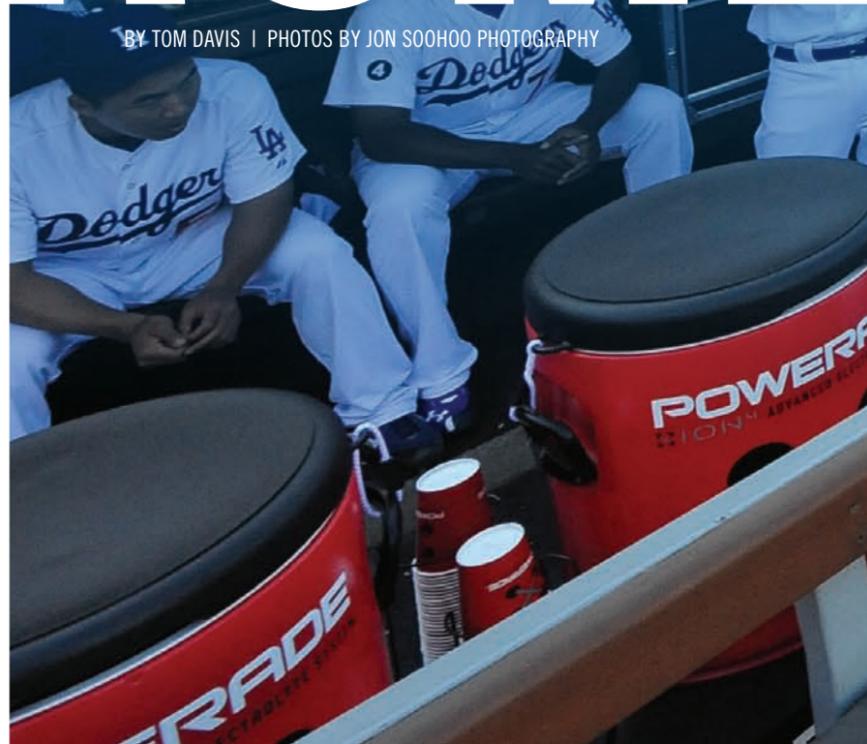


Dodger players go through many different steps in trying to find a place to live during the season.

HOME SWEET HOME

BY TOM DAVIS | PHOTOS BY JON SOOHOO PHOTOGRAPHY



MARCUS THAMES is becoming more familiar with a different fan base, and also a new city in his first year with the Dodgers.



JUAN OCAMPO/JON SOOHOO PHOTOGRAPHY

Juan Uribe and Dioner Navarro received relocation advice from the same agent prior to the season.

Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home – JOHN HOWARD PAYNE

MARCUS THAMES lives every year in thirds. He spends a third of his year at his home in Starkville, Mississippi preparing for the rigors of another season. Between Spring Training and the 81 road games played from South Beach to San Diego, he devotes another third to life on the road. The remaining third is spent in Los Angeles where he logs roughly 10 hours at the office every game day.

Little wonder then when asked what his favorite part of L.A. was, he smiled and said, “the ballpark.”

Though it seems like they live at the stadium, most Dodgers endure the same trials and tribulations that face all Angelenos when it comes to finding a place to call home. Consider that few Dodgers makes Los Angeles their home year-round, most players live in the city only during the season. Finding a short-term lease then is a key factor in their search. Security, privacy, furnishings, access to attractions and commuting time are also on the list.

The options are as diverse as the city itself, as are the ways to find a place to lay your head. Here's how the big leaguers do it.

MOVIN' ON UP

When it comes to real estate in Los Angeles, the mother-daughter team of Barbara and Nichelle Robinson are five-tool players. Their experience comes from having lived their lives splitting time between their home base in Los Angeles and stops in Cincinnati, Baltimore, Cleveland, San Francisco, Montreal, Washington and Puerto Rico alongside Hall of Famer Frank Robinson.

Both Barbara and Nichelle credit their nomadic lifestyle with giving them a unique understanding of real estate, an area they've set the standard in for over 30 years. Together they've brokered some of the largest transactions in the history of the city and their client list reads like a who's who of sports and entertainment royalty.

