

ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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I was visiting. It wasn't until I got to Houston that anyone bothered to argue with me. The topic, of course, was "Tubby" Clemens.

My sparsely constructed theory of why he sucks consisted of the following: 1) he spurned my beloved Red Sox to become the ultimate traitor, 2) he sounds like a jerk sometimes, and 3) he's fat.

Loyal Astros fans pointed out that he had already proved himself to be the best pitcher of his era, and continued to pile up numbers that could qualify him as the best ever. At this point I didn't even bother with my "Too Many Cheeseburgers" theory of why he always blew the big game. They had a point.

"Just you wait," was all I could say. "Every team he's ever played for, the fans end up turning on him. You'll see."

In the first inning, Clemens walked four batters, forcing in a run.

"Way to go, Rog!" I gloated.

But then the Houston faithful went to work. Before Roger got upset enough to reprise his early playoff exit of 1990, a chorus of boos rose up from the crowd. Their efforts at badgering the umpire were rewarded. He promptly widened the strike zone, allowing Tubby to settle down, notch another win, and get one number closer to proving he's the best.

Meanwhile, behind home plate, owner Drayton McLane shook hands with the fans. He didn't stray far from his peers in the rich seats, but it was still refreshing to see an owner thanking his customers. I tried to picture Vince Naimoli doing this in Tampa, and it ended with him getting beat up.

Grade: B+

Notes: They would have gotten an A-, but it seemed like an Astros' game was the latest fad. The conversations I overheard had more to do with gossip than baseball. In Tampa, I could ask the guy next to me how many strikeouts Paul Abbott had and get a reasonably close answer. Here, all I got was a "How many whats?"

Plus, I *hate* Roger.

MAY 3 TAMPA AT TEXAS

A few days outside of Arlington, I called to see if I could weasel some free tickets from the team.

"First-place Texas Rangers," said the



COURTESY OF CHARLIE HAMILTON

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.

COURTESY
HOUSTON
ASTROS

voice on the other end of the phone. "How can I help you?"

"Sorry, I must have the wrong number," I said, hanging up.

A quick check of the standings, though, showed that the Rangers were indeed atop the AL West. Who knew?

Apparently the fans didn't, because they moped around the park as if they were in their more customary fourth spot. Even three homers in the bottom of the first went nearly unnoticed as half of the anemic crowd of 15,000 still hadn't filed in.

The Rangers had swept the series that ended the day before against Boston (try as I might, I couldn't pedal from Houston to Arlington in two days). Expecting a flood of abuse for wearing my Red Sox hat, I was shocked at not only the fans' civility, but their complete failure to acknowledge it. Their shunning of me may have had something to do with my having pedaled 93 miles in the Texas heat without a shower, but I have a feeling I could have wandered unmolested around The Ballpark in a "Rangers Suck" t-shirt, if such a thing existed.

Finally, in the seventh inning, an usher approached with a wry little smirk on his face. He was a friendly old sort in his seventies who had spent the game helping folks find their seats and answering ques-

tions.

"Aren't you ashamed to wear that hat?" he asked, grinning.

That was it.

The most damning evidence against these fans was that they started leaving in the eighth inning while Kenny Rogers was still working a shutout. This is unheard of where I come from. In fact, leaving the game early for any reason earns you a flurry of sarcastic comments. And how often do you see a complete-game shutout these days?

Perhaps their lack of faith can be explained by the Rangers Hall of Fame ballots that were handed to fans on the way into the park. The ex-players on the ballot were not an inspiring lot; most had spent their best years elsewhere. Mickey Rivers was on it, for God's sake. The best candidate was Toby Harrah, a career .256 hitter. Maybe that's why nobody showed up for a first-place team with a history of fading.

Grade: C

Notes: I was going to give them a C-, but Rangers fans seemed pretty happy to be rid of Alex Rodriguez. I didn't see a single person wearing his jersey, so they're OK by me. 🍌

Next: across the desert to Arizona, San Diego, Los Angeles, and Oakland.