

This Baseball Season, Just Take Me Out

Spring training is underway yet again, but one brokenhearted fan is searching for a new pastime.

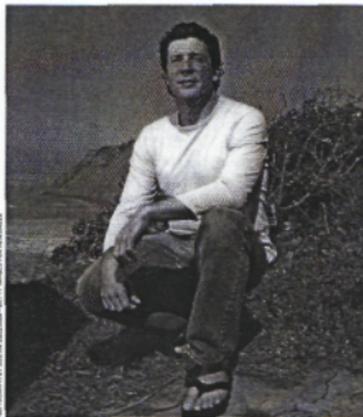
BY MATT VILLANO

I'VE HAD IT. I'M DONE. AFTER A LIFE-time of love for the game of baseball, I'm hanging up my voice box and resigning as a fan. I've canceled my family's season tickets. I refuse to attend any games in any other section or stadium, even if someone else treats or the tickets are free. I've backed out on my subscription for Internet radio, and soon will decline my MLB Extra Innings package, too