Magic Johnson, Denzel Washington, Kobe Bryant, Eddie Murphy, David Beckham, Julio Iglesias, Wayne Gretzky, Pete Sampras and Sugar Ray Leonard have all turned to the Robinsons when looking for home sweet home. When Dodger outfielder Matt Kemp was ready to upgrade his surroundings, so were the Robinsons.

“Matt knew the exact building he wanted, so we were there to negotiate his lease and help him get set up,” Nichelle Robinson noted. “It was during Spring Training in 2010, so I was there when the movers came and even unpacked his stuff. He also gave me a budget to furnish the place. Although he said he trusted me, he never saw the stuff I bought until it was in the house, so that was a bit nerve-wracking.”

Being married to a ballplayer for nearly 50 years, Barbara Robinson has seen big changes personally and professionally in players’ housing habits. When the family moved to Washington in 2005 when Frank managed the Nationals, they moved into their new digs sight-unseen, relying on the tastes of a trusted friend. But things weren’t always so simple for the Baseball Family Robinson.

“In Baltimore in the 60s we had a hard time finding housing because of the color of our skin,” remembered Barbara. “Landlords thought we were Brooks Robinson’s family most of the time. Then when they saw us they suddenly had nothing available. Jerry Hoffberger, the Orioles owner, stepped in and really helped us out.”

“Today’s athletes don’t worry about that. They just want things easy and simple. They’re interested in security and privacy and they trust us because they know we’ve gone through what they’re going through.”

“We see ourselves more as trusted neighbors,” Nichelle Robinson added. “More than just helping them find a place, we help them set up their lifestyle. We help them find the market, dry cleaners, housekeepers, nannies and so on. That’s just the way we are. We always appreciated when people were there to help us.”

A WOMAN’S TOUCH

With players having to spend more than six weeks in Spring Training, even though the Dodgers train in neighboring Arizona, it’s not exactly conducive to walking in and out of several properties before selecting a place to live. That’s why many players rely on their wives or girlfriends to make the decision on where they’ll live.

“My wife takes care of all that stuff, I don’t get involved,” said Thames. “She’s always taken care of it, which makes it easier on me because we’re always gone.”

In each of their big league stops in Detroit, New York and Los Angeles, the Thames family has used the suggestions of other players’ wives to inform their decisions on where to live. For this part, Marcus finds this network to be invaluable.

“The wives e-mail and talk to each other and just try to find nice places to live that are family oriented,” Thames said. “It helps out a lot. Hollywood is a little different than Mississippi.”



Matt Kemp worked with the wife and daughter of Hall of Famer Frank Robinson in finding his home in Los Angeles.



“The key is not to get ahead of yourself. You want to talk to the guys who have experience with the city. Andre Ethier knows the town real well. Between your teammates and coaches and your agent you get a pretty good idea of where you want to live. Then it takes a little while to find your favorite spots to go after the game. So those are the main things you look at. The general consensus here is to live at the beach or not too far from the stadium. I chose to be not too far from the stadium.” —AARON MILES ON MAKING HIS DECISION FOR WHERE TO LIVE IN LOS ANGELES

THE CHANGE AGENT

Though a large percentage of players rely on the women in their lives to help them set up house-keeping, others call in professionals. That’s usually when Ikem “Ike” Chukumerije’s phone starts blowing up.

Chukumerije is the President of SportsRelocation.com, a nationwide service based in Beverly Hills. Services like SportsRelocation.com specialize exclusively in working with athletes in all sports.

“I get calls from agents, business managers, publicists and even mothers,” said Chukumerije. “We transport cars, turn on utilities, set up schools . . . we’re involved until they tell us we’re done.”

Chukumerije estimates that his five-year old enterprise assists around 200 athletes per year in some form or fashion. In that time he’s seen significant changes in buying habits.

“I’d say a good 75% of the athletes are leasing now,” he said. “Three years ago maybe 75% of them were buying because even if you got traded you could quickly sell, make money and move on. It’s not like that anymore unless you have a long-term contract with guaranteed money.”

