

ONE BIKE, THIRTY BALLPARKS

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Fenway's, dedicated to feeding and boozing up fans before the game, but with a California flair.

What I found was a ghost town. It wasn't until an hour before the first pitch that any of the bars filled up. When I finally found one, I was shocked. It was Memorial Day, and everyone was wearing shirts with collars and drinking martinis and wine.

"You going to the game?" I asked one of the tanned and stylish patrons.

"Yeah."

"What do you think about the matchup?" I asked, to break the ice. "Eaton is 1-6, but his ERA's not bad. What's the problem — no run support?"

He looked at me like a dolphin had just asked him to solve Fermat's Last Theorem. Without responding, he turned to his beautiful friends to continue discussing his stock portfolio. If I ever mention my investments during a pre-game drinking session, please stab me in the neck with a New York Yankees pencil.

Abandoning the bar for the real fans at Petco Park yielded further disappointment, as I couldn't find any.

"That's a double!" declared one guy as a ball shot over the head of the second baseman. The runner rightly disagreed, not even bothering to round first.

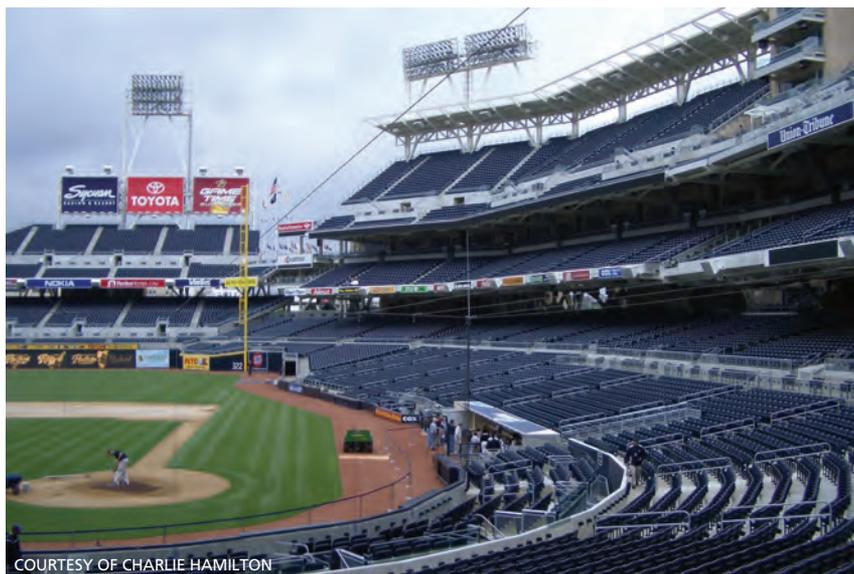
With the Padres in the field, the woman next to me yelled, "C'mon, let's get the double play!" Her enthusiasm was admirable, but there were already two outs.

In the bottom of the first, the lead runner got on and the next batter bunted. They were going up against a pitcher with an ERA over 7, and were playing for one run in the first inning! It was National League ball taken to its ridiculous extreme.

"What's with Bruce Bochy?" I asked the woman next to me. After she replied with a couple of blinks, I added, "The manager."

I just didn't fit in.

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COURTESY OF CHARLIE HAMILTON

PetCo Park. Despite the incentive to stick around for the post-game fireworks, the fans started leaving in the seventh inning, when it was still a one-run game. It was a perfect end to a perfectly unsettling experience.

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Grade: F

Notes: John Henry should take a field trip to San Diego to see the horrors that await when only yuppies can afford to go to a game. Then again, maybe that's why he hired Larry Lucchino.

JUNE 1 BOSTON AT LA ANGELS

After a 90-mile ride from San Diego to Anaheim, I was running late. I just made it to my seat in time for the national anthem, and was surprised to see how many people were in the park. Of course, most of them were Red Sox fans who would trample their



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own mothers to keep from missing the first pitch.

The tide turned, though, around the middle of the second inning when all the Anaheim fans had filed in. They easily drowned out our chants of "Here we go, Red Sox!" Still, the Angels rooters always

seemed a step behind — waiting to give it back, but never dishing it out.

Only late in the game did the Anaheim fans get worked up. Their enthusiasm, though, did not grow organically, but was coaxed out of them by the Rally Monkey — a hopping, shrieking nightmare with the creepy ability to inspire come-from-behind wins. In the 2002 postseason, he was a near-perfect six for seven. I respect the monkey, but I'd feel better about these fans if they didn't need him to get off their duffs and make a racket.

And what a horrible noise it was. Instead of yelling, clapping, and tearing the stadium apart, Angels' fans bang ThunderStix® together — small inflatable rods made from the same plastic as a beach ball. They make a sharp and artificial noise, unfit for our national pastime. They are the baseball equivalent of choosing an inflatable doll over a real, live girl.

To the credit of all the fans, nobody left early, despite the Angels' three-run lead. When the game ended on a fantastic pick by the third baseman on a Kevin Millar rocket, they stayed put to watch the replay. The cheering was even louder after they saw it in slow motion.

"Wow," I said to the guy next to me. "I didn't know Figgins could make that play."

"He didn't. Amezaga came in as a defensive replacement."

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