



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.*

## AUGUST 3 MONTREAL AT ST. LOUIS

The throngs that once lined Red Square on May Day had nothing on these Cardinals fans, who were decked out in bright red from their caps to their socks. They filed obediently past the bronze statue of Stan Musial, who might be mistaken for Lenin, were it not for the bat in his hands.

The 90-degree temperatures and 100% humidity eventually turned the fans' faces the color of their shirts, especially after one or two of the ubiquitous Anheuser-Busch beverages. Although the sweltering heat did little to dampen their spirits, it did a



the armpits, which all appeared to be bleeding Cardinal red. This would be a bad place for an acid trip.

It also turned out to be a bad place for the home team. Defensive replacement So Taguchi dropped an easy fly ball that cost a run and pushed the game into extra innings. Nobody dared berate manager Tony LaRussa. In fact, *nothing* riled these fans. They even hung around after Tony Batista hit a grand slam for the Expos in the 12th, continuing to cheer their team, ignoring the long odds of getting any satisfaction from it.

Cardinal fans lived up to their reputation as the most loyal in baseball, but this dedication seemed to come at the expense of any form of criticism, constructive or otherwise.

Grade: B+

Notes: I would have been calling for Taguchi to be banished to Triple-A Memphis and have his name permanently stricken from the team's yearbook. The fact that Cards fans didn't do this showed a lack of revolutionary zeal. It also cost them an A-.

## AUGUST 7 CLEVELAND AT CHICAGO WHITE SOX

Approaching US Cellular Field, with its street-hardened nickname, "The Cell," makes you wonder if you'll be attending a ballgame, or serving ten to fifteen. Once there, though, you find how passionate White Sox fans are — about hating the Cubs.

Numerous t-shirts incorporated the circled "C" logo, using it to start disparag-



ing words. “Cork” was one, reminding the world of Sammy Sosa’s illegal bat. “Chokers” cleverly recalled their disastrous unraveling in the 2003 Championship Series. Not a single “Indians Suck” shirt was to be found anywhere.

“Something’s wrong with these people,” I thought, walking through the gate.

Sadly, my prediction proved accurate once I found my seat. Behind me sat two yuppie couples with their children. They were typical American families, all the way down to their grating self-obsession and complete inability to see their precious offspring for what they really were — annoying brats. The kids scrambled across the row, knocking me in the head with their sharp little elbows as their mothers sent them to beg souvenirs from the bat boy.

“Tell him you want a ball!” mom advised when they came back empty-handed.

They tore off again, poking more holes in my skull.

“Maybe they’d have better luck,” I suggested, “if you dressed them in rags instead of Ralph Lauren.”

She looked at me as if I were her cleaning lady and had just asked for a \$5 raise.

When the ninth rolled around, the yuppies were long gone and closer Shingo Takatsu came out. The rousing ovation he had earned by converting all of his save opportunities turned into withering boos when he gave up a two-run bomb to lose the game. This might still be the Midwest, but the reserved dignity of the last three ballparks was long gone. These people wanted blood. I felt right at home.

Grade: B-



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***Wrigleyville is the last place on Earth that continues the sacred tradition of the weekday afternoon start. Attending a ballgame is so much more meaningful when it isn't something you do after work, but instead of work. And since you're not on the clock, why not have a couple of cold pops?***

*Notes:* My advice? Forget about the Cubs — they're out of your league in more ways than one — and get busy with those “Indians Suck” t-shirts.

#### **AUGUST 12 SAN DIEGO AT CHICAGO CUBS**

As I navigated the busy streets of Chicago's north side, the spokes on my rear wheel kept loosening, threatening to leave me stranded short of my goal. But once I finally made it and locked everything up in Wrigley's spacious bicycle parking garage, I turned around to find 40,000 long-lost relatives.

Wrigleyville is the last place on Earth that continues the sacred tradition of the

weekday afternoon start. Attending a ballgame is so much more meaningful when it isn't something you do after work, but what you do *instead* of work. And since you're not on the clock, why not have a couple of cold pops?

For most Cubs fans, the beer-drinking begins well before the first pitch, and builds steam throughout the game, later spilling out into the hundreds of bars that circle Wrigley like a flock of vultures. The vendors who nearly outnumbered the standing-room crowd quickly unloaded their trays of Old Style to thirsty patrons whose taste buds had been numbed hours earlier.

