



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.

APRIL 2 BOSTON AT ATLANTA

Normally the crowd that comes out for a pre-season tune-up consists of guys desperate to escape a visiting mother-in-law. I expected maybe a few thousand, more concerned with drinking beer than watching the inevitable 15 pitching changes. To my pleasant surprise, 15,000 Braves fans turned out to see what their new team looked like.

Gone were old stand-bys Greg Maddux and Javy Lopez. In were youngsters like John Thomson, Jaret Wright, and Johnny Estrada. The only exception to this trend was the oldest player in baseball, Julio Franco, who single-handedly dragged the average age of the team up by a year. He was closer in years to collecting Social Security than he was to teammate

Wilson Betemit.

The fans questioned whether the Braves could take the division for a 13th straight year with so many unproven players. Most were confident that Bobby Cox could coax a first-place finish out of this team, but the key would be the pitching, under the eye of legendary pitching coach Leo Mazzone.

The stands hushed as the man himself loped out of the bullpen, imparting a few last gems to his starting pitcher as he accompanied him to the dugout. The fans seemed to understand that the season hung on whether Mazzone could work his magic on youngsters like Wright and Thomson, which makes their disgraceful behavior every October even more inexplicable.

"Hey Rich," I taunted my buddy from Atlanta. "It looks like you get as many

people for a spring training game as you do for the playoffs."

"Awww, man," he said, lowering his head. "You had to bring that up, didn't you?"

"At least you had a couple of sellouts last year, thanks to all those Cubbie fans."

The conversation ended with a flurry of expletives from Rich, but I had made my point. My people pay \$500 for a grapefruit league Yankee ticket, yet Braves fans won't shell out in October when the games matter most.

Grade: C+

Notes: The mascot, "Homer," is the worst in the league and a complete rip-off of Mr. Met. A gang of lint-heads cheered him on as he danced spastically to some awful top-40 song. It cost them a B-.

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