TRICKS OF THE TRADE

On July 26, 2008 Casey Blake received a call from Dodger GM Ned Colletti at 7:30 a.m. His trade to the Dodgers had been approved. Seven hours later, Blake landed in Los Angeles. That night he went 2-for-3 in his debut in Dodger Blue.

When trades occur, Traveling Secretary Scott Akasaki becomes an invaluable asset to a new acquisition.

“The rule is that once a guy comes over via trade or minor leagues, the club pays for 7 days in a hotel,” Akasaki noted.

When Blake came over from Cleveland he stayed in the hotel at his expense for the remainder of that season.

Because few players live in Los Angeles year-round, finding flexible leases and landlords are critically important. Fortunately, Akasaki keeps a list of places that are player-friendly and maintains relationships with homeowners who rent exclusively to Dodger players.

“I don’t advise anyone on where to live, but I was born and raised in L.A., so I give my opinion if they ask,” he said. “Typically guys start small with something in close proximity to the stadium. Once they’re a little more established you’ll see them move to the Hollywood hills or the beach area. In either case, we definitely don’t have MTV Cribs looking to do much with our guys.”

Traffic is a constant concern even for ballplayers who may be commuting when during non-rush hours. When Blake Hawksworth was traded from St. Louis in the offseason he quickly found out that the L.A. freeways make finding a home just like an outing on the mound. It's all about location, location, location. Blake's wife, Courtney, grew up in Orange County and the Hawksworths considered living there . . . before the commute changed their minds. That and Courtney having their first child in the days leading up to the 2011 season.

"With a newborn, we felt like I'd be in the car too much," he said. "Then I was going to stay in an apartment that James Loney lived in last year, but we have dogs, so that limited some options. Ultimately, we found a house closer to the ballpark."

CONTACT SPORT

For the Robinsons, Chukumerije and Akasaki, being on a first-name basis with agents, not to mention the athletes themselves, is critical to their success on the job. For them, relocation is a contact sport.



Director, Team Travel Scott Akasaki is in his seventh season in this position with the Dodgers, and sometimes offers players ideas of where they might want to live.

Case in point, when Juan Uribe and Dioner Navarro were searching for leases through their agent, Akasaki relied on personal contacts and recommended Bruce Dilbeck and Chelby Crawford, the brokers who managed his own recent purchase.

"We started sending online listings to their agent in Florida," Crawford recalled. "Both Juan and Dioner found homes, but we never met the players up front and neither stepped foot in either place."

Likewise, the Robinsons credit much of their success to personal contacts.

"Agents are way more involved now," said Barbara. "Matt Kemp sits near us at Laker games, but he came to us because of our friendship with his agent, Dave Stewart."

As any full-service agent will tell you, their goal is to maximize performance on the field and limit distractions off it. That means handling even the most tedious and time-consuming tasks.

"Some of the guys who come to us are 22, 23 years old," said Chukumerije. "They're not sure what to do, so they look to their agents for advice. Those agents trust us because of the relationships we've developed."

A VETERAN MOVE

A veteran of five big league teams, Aaron Miles has never called any Major League outpost home for more than three years. Coming into this season, where he'd hang his hat was the last thing on his mind.

"I wasn't even sure if I was going to make this team or not," said Miles, who came to Spring Training as a non-roster invitee. "So I wasn't really too concerned about where I was going to live."

Now in his ninth big league season, Miles prefers the measured approach, relying on word-of-mouth reports.

"The key is not to get ahead of yourself," he advised. "You want to talk to the guys who have experience with the city. Andre Ethier knows the town real well. Between your teammates and coaches and your agent you get a pretty good idea of where you want to live. Then it takes a little while to find your favorite spots to go after the game. So those are the main things you look at. The general consensus here is to live at the beach or not too far from the stadium. I chose to be not too far from the stadium."

Like his teammates, Miles prefers to keep his options open.

"I'm one of those players who probably isn't going to get the five-year deal," he said. "Hopefully I'll be here for a while, but there will definitely be no buying of houses or getting into long-term leases of any kind." ■

Copy to come is a co-host of DodgerTalk, which follows every Dodger home game on the team's flagship station, Talk Radio 790 KABC.