Normally, you'd expect a scene like this to be violent, or at least sloppy. Amazingly there wasn't one fistfight, and everyone, no matter how blotto, was riveted on the game. The drunks in front of me placed bets on every at-bat, despite blood-alcohol levels which would fell a Kennedy.

“A buck he strikes out,” said Drunk #1.

“Nah, ground ball to second,” corrected Drunk #2.

“Home run!” exclaimed Drunk #3.

They happily traded dollar bills back and forth like this until the Cubbies needed to squeeze a run across late in a tie game.

“Fly ball,” said Drunk #1.

Drunk #2 turned with a sly grin. “Sac

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## ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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bunt.”

“No fair! I wasn’t paying attention,” complained Drunk #1.

“Home run!” yelled Drunk #3.

Wrigley Field conjures this kind of magic 81 times a year. Of course, most people would probably view it as one enormous failure of an AA meeting.

*Grade: A+*

*Notes:* On the way out, I passed a banner hanging from the window of an apartment building across from Wrigley Field. It read, “Boston, Thanks for Nomar.” You wouldn’t see that anywhere else.

## AUGUST 13 FLORIDA AT MILWAUKEE

Racing 106 miles along the western shore of Lake Michigan to catch my second game in two days, I kept wondering how a Major League team managed to exist in Milwaukee. Two ancient teams with generations of fans sat just to the south in Chicago, while the Twins had a ten-year jump on claiming the fans of Minnesota. But the Brewers were still here, 35 years later, with only Wisconsin to support them. How did they do it?

My hosts Pat and Hilary, a young couple with season tickets, quickly cleared up the mystery for me. Milwaukee is baseball crazy.

We settled into our seats and started knocking back the beer, which seemed like the right thing to do at a place named Miller Park. The fans were surprisingly enthusiastic, considering the Brewers were headed for another last-place finish. Their energy seemed to pick up Wes Obermueller, who delivered an unlikely quality start.

“He sucks,” Hilary told me. “He never pitches like this.”

They also weren’t too fond of Bud Selig, the longtime owner of the team and ten-time winner of *People* magazine’s “Creepiest Man Alive.”

“He runs this team like a used-car lot,” Pat said.

The real venom, though, was reserved

for a most undeserving character.

“I got kicked out of here one night,” Hilary admitted with sheepish pride. “I used a few too many f-bombs while yelling at Wes Helms.”

*Wes Helms?* He never even had 500 at bats in a season. He’s spent his whole career as the 25th guy on the bench. Why pick on a guy like that? Whenever I risk getting kicked out, I go after over-paid, washed-up veterans like Jack Clark and Dante Bichette — not the National League’s version of Lou Merloni.

“Wes Helms?” I asked. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just hate the guy.”

*Grade: A-*

*Notes:* Anyone who gets to know the last guy on the depth chart well enough to despise him is a true baseball fan. A little obsessive, maybe, but an inspiration to us all.

## AUGUST 20 SEATTLE AT DETROIT TIGERS

Whenever someone offered to go to one of these games with me, I jumped at the chance. A Detroit cop named Jerilyn had sent me an e-mail asking if I’d go to the Tigers game with her and a few of her co-workers. Even better, she knew left fielder Rondell White from working the on-field security detail and could get free tickets. If there was one city where I was glad to have a police escort to the game, this was it.

I was initially impressed with the crowd of 32,000 that turned out to see a team playing out the string on a cold, rainy night. After a couple of Jerilyn’s juicy stories, though, I couldn’t have cared less.



CHARLIE HAMILTON

### **Detroit: tough town, great fans, friendly cops**

“He’s a pervert,” she said, pointing to one of the players.

“Yeah? And what about him?” I asked, filing this precious information away.

“He’s really nice.”

“Oh,” I said, trying to hide my disappointment.

“But him? He’s a complete —.”

“Tell me all about it!”

To my disappointment, out of 25 Tigers, only two were described as total jerks. Still, this was a whole new way to enjoy a ballgame. By the time we rehashed every last bit of gossip, I had completely abandoned the action on the field. I wanted more stories.

I grilled Jerilyn about her job as a Detroit cop.

“How often do you have to use your gun?” I asked her.

“Oh, I pull it out two or three times a day,” she said as if she were talking about her lipstick.

Talk about a tough town. I’m not saying one bad thing about the fans of Detroit.

*Grade: A*

*Notes:* Great fans. I mean it. 🐾

*Next:* across the border to Canada



**Milwaukee’s Miller Park**