



DEMOLITION, BLASPHEMY, AND HYPERBOLE

"Several rules of stadium building should be carved on every owner's forehead. Old, if properly refurbished, is always better than new. Smaller is better than bigger. Open is better than closed. Near beats far. Silent visual effects are better than loud ones. Eye pollution hurts attendance. Inside should look as good as outside. Domed stadiums are criminal."

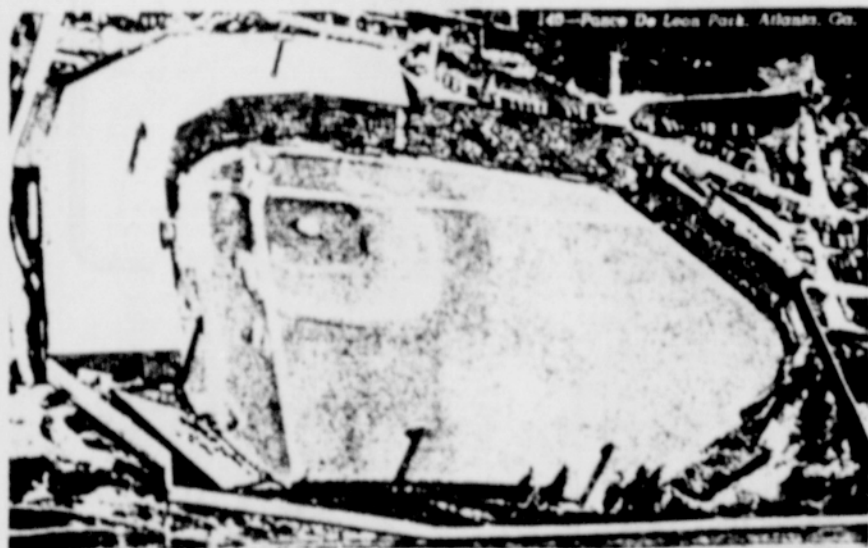
-Thomas Boswell

Regarding the ballyard, Thus Spake Boswell. But is it gospel?

Baseball, unlike other team sports, has an almost symbiotic relationship between the players on the stage upon which the grand drama is set. Ruth, after all, had a house built to his own specifications. Wynn and Cruz had their games constricted by the Astrodome. Who can say how many dingers Aaron would have hit in 24 years in the launching pad in Atlanta? And, of course, who can forget the national debate regarding the consequences of a trade sending Williams to the short right porch in Yankee Stadium and DiMaggio to the Green Monster in Fenway?

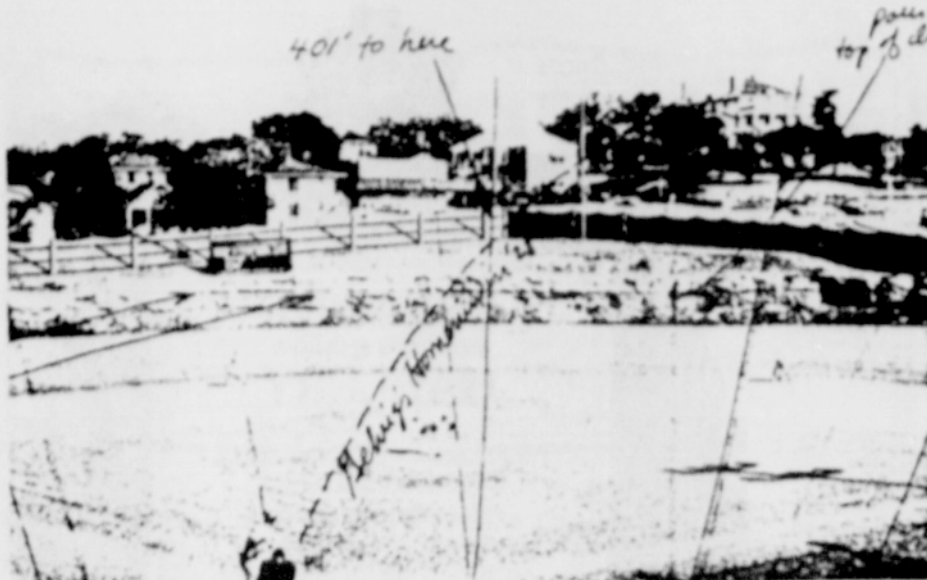
This game is unlimited in two dimensions, having no game clock and no restrictions on field size, other than sixty feet six inches for the pitcher and ninety feet on the base paths. (A third dimension, previously unhindered, has been effectively truncated by domed ceilings.) Thus, outfield and foul ground areas are radically varied and oftentimes determine the character of the teams that occupy them. The older parks generally had more eccentricities because they were built in inner cities, in great density, tailored to the space provided. This resulted in various angles, overhangs, inclines, slopes, screens, nets, flagpoles, tarps, pipes, doors and ivy to torment the unwary fielder.

