

ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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night for a last-place team would thrill most franchise owners, but then again, the opportunity to drink great beer and yell insults at fish-faced Barry Bonds is just too good to pass up.

JULY 22 TAMPA BAY AT MINNESOTA

My ballpark schedule had one fatal flaw — I had to ride an average of 140 miles per day to get from Denver to Minneapolis. It wasn't going to happen, which meant that I had to cheat, in the form of an overnight bus ride from Omaha.

"Keep your feet off the seats," droned the bus driver as I tried vainly to get some sleep. And: "You can't imagine what people do on this bus." I vowed never to get off the bike again.

Now I was officially in the Midwest, where the fans' behavior matched their reputation. They were polite and temperate. Nowhere did I see shirtless men with a beer in each hand accusing the left fielder of potato-headedness. They cheered respectfully, keeping any excess enthusiasm well-hidden.

Nobody (other than me) screamed for manager Ron Gardenhire's head when he batted Nick Punto second. There were no cries of outrage (save mine) when he took out unhittable Johan Santana for Juan Rincon, who promptly gave up a grand slam. There was a quiet nod of appreciation (from all but me) when Punto rewarded Gardenhire's loyalty with an unlikely home run.

These people let the game happen, appreciating the twists and turns along the way. They believed in the men who managed and played for the Twins, and if they didn't, they kept it to themselves.

While that was going on, I chewed on my beer cup and steamed. Unwilling to admit that Gardenhire might know what he was doing, I insisted he got lucky. My grouching continued through the ride home, and I don't even like the Twins.

Meanwhile, the rest of the fans went on their way, content with another win.



COURTESY OF CHARLIE HAMILTON

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.

Grade: B+

Notes: You know you're in a great baseball town when you find guys outside the ballpark selling independent fanzines. The Twins' edition is called *Game Day* and is filled with insightful baseball news, a refreshing contrast to the mind-numbing fluff in the team's official program. It almost makes it worth sitting in a garbage bag to see your team play.

JULY 30 CLEVELAND AT KANSAS CITY

An army of relatives surrounded me for the Royals game, providing a representative cross-section of Kansas City's fans.

My cousin, Corey, was a firm advocate of sabermetrics. He loved the Royals, but pooh-poohed concepts like clutch-hitting and big-game pitchers. When Mike Sweeney gets up in the ninth with a chance to win the game, he doesn't say, "He'll get a hit — I can feel it!" Rather, he'll say something like, "Sweeney bats .226 against this guy, with a .303 OBP. Time for a pinch-hitter." He dares to suggest moves no manager would make. I understand the logic, but it feels wrong.

It's like picking your friends based on their resumes.

My cousin Stewart is more like me. He's bitter and vocal about the team's habit of trading perennial all-stars like Carlos Beltran for prospects as soon as they hit free agency. He vented his frustration by ridiculing journeymen Matt Stairs. This kind of pointless yet cathartic behavior appealed to me, so I joined him. We had to shut up after Stairs knocked in four runs with a double and a homer.

My Uncle Wayne is a man of few words — the archetype of the KC fan. He remained calm, quiet, and respectful during a tough 11-inning loss that featured some classic Little League blunders. Wayne shrugged it off without a word.

Then there was my Aunt Barbara, experiencing her first Major League game in person.

"Enjoying the game?" I asked her.

"I'd rather be home washing dishes."

Grade: B+

Notes: That night, hot dogs cost only a buck and I had trouble stopping at five. They should have drawn 55,000 for the hot dogs alone, which cost them a half grade. The integral role of junk food in our national pastime *cannot* be taken for granted. ♣

Next: St. Louis and the Windy City.