



AP PHOTO

one BIKE thirty BALLPARKS

by CHARLIE HAMILTON

During the 2004 baseball season, I traveled to see a game at each of the 30 Major League ballparks.

I was hoping to get a first-hand view of all the nuances of these unfamiliar ballparks — Dodger Stadium's simple elegance, the gravity-defying physics of Coors Field, the primeval magic and falling concrete of Wrigley.

But fascinating as the parks were, the fans quickly became the focus of my interest. Of course, a baseball fan hardened in the crucible of Boston cannot possibly offer a fair assessment. Further tainting my objectivity is the way I chose to travel to the ballparks — by bicycle. This limited my scheduling flexibility, and forced me to attend a number of games that even diehard fans avoided like the plague, including four inter-league snoozefests and no less than five Devil Rays games.

During the games, I usually stayed in my seat, keeping score, rather than wandering around taking notes. I can only report on what I saw — or possibly hallucinated, after a 100-mile day on the bike.

Here are my notes on all 30 ballparks, in the order I visited them, along with a grade assigned to the home-town fans.

JUNE 15 TORONTO AT SAN FRANCISCO

Everyone raves about SBC Park, and with good reason. There is no more beautiful place to watch a game than the upper deck behind home plate. The waters of McCovey Cove teem with traffic, while sailboat masts tilt rhythmically behind the left field bleachers. The brilliant blues of the sky and water beat the field into a dingy mixture of brown, green, and brick red. But it is both an architectural wonder and a horrible tragedy, because in my opinion anything that detracts from the life-and-death importance of a baseball game is the work of the Devil, Communists, or Bud Selig.

I went to the game with a bunch of old friends, so most of the chit-chat involved kids and jobs, rather than the pros and

cons of the hit-and-run with the drunks in the row behind us. Still, the crowd was surprisingly loud. They cheered on team ace Jason Schmidt, who methodically racked up 11 strikeouts. They really went wild when he got a hit.

Unlike me, though, they didn't know how to behave when things went wrong. Schmidt's base-running adventure ended abruptly when he was doubled off first on a fly ball. The crowd gave a disappointed, "Awwwww," as if their kid just screwed up in a Little League game. Nothing riled them up.

They sat respectfully as manager Dusty Baker, legendary for destroying bullpens, dragged four relievers into the game to get the final seven outs.

"What the hell is he doing?" I asked my buddy Carl. "Does he think this is the All-Star game?"

Carl just shrugged his shoulders and flagged down the ice cream guy.

The Giants have an astounding 28,000 season ticket holders, so getting the park filled isn't a problem. Teaching them to be harsh, judgmental, and unforgiving seems to be another thing altogether.

Grade: B-

Notes: These are the only fans in baseball who still cheer for Barry Bonds. That's a half grade right there.

JUNE 26/27 SAN DIEGO AT SEATTLE

What can you say about a team that locked up last place in the middle of June, but still drew over 80,000 fans for two

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