the road than at home.

It's a modest-sized room with two double beds, a 30-foot long desk covered by scouting reports, media guides and a stop watch, an old-fashioned wall-unit air conditioner, an entire wall covered by a white curtain but no windows, and a sliding-glass door leading out to a small patio.

With purple carpeting, of course.

"It's looks like a funeral home," Lakey says. "There's got to be some dead bodies around here somewhere."

"I've never even ordered room service because I don't think they could even find it."

You wouldn't even know this is a hotel driving by it, a boutique spot tucked into the heart of Old Town Scottsdale, at the foot of the Civic Center, and just a five-minute walk to the San Francisco Giants' spring-training home at Scottsdale Stadium.

"I remember showing [former California Angels GM] Mike Port where I was staying," Lakey said, "and he says, "Are you part of the witness protection program?"

"Well, Mike Tyson stayed there one night, so come to think about it, maybe there was something to it."

It started off as a DoubleTree hotel, became a Holiday Inn, switched to the James, the Old Town Inn, the Mondrian Scottsdale, the Saguaro and four other names in between.

"It's still the only place in the world that changed addresses," Lakey said, "and didn't move."



Gordon Lakey has been about the only constant at a Scottsdale hotel that has re-branded several times since he began staying there in 1980. (Photo: Joe Camporeale, USA TODAY Sports)

Indeed, the hotel's address used to be on 7353 E. Indian School Road, and now is 4000 Drinkwater Blvd.

Then again, Lakey has never changed rooms either, but his room number has switched from 400 to a four-digit number that's typically used for sixth floor residences.

Only it's on the ground floor.

"I'm the product of a lot of changes in this place," said Lakey, who looks across at the pool, which used to be two tennis courts. "I remember when I first came here, it was the first time I've ever seen white Astroturf. It was the first time I ever had a big-screen TV in my room, too. I used to bring my two English Bulldogs here and they'd swim in the pool.

"Now, you look around here, and it's certainly not the place for the color blind."

The only constant to this sea of change has been Lakey, who has scouted 49 years, but when he checks out of his hotel Thursday morning, he doesn't know if he'll be back for Year 50.

Still, he'll stick to his regular routine at checkout. He'll put in his reservation for March 1 to April 1, 2019. He'll fiddle with the exact dates when he knows his schedule, or whether he's still working.

He once figured out that the hotel could store five years' worth of reservations, so he kept a revolving reservation. It lasted right up until the time management figured out it wasn't a sound business plan permitting a man to have the same rate for five years when their room rates are spiking at \$419 this weekend.

Lakey, of course, should get some kind of bonus for spending nearly three years of his life at this hotel, particularly when it was nearly shut down back in its early years for serving drinks to underaged teenagers.

"Supposedly, the police posed as kids and the guy at the door said, "Welcome to underage drinking night," Lakey said. "When they raided it, kids were climbing over the wall to get out of there. It lost its liquor license for a year.

"Needless to say, I was not part of the raid."

Besides, it didn't affect Lakey considering he doesn't drink.

For a five-year stretch last decade when it was called the James Hotel, Lakey may have been the only occupant who never set foot in the lobby, which became the hottest bar in Scottsdale.

As Lakey pored over his scouting reports, celebrities like Kevin Bacon and Run-DMC were just a few feet away.

This, after all, is a baseball traditionalist who arrived last month with four suitcases. He still has every *Sporting News* from 1960 to the mid-'80s, when they stopped printing boxscores. He has kept every team's media guide since 1979. And for years collected every major newspaper's yearly baseball special section.

"Guys thought I was nuts staying here," Lakey said, "especially when it got a little crazy. It was tough to sleep. I could hear that music from the lobby until the bar closed."

Lakey, one of three men who started baseball's scouting bureau that just laid off its remaining scouts last week, is indeed a creature of habit. Instead of talking about WAR, exit velocity and spin rates, he says, can't a man please have boxscores in his local newspaper?

"To see all of these papers no longer printing boxscores," Lakey says, "is really sad. Box scores are unique to the history of baseball. I don't think any other sport where a recap of the game is more historic than boxscores are to baseball."

Times are changing, and Lakey is trying to cope with it. It was a huge blow when the Pink Pony, baseball's Cactus League landmark restaurant/bar, was shuttered. Now, Don and Charlie's, a staple of baseball dining since 1981 where former Commissioner Bud Selig still has his own table, is being razed next year for a new hotel.

"It's really sad to see," Lakey says. "It was unique to baseball. You'd go to Don and Charlie's when you want to find baseball people, just like you'd always see Billy (Martin, former Yankees and A's manager) at the Pink Pony.

"Billy used to live in an actual trailer outside left field when the A's trained at Phoenix Muni. He loved it there because he wouldn't have to walk far to his office after being out all night at the Pink Pony."

Lakey, who says he'll forever be indebted to former Houston Astros executive Tal Smith for hiring him, calling it an honor working for childhood hero Al Rosen, and a privilege working with Hall of Fame executive Pat Gillick for three decades, sits outside on the patio and is flooded by all the memories.

This is where he and his wife, Elsa, raised their two kids, Ryan, 36, and Megan, 31, when they'd come down each year for spring break.

This is where he first saw Ken Griffey Jr., hit his first home run in the Seattle Mariners' old spring training site in Tempe, and still has never forgotten it.

"He hit a ball to the right of the center-field backdrop," he said, "and it just kept going. The Mariners had been a little reluctant to bring him to the big leagues because they didn't want to start the clock, but he played his way onto the team, right to the Hall of Fame. That was probably the most significant moment I saw in spring training."

While the Valley is now a glittering collection of spring training complexes, hosting half of Major League Baseball's squads for nearly two months, Lakey remembers when the Cactus League was endangered, consisting of only six teams.

Much of the region itself was nearly washed away, hit with a 100-year flood back in 1980, destroying all but two major north-south road throughways, leaving Lakey stranded one day at the Milwaukee Brewers' old complex in Sun City.

"It was built on a dry riverbed," Lakey says. "I got over there, and you saw players and personnel linked arm in arm to get all of the equipment out of the clubhouse. Later that day, the clubhouse washed off its foundation and down the river."

Now, here he is 38 years later, getting ready to pack up those four suitcases, his two briefcases, grab his book - *Leo Durocher: Baseball's Prodigal Son* - from the nightstand and leave this hotel for perhaps his final spring training.

He may opt to retire, with his contract expiring after this season. It's a conversation that likely will take place this summer. The Phillies have certainly been loyal to him, as reliable as Lakey's unlikely desert oasis.

"I still remember the first day I parked here, going to a Giants game, and I thought it was part of the Civic Center," Lakey said. "Lo and behold, it was a hotel. I immediately switched over to this place, and I never left.

"People don't have any idea about this hotel. Most don't even know this place is here. But for me, it's just been such a unique part of my life.

"I'll never forget this place. Really, how could I?"

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