Most parks in service to the "major leagues", which we can define as the American, National, and Negro Leagues and the American Association, had such quirks. Imagine the adventures you'd face playing in them.



Ponce DeLeon Park, Atlanta - In right center, a long fly ball would require you to run up a steep embankment and play the ball off a stand of magnolia trees, which were in play.

8 UPPER LEFT EDGE MAY 1997



Clark Field, Austin - A split-level outfield, with a very unfriendly 12 foot limestone cliff running from the left field foul line to right center bisecting most of the outfield. And yes, the upper tier was in play.

Memorial Stadium, Baltimore - Before June, 1954, you would have to battle a hedge on a flyball to center.



Huntington Avenue Baseball Grounds, Boston - Here you had to deal with dead sandy spots in the outfield. There was also a tool shed in center that was in play, but most likely you would first have to battle through ten deep spectators that ringed the yard.

Easter Park, Brooklyn - Call me crazy, but naming your team the "Trolley Dodgers" after the ordeals your fans have to endure just to get in the park does not spell customer service. It's like calling the Yankees the "Mugger Outrunners".



Ebbets Field, Brooklyn - Even this beloved brickpile, probably the closet thing to perfection of any ballyard, had its flaws. It had no press box for sixteen years, and the center and right field walls had enough weird angles to make snooker hustlers out of Snider and Furillo. In one pennant critical 1950 game, Pee Wee Reese hit a ball into the right field screen that fell straight down and bounced on the top of the wall several times, and then stopped dead. Reese scored on an inside-the-park home run.

Lakefront, Chicago - A pitcher's living hell, with miniscule foul lines of 180 feet to left and 196 feet to right. In 1884, the White Stockings had 142 home runs in this aberration, an astounding figure in a dead ball team.

Next Month: Part 2

It is designed to break your heart. The game begins in the spring, when everything else begins again, and it blossoms in the summer, filling the afternoons and evenings, and then as soon as the chill rains come, it stops and leaves you to face the fall alone.

- A. Bartlett Giamatti
Commissioner of Baseball 1989

Busting the Golden Hardhat

1922 - The United States Supreme Court, under direction of ex-president William Howard Taft, bestows a gift upon organized baseball unheard of then and since. U.S. Steel can't get it, General Motors doesn't have it, and it's beyond the wildest dreams of the railroads, coal mines, and shipping companies. It is an exemption to the Sherman Anti-Trust Law, on the reasoning that baseball is neither trade nor commerce. This, mind you, is a court that features such heavy-weights in jurisprudence as Oliver Wendall Holmes and Louis Brandeis, and writes this decision a mere two years after the Black Sox scandal comes to light. This just has to rate right up there with the Dred Scott vs. Sandford and Plessy vs. Ferguson as monumental judicial stupidity. It allows management a free hand in determining who plays where, when, for who, and for how much. Imagine AT&T with a similar mandate. The federal government did, filed suit, and that's why you now have all those really irritating phone commercials on TV, from Sprint and MCI.

1972 - The Supreme Court, on judicial review, says, in effect, okay, we screwed up on the baseball thing, but now it's in the hands of Congress. These various committees, aside from some useless blustering and sabre rattling, have, through their "positive inaction", effectively endorsed the status-quo.

1994 - The third strike/lock-out in thirteen years is imminent. Unaccustomed as I am to the role of apologist for a pride of millionaires, it's obvious the owners are engaged in union busting, clear and simple. They are, as exemplified by their exclusion of the entire state of Florida until 1993, also engaged in unreasonable restraint of trade. The standard argument against further expansion is "We must avoid any more dilution of talent." This is silly. Substitute "money and power" in that sentence and you're nearer the truth. After all, seventy years ago there were sixteen major league teams and hundreds of minor league teams, culled from a national population base of half what it is now. But I digress.

The owners want a salary cap in the worst way, and the only quid pro quo they are offering is revenue sharing amongst themselves. There have been no financial disclosures, no constructive proposals, virtually no good faith bargaining on their part whatsoever. They are relying on the current "era of good feeling" in the game to sway public sentiment. A fundamental tenet of management stresses that a strike or a lock-out is a failure on everyone's part. But baseball players are still nowhere near the level of labor rights that the rest of us take for granted. True, the average salary is about a million bucks a year, but this is a short-term, labor intensive business that raked in a cool \$1.9 billion in revenue last year. In the event of a lock-out, the owners are banking on your placidity and the inertia of Congress to break the union and usher in a new age of greed. Perhaps not.

Twenty-eight people do not own the game of baseball. There is one more legal term that will come into play in these labor negotiations.

"Public Interest."