

Baseball Stadiums: Tiger Stadium, Atlanta, Skydome

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Philip Lowry chose the title Green Cathedrals for his book on the baseball parks of America because of the religious devotion that baseball fans seem to bring to the sport, and the majesty of many of these parks, especially the older ones. Over the past summer my wife and I had the good fortune to visit three parks, representing three distinctly different eras in baseball history.

We visited Tiger Stadium for the first time. Its style, with the double-deck outfield and overhang, and the intimacy of an old park makes it a great place for baseball. It dates from the early 20th century, and despite modifications it retains most of its original look. The ghosts of Cobb, Ruth, and Gehringer haunt the place, and one can still see Kaline and Cash in the mind's eye. The sight of the light-standard in right-center field that stopped Reggie Jackson's 1971 All-Star game home run from leaving the park entirely, was stunning. But there were more than memories. We saw Cecil Fielder hit the facing of the roof down the left-field line, just a few feet foul. His powerful swing took the air out of the ballpark, and caused a murmur in the crowd. The presence of Ken Griffey Jr. added to the sense of the timelessness of baseball.

Tiger Stadium's future is in doubt, largely because of its location. The immediate surroundings resemble a bombed out landscape of open space, and the nearest neighbors in one direction are winos and derelicts, with sub-standard housing in another direction. The Stadium needs renovation and some redesign to eliminate the obstructed seating.

We were there for a day game and the crowd itself was largely families and businessmen. It was a cool sunny day and the smell of freshly cut grass, hot dogs, and beer were enough to inspire poets. A man from a town north of Detroit sat next to us with his family. He told us he came only to day games, as the neighborhood seemed too dangerous to risk the safety of his wife and children at night. Whether this is true or not, it is one of the realities facing those who own the Tigers. These problems need to be solved. But tearing down the ballpark at Michigan and Trumble is not a solution, nor is it progress.

Two days earlier, we spent two days at Atlanta Fulton County Stadium, a place we had been several times before, although

never with as many other people. Both games were sellouts and the crowds were frenetic.

I have never much liked this Stadium. It dates from the late 50's and early 60's and comes from the urban renewal phase of stadium construction. This was the same period that produced Riverfront Stadium in Cincinnati, Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia, and several other dreadful places. It may have been the first of the cookie-cutter stadia and has always been more suited to football than baseball. Even sitting in the lower deck you are a long ways from the action. There is nothing distinctive about this Stadium, and the field shows no peculiarities of character, with the exception of sterility.

Atlanta displays one of the major downsides of the modern ball park. Extremely loud music is played before the game, between innings, and at any other break in the action. As a result an atmosphere of relaxed conversation and discussion, one of the best parts of baseball, is made extremely difficult, if not impossible. It was not always this way, but I guess this is part of the Braves' idea of the total marketing package.

Just a week after being in Tiger Stadium we headed to Toronto and Skydome, the technological wonder of the sportsworld. I am sorry that we did not see it with the top down, but weather conditions did not permit. It is an overpowering building, and we viewed it from several angles. The carpet is one strike against it, the roof is strike two, and the fact that it has 20,000 seats from which you can not see the entire field is strike three. It is really amazing to me that a modern technological wonder such as Skydome would have such a flaw.

The most peculiar thing may be the fans themselves, who are eerily quiet most of the time. They will politely applaud a strike, and they do get excited about hits and runs. But most of the time, unless the wave is going, it is very quiet.

The interior appointments are mindboggling. The lounge, the restaurant, and the hotel rooms, all in the outfield, as well as the McDonald's concession stands, give Skydome the air of anything but a ball park. It is clearly a modern sports Stadium, and as such it is a success. Its size and its architectural appointments make it an engineering achievement, but as a place for baseball it leaves much to be desired.

Skydome is one of the most expensive places to see a major league game. The cost for one game for a family of four, with a

soda and a hot dog for each, runs into the hundred-plus range. Nonetheless this season over four million people will pay the Blue Jays or the scalpers to enter this wonder of the Canadian world. All of which only proves that several million Canadians can be wrong.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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