



# 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.*

## AUGUST 24: CARDINALS AT CINCINNATI

The crowd of 20,000 left most of The Great American Ballpark exposed, proving that it was no Camden Yards. One glance showed that it was done on the cheap — a mass of concrete and aluminum with the sightlines and coziness of a pure ballpark, but the soul of a multipurpose stadium from the 1970s.

The generic drabness seemed to infect the fans, who were down on their team in a big way. Cincinnati had been a punching bag for the Cardinals all season, and they were resigned to it.

"He'll strike out," was the glum prediction for slugger Sean Casey by the drunk behind me.

Not content just to dump all over the players, they took to harassing other Reds

employees. A hard-hit grounder into foul territory handcuffed the ball boy, recognizable by the Reds' uniform he wore with the letters "BB" on the back. The ball shot past his glove and caromed off the wall onto the field, holding up play.

"Aw, c'mon, number 88!" wailed the drunk, as if booting that ball had cost them the pennant. I nearly blew a full beer through my nose.

It seemed nothing could undampen their enthusiasm. Even a game-winning hit in the tenth by such an unlikely hero as Darren Bragg couldn't cheer them up. There was a brief and maudlin ovation before everyone slunk out. Perhaps the knowledge that Mr. Bragg was on their team at all was too much to bear.

*Grade:* B-

*Notes:* I have a hard time faulting fans for getting all over a team that's had a

string of bad seasons. Still, if they really cared, there'd be more than 20,000 at the park to boo them.

## AUGUST 27: CARDINALS AT PITTSBURGH

Earlier in the summer, as I was pedaling through a sparsely-populated section of Idaho, a couple flew past me on a tandem. I caught up to Bob and Maggie later outside a tiny diner. The owner came out wearing a Steelers hat and spoke to us with an unmistakable Pennsylvania twang.

"Are you from Pittsburgh?" Maggie asked him.

"Sure am."

"So are we," said Bob, as if this kind of thing happened every day. The three of them then talked for 45 minutes about all the common friends they had, which

seemed to be half of Pittsburgh.

Two months and many miles later, we were all reunited at PNC Park along with Debbie, one of Maggie's high school friends. Bob's complete disinterest in the Pirates stood in stark contrast with the two women's fanaticism.

They named the full rosters of the powerhouse '70s teams, complete with batting averages, home run totals, and which players they had crushes on. It was scary. They described all the paraphernalia they had collected as members of the junior fan club. I suspect they still have it all, and that they pull out reminders of the glory days on chilly September nights while listening to the radio as the current team drops to 25 games out.

We went to the game on Dave Parker figurine night. The statuette featured the fearsome slugger in his ugly '70s-era uniform, about to drop his bat and break into a home run trot (or snort up the foul line). The team is trying to rehabilitate his image, but no one was buying it — I wound up with more of the things than I could carry. These fans want a winner, not a knick-knack.

*Grade:* B+

*Notes:* San Diegans may flock to PetCo, but Pittsburghers were more concerned about who was on the team, not where they played. If they put a winner on the field, the Pirates could sell out a game played in the rubble of Three Rivers Stadium.

### **AUGUST 29: WHITE SOX AT CLEVELAND**

The morning I rode from Akron into Cleveland, I had no idea that I was about to be treated to the best baseball game I'd ever seen.

Indians' journeyman Scott Elarton tossed a gutsy complete-game shutout, facing two over the minimum, including drilling a guy in retaliation to start the bottom of the ninth. The best part of the game was the final entry in the box score — "Time 1:56." I had barely finished my second beer when it was time to leave, but I didn't feel gypped. We had just witnessed something very rare and special, and these savvy fans realized it.

After the game, my hosts Jeff and Katie brought me to the Cleveland Baseball Federation Dinner. Bob Feller was on hand, helping run an auction to raise money for youth baseball in the Cleveland area. He signed balls and chit-chatted with fans that paid big money to be near



***In Cleveland, I saw the best baseball game I'd ever seen — and it was over in one hour and fifty-six minutes***

him. It was fun, but I had always found the blind hero-worship of ballplayers curious. I felt slightly ridiculous until Jeff's buddy sidled up with a confession.

"I stuffed the 'Slider' raffle jar," he said conspiratorially. Slider was the Indians' mascot, an obese pink Muppet that looks like Jimmy Durante. The Indians were auctioning off his services, probably expecting some parent would use him to liven up a kid's birthday party.

