

ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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pointless games against the Padres?

"This can't be right," is what I said.

Everyone points to the new ballpark as the big draw, but that's a tiny part of it. Some argue that the team's historic 116 win season in 2001 still brings them to the game. But baseball fans are a fickle lot, and one year's darling can become next year's red-headed stepchild. The real reason they packed the place is that they are just obsessed with baseball.

They heartily cheered Jolbert Cabrera's three-RBI game and a plucky performance by spot starter Ron Villone. When fans go nuts for role players on the team, you know they aren't fair-weather yuppies. They also grumbled appropriately, getting all over high-paid Bret Boone, who was having a stinkeroo season.

Perhaps the fans' best moment came in the second game, on a warm and sunny afternoon that lulled us into complacency. Jamie Moyer was struggling through a tough outing, but the crowd gave him a break. There was plenty of good beer and food to ease the pain of another loss for a team going nowhere.

Then the news started making its way through the stands. In the middle of the game, Freddy Garcia, their best young pitcher, had been traded to the White Sox.

"Thanks a lot, Billy!" yelled an irate fan, addressing Billy Bavasi, the general manager. "Two minor leaguers for Freddy? Way to go!"

The grumbling continued as people with radios were badgered for the details. Others poked their cell phones madly for confirmation of the trade. It was an impressive display of grass-roots baseball fanaticism, the last thing I expected from West Coast fans.

Grade: A-

Notes: A few mouth-breathing knuckleheads cheered a grown man in a moose costume as he sped around the warning track on an all-terrain vehicle. It cost them the full A.



COURTESY OF CHARLIE HAMILTON

Only in California. This photo was taken at SBC Park in San Francisco, home of Barry Bonds and the Giants

JULY 15 SAN FRANCISCO AT COLORADO

Between Seattle and Denver, I pedaled 1,500 miles — across the Continental Divide six times, up and over the Rocky Mountains, and through miles of deserted and scrubby ranch land. Nearly three weeks passed between ballparks, and in the interim 200 Major League games were played.

As I cranked my way past cowboy bars and antelopes, the season marched on without me. Often I couldn't even get a decent newspaper with box scores. I just hoped I could remember how to record a double switch by the time I got to Denver.

I finally arrived, only to find another last-place

The Mariner Moose (ATV not pictured)

team. Over time, the initial enthusiasm for the Rockies has waned as they've struggled to win in a hitter's heaven and hell on earth for pitchers. The thin air a mile up makes curveballs flatten out, sliders less slippery, and cut fastballs stop bleeding. For 12 years, team management has tried to assemble a team that can win in this place and still remain competitive on the

road. So far, it's proved to be an unreachable goal.

In spite of all the pain and suffering Colorado fans have endured, they have plenty of fun at the park. The target of today's jocularity was visiting left fielder Barry Bonds.

"Hey, potato head!" yelled one guy, five or six times an inning.

"Barry! BALCO!" shouted another.

The fans were of two different minds on how to handle Mr. Bonds when he came to the plate.

"Walk the big-headed freak!" demanded 15,000.

"Boooooooo!" cried the other half whenever the catcher stood and held his glove to the side. They wanted him out of their sight as quickly as possible. Their rage warmed my heart. Only real passion can bring about such mean-spirited taunting.

True to his stubborn persona, Bonds did nothing to discourage the abuse. Throughout the game he turned to give Mr. Potato Head the stink eye.

To their credit, the Colorado fans didn't back down, even under threat of a 'roid rage attack. It takes guts to heckle a man who has so many muscles that they've run out of places to grow and take root under his scalp.

Grade: A-

Notes: Thirty thousand on a rainy

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