



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.

SEPTEMBER 12 YANKEES AT BALTIMORE

As I pedaled past the burned-out tenements of downtown Baltimore, I kept reminding myself that I would soon be safely perched in the good seats behind home plate in the cozy confines of Camden Yards, courtesy of my friend Elizabeth.

This was the first time I had drawn the Yankees as a visiting team on my trip. It gave me a clear conscience to root for the Orioles, and an opportunity to measure their fans by the quality of their Yankee hating.

And there was a lot to hate. The place was crawling with loud, obnoxious fans in pinstripes. I did my best to be just like them — minus the stripes. I went on the offensive while standing in line at Boog's Barbecue Pit with Elizabeth.

"Why are so many of you here? You come to steal the Orioles again?" I asked the flabby Yankee fan ahead of me.

"Huh?" he said.

"Your stupid Yankees weren't even in the American League until you stole the team from Baltimore," I said, turning to Elizabeth, but speaking loud enough for the nearest 50 people to hear. "These dopey Yankee fans don't know anything about their own crummy team."

"I'm glad I didn't bring the boys," she sighed.

The O's fans were a little too content in the midst of this invasion from the Bronx. Of course, it didn't help that they were forced to sit through the Worst Game of Baseball Ever Played. It was a four-hour root canal in which the Orioles walked an eye-popping 14 Yankees. Baltimore manager and war criminal Lee

Mazzilli set a new record that day by using ten pitchers in a nine-inning game.

It was the kind of spectacle that makes you swear off baseball. The problem was the Oriole fans looked like they already had.

Grade: C

Notes: Next time your park is invaded by annoying and arrogant Yankee or Red Sox fans, start a fight. You'll feel better, and you'll get a B next time.

SEPTEMBER 15 BRAVES AT NEW YORK METS

My first experience with Mets fans came in college, where I was surrounded by them during their team's successful run in the mid 1980s. They were the loudest, most obnoxious bunch I ever met, especially after the '86 World Series game that shall not be mentioned.

Because of this, I wasn't expecting to enjoy my trip to Flushing much, but four depressing seasons had turned these fans into a humble bunch. To top it off, manager Art Howe had been fired that afternoon. In an amazing display of selflessness and, some might argue, self-humiliation, he agreed to stay on for two more weeks to finish out the string. This was unprecedented, and probably a sign that his wife wouldn't let him back in the house until the season was over.

"If I were him," I told my buddy Chief, "I'd hand the lineup card to the umpire and kick dirt on him until he threw me out. Then I'd go back into the clubhouse, drink a few beers, and take a nap."

The Art Howe sideshow caused a spike in attendance, drawing 10,000 more wise-guys than usual. And they made their feelings known. Down in the box seats, a group of fans sat with brown paper bags over their heads. On each bag was a "W" with a circle and line through it, showing their displeasure with owner Fred Wilpon.

Grade: B+

Notes: If you can your manager and draw an extra ten thousand at the park wearing bags on their heads, you have some great fans. And if they think you're a jerk, they're probably right.

SEPTEMBER 17 EXPOS AT PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia sport fans have a reputation for being the harshest on Earth, even worse than goalie-murdering Colombian soccer fans. Outraged pundits point to a few incidents to make their points:

- * Sixers fans cheered as Celtic guard Tiny Archibald lay on the Spectrum floor with a dislocated shoulder

- * Santa Claus was booed and pelted with snowballs at an Eagles game

- * The ironically named Mayor Goode once firebombed a city block

- * Hall-of-Famers Mike Schmidt and Steve Carlton were regularly booed

To be fair, Tiny always killed the Sixers, and the Eagles crowd only threw snowballs at a guy *dressed like Santa*. Still, it gives you an idea of the general level of compassion in this town. The telling story here is the Philly fan's love of booing. It is their first instinct in any situation — if attacked by a mountain lion, they would boo it into submission.

The previous year I made the trip to see the Red Sox take on the Phils.

CHARLIE'S CHART

Team	Att.	Pop.	GPYPC	WS Win	WS App.	1st Place	2nd Place
<i>Attendance & Population in millions</i>							
Expos	19.8	1.00	1.8	0	0	1*	2
Mets	21.5	4.00**	0.5	1	1	2	4
Phils	23.3	1.50	1.4	1	2	2	2
Cards	24.6	0.35	6.4	1	3	3	0
Pitt	12.7	0.33	3.5	1	1	1	2
Cubs	18.9	1.40**	1.2	0	0	2	0
Team X	19.1	0.60	2.9	0	1	1	1

* Strike Season

** Counting half the population of two-team cities

Swarms of other Boston fans were there also, and it wasn't long before a "Here we go, Red Sox" chant rose up. Like crowds in every city the Philly fans countered it by drowning it out with their own rallying cry — a long, loud boo.

In spite of the Phils' disappointing season, the fans were still coming to the park, with over 35,000 turning out on a night that seemed sure to produce a couple of thunderstorms. These weren't the same fans that I remembered, though. It was as if they had shipped them in from San Diego.