"I'm going to have him show up at our local bar and just sit there and watch us get hammered. It'll be great."

This was the most inspired idea since... well, there has *never* been a better idea. I finally found some fans who knew how to deal with their mascot problem. I just wish I could have been there.

*Grade:* A-

*Notes:* I would have given them an A, but some of these people used to cheer for Albert Belle.

### **SEPTEMBER 2: MARINERS AT TORONTO**

The chatter around a ballpark gives you an idea of a team's standing in its hometown. The business-like influx at Busch Stadium and the carnival around Wrigley may seem worlds apart, but both underscore the local nine's importance.

The talk outside SkyDome consisted of, "Who needs tickets?," "Hey, tickets here!," and "Free tickets!"

I finally managed to unload one of my three extras on a guy named Dan who was visiting from Jersey. He had been to the last ten games, none of which he paid to

get into.

Of the 15,000 on hand, Dan and I were the only ones who didn't act like we'd accidentally wandered into a selectman's meeting. And for a meaningless game between a couple of cellar-dwellers in September, there were plenty of sub-plots to keep a baseball fan involved.

Ichiro Suzuki was on a pace to break George Sisler's single-season record for hits. I booed him every time he came up, feeling that it was imperative for Sisler to hold onto this record, as it was pretty much all he was known for. If Ichiro beat him out, that's the last we'd ever hear of old George.

I became agitated in the bottom of the seventh when Eric Hinske came to the plate. He was a homer away from hitting for the cycle, that most pointless and difficult of baseball achievements.

"C'mon, Eric, hit a homer!" I yelled loud enough for all of SkyDome to hear.

Even Dan looked at me funny until he realized what I was going on about. Hinske, or course, popped out, making me hate him even more.

The biggest drama was whether we would see Edgar Martinez. The deadly right-handed hitter was retiring and this was his last game in Toronto. When he entered the on-deck circle to pinch-hit in the eighth, Dan and I stood up and cheered loudly. A few others realized what was going on and joined in half-heartedly.

Edgar promptly doubled and was taken out for a pinch-runner. That was it

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— he'd never set foot on this field again. There was no ovation.

*Grade:* D-

*Notes:* Baseball fans go crazy for players chasing records, cycles, and the last at-bat of a star player. As far as I could tell, there weren't any fans at this game.

### SEPTEMBER 9: DEVIL RAYS AT NEW YORK

In the Bronx, my buddy Chief and I were treated to a rarity in modern baseball, a single-entry doubleheader — two games for the price of one ticket. Surely this would attract an enormous crowd!

But when Mike Mussina stepped out onto the mound, there were about 250 people in The Stadium, almost all of them in the right-field bleachers. Chief, a bitter Red Sox fan, had a field day.

"Best fans in baseball" he bellowed. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Almost immediately, one of them came up to us. We were in the upper deck,



with a good 40 empty seats surrounding us in all directions.

"Can I see your ticket?" he asked.

"There's plenty of seats," Chief said, waving his hand at the sea of uninterrupted blue.

"You guys are in my seat," he insisted blankly.

"Friggin' guy," Chief said as we moved to an empty section. "I hate these people."

The first game wasn't even half over when we heard it again. "Can I see your tickets?"

To be fair, at this point there were only 20 empty

seats surrounding us.

I'd been to games here dozens of times and it was never like this. A big crowd was always on hand, and I could expect plenty of abuse for wearing a Red Sox hat.

"Nineteen-eighteen!" was their favorite taunt.

"Which one is your IQ?" I'd ask.

I'd had "Boston sucks!" yelled at me by small children, petite young women, and gangs of drunken frat boys. Even the

drones working the concession stands joined in. This day was different, though. I couldn't even get arrested.

In the ninth inning of the second game, one of them finally stirred, emboldened by a double-header's worth of beer. "Hey, Boston fans, why are you even here?"

"I'm going to all 30 ballparks this summer, so I *had* to come to this dump," I answered honestly.

"Hey, he just called Yankee Stadium a dump," his buddy said to him in a cartoon voice.

Chief, always a calming influence, shrieked "This place is a —hole!"

And then they came down and we talked ballparks until the game ended. That's what I like about Yankee fans. Once you get past the expletives, you can talk baseball with someone who knows his stuff.

*Grade:* C-

*Notes:* The pitiful attendance at this double-header cost Yankee fans two full grades. It's like showing up drunk for a final exam. 🍷

*Next:* the home stretch

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