

ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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APRIL 11 PHILADELPHIA AT FLORIDA

To be a Marlins fan, you have a lot of obstacles to overcome. The first and most daunting is that horrible orange football stadium. Some seats are so far away that you need binoculars to tell which team is batting, let alone which player. It's a fine spot to see ten thousand Moonies get married, but it's a lousy place for a ballgame.

Another problem is that most Floridians prefer football to the national pastime. With the first kickoff of the season five months away, the Dolphins got three pages of coverage in the local paper, while the baseball team got less than one. Blatantly pandering to this crowd, the Marlins, to their shame, are the only Major League team with cheerleaders.

Lastly, Marlins fans must support the most evil man in baseball — and this is against stiff competition. Owner and Benny Hill look-alike Jeffrey Loria ran the Expos into the ground. MLB rewarded him with the Florida Marlins, who promptly won the World Series. Theologians point to this development as proof that God is dead, until they are reminded that to win their title, the Marlins beat the Yankees.

In spite of all these handicaps, the Florida fans were an enthusiastic lot. 21,000 showed up on Easter Sunday when they could have been at the beach stuffing themselves with ham and chocolate bunnies.

The game was the kind a real fan loves — a low-scoring pitcher's duel. The crowd's attention was riveted on the mound whenever Josh Beckett got two strikes. They cheered wildly when he bunted a runner over. Bullpen moves were discussed, as well as strategies for pitching Jim Thome (not at all) and David Bell (nothing but strikes down the middle). They even stuck around to watch Billy Wagner throw a meaningless eighth inning, just to hear the pop of a hundred-mile-an-hour heater.

Grade: B

Notes: I was going to give them a B+, but the fans behind the dugout went bananas for the cheerleaders.

APRIL 16 WHITE SOX AT TAMPA BAY

Before the game at Tropicana Field, I



COURTESY OF CHARLIE HAMILTON

Normally the first glimpse at the inside of a new park is a magical moment. Instead, I was greeted with drab concrete walls topped with an enormous white diaphragm that blotted out the sky. The air conditioning was set so high that thin-skinned Floridians were bundled up in long pants and sweaters. It was like watching a ballgame in a morgue.

asked myself, "What are the fans of the Devil Rays like?" By the time I found my seat, I wondered how they had any at all.

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Sitting among the core of season-ticket holders in the crowd of 12,000, I found their passion surprising. They bragged about the abilities of Carl Crawford and Rocco Baldelli, while carefully avoiding the topic of their pitching staff.

"Watch this," one said after Crawford's speed forced an errant throw, putting him on first. "Even if they pitch out, he'll get second base."

Unfortunately, they threw to first instead, picking him off — yet another disappointment for these sad souls searching for something to cheer. This crowd reminded me of early Mets fans, without the prospect of a '69 season on the horizon. But here they were anyway, even though arrogant owner Vince Naimoli gives them no reason to show up.

The final insult came in the team shop

on the way out of the park. Kids' t-shirts and hats were \$25 a pop. Sweatshirts were \$50. These were the most expensive souvenirs outside of Yankee Stadium, and people lined up not to buy them. Whole generations of Tampa kids are growing up without a D-Rays cap or any rooting interest in the team, because the owner can't see past his greed to grow his franchise.

Meanwhile, Naimoli sits in his owner's box, turning the stadium's thermostat from "COLD," past "COLDER," finally pegging it on "\$50 SWEATSHIRT."

Grade: B

Notes: I would have given them a B-, but the fact that they show at all indicates they have a serious mental imbalance, the key ingredient for any fan.

APRIL 30 CINCINNATI AT HOUSTON

After the baseball wasteland of Florida, it was a pleasant surprise to find Minute Maid Park buzzing with the kind of excitement normally found around Fenway. The crowd was revved up by the team's return from a road trip and a start by hometown hero Roger Clemens.

So far I had made offhand, disparaging comments about players of whichever team

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