In one particularly terrible display, a weak grounder was hit to the pitcher, who promptly dropped it. His throw still beat the runner, but the first baseman didn't want to be left out of the fun, so he also dropped the ball. The Philly fans I knew would have booed until they woke up the next morning, showered, and had a cup of coffee. But this crowd shrugged it off. They had definitely lost their edge.

Grade: C+

Notes: I gave them a break on the grade since the new park is doubtless suffering from the typical freshman infestation of yuppies. If I go back in a few years and it's still filled with happy faces, I'll know something's wrong.

SEPTEMBER 22 METS AT MONTREAL

In order to understand the sad tale of the Montreal Expos, we will use the baseball fan's favorite objective measuring stick — cold, hard statistics.

Here's a look at what happened in the NL East (with one mystery guest) from 1979 to 1989, the division's golden age. In eight of eleven years one of these teams went to the World Series, without any one of them dominating the era. It was also a relatively recent and stable period, with no expansion and only one strike.

The chart above shows the attendance, population, and success measured by World Series performance and first and second place finishes. The telling stat is GPYPC (Games Per Year Per Citizen), which is a rough measure of how many times a year someone living in that city went to a game.

The first thing that jumps out is the dedication of St. Louis fans — wow! On the other side, the Mets did the worst job of coaxing people out to the park. Everyone else is in the middle of the pack, including the Cubs & Expos, despite having the poorest on-field performance. Probably the most interesting part of this chart is that you couldn't in good conscience claim that one city in particular can't support its baseball team.

Yet that is exactly what the Commissioner Bud claimed about Montreal, effectively driving a stake into the heart of the franchise and its fans.

I went to Olympic Stadium one week before the last game the Expos would ever play there. A few hundred moribund Mets fans used it as an excuse to escape Flushing and spend a few days in one of the best cities on Earth. A grand total of 3,664 were on hand to see me throw out the first pitch. Amazingly, they had more lung power than a Devil Rays' crowd five times as large. I couldn't understand what they were shouting, but they sure meant it, whatever it was.

In a close game, the guys behind me were living and dying on every pitch, rooting on a team that was going nowhere this season, and to a different city the next. Meanwhile, players and journalists complained about the lousy attendance. After what MLB did to the Expos, it's a miracle anyone came to these games at all.

Grade: B

Continued on next page

Notes: FYI, Team X is Milwaukee, the Commissioner's team. Not much different from the Expos, is it? We should have contracted the Brewers, and Bud along with them.

SEPTEMBER 26 YANKEES AT BOSTON

I pedaled up Brookline Ave for the final home game of the regular season, and on paper there wasn't much to get excited about it. It was a meaningless playoff tune-up, but since the Yankees were in town, the place was buzzing. In the third inning, this energy channeled itself into a drunk sitting two rows behind me. He burst forth with the Fenway mantra, "Yankees Suck! Yankees SUCK! Yankees Suck! YANKEES Suck! YANKEES SUCK!"

It was music to my ears.

Sadly, this misunderstood chant has been dismissed by every sports pundit as crass, pointless, and even just plain wrong. It is none of these.

Much like an ohm'ing Buddhist, the drunk behind me was experiencing a deep and powerful spiritual moment. "Ohm" is

the aural representation of the Supreme Being, incorporating the past, present, and future of all existence into one simple but perfect sound. "Yankees Suck" lacks this compact form, but, in fairness, the tortured past, present, and future of the Red Sox-Yankees rivalry is far more complicated than any universe. That's why we need two more syllables.

The spiritual release it provides is akin to the "amen" following a hymn, or James Brown screeching, "Yeah!" Pent-up frustration is released, fueling a positive group-bonding experience, rather than festering. This chant has prevented countless domestic assaults and kicked dogs, which is more than enough to justify its continued use to the two people on Earth who are still offended by the word "suck."

Many argue that this controversial word is inappropriate. How can a team that always wins suck? The solution is found in the dictionary definition: "to be contemptible or disgusting." It's as clear as rainwater — you can have 26 World Series titles *and still suck*.

Grade: A

Notes: At \$75 a ticket, the crowd isn't what it used to be.

CONCLUSION

By the time I left Fenway, I was a different man. Like the crowds in LA, Kansas City, St. Louis, and twenty other parks, I was walking out with a smile on my face. I had spent the afternoon catching up with my wife and family, enjoying the social opportunity the national pastime offered. I appreciated the little things on the field that give the game its unique appeal. The gut-wrenching was gone and a pointless, late-inning bean-ball war made me laugh instead of raising my blood pressure.

Of course, this was because the game was over in the first inning, when the Sox chased starter Kevin Brown before he could get three outs. It was a laugher from the start. I may have changed, but not THAT much. ♣

You can read more about Charlie's trip at www.hiforthecycle.org and contact him at charleeh@earthlink.net. He is currently finishing his book, Thirty Ballparks on a Bicycle.

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