



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 ballyards — 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.

MAY 15 & 16 EXPOS AT ARIZONA

After pedaling for eleven days through the desert, you'll have to forgive me for mistaking the 32,000 fans at Bank One Ballpark for a mirage.

The season was six weeks old and the DiamondBacks had a mortal lock on the NL West cellar, with fans calling for manager Bob Brenly's head. Unlike the D-Rays, another last-place team who had also entered the league eight years ago, the D-Backs managed to draw a respectable crowd. Of course, it didn't hurt that they beat the Yankees in one of the most exciting World Series ever played. Even though that team was long gone, these dedicated people kept coming.

They keep coming, but these fans are

too content for my taste. I sat through two painful losses as the D-Backs kept giving up two-out runs and hitting into bases-loaded double plays. The kind of losses that make me hurry home to kick the dog.

But when they were over, the Arizona crowd exited calmly, chatting and smiling as if they were leaving church. I was more upset than any of them, and Arizona is either my 25th or 26th favorite team. They were less like baseball fans than Stepford Wives.

Of course, this was the first game I'd been to that the home team didn't win, so what I was seeing for the first time is that fans around the country don't treat every loss like the death of a family member.

The Arizona fans did, however, possess one quality that I hadn't come across yet. I spent five days in Phoenix and wore my Red Sox hat everywhere.

"Boston sucks." I heard it from everyone.

What did they care? We were in a different league, without a single rivalry, sports or otherwise.

Good for them, I say — contempt for other teams is part of being a proper fan.

Grade: B+

Notes: They would have gotten an A if they had booed their team or showed up with paper bags on their heads.

MAY 31 COLORADO AT SAN DIEGO

San Diego was one of the few cities where I had enough time to take in the pre-game scene around the ballyard. I hoped to find a neighborhood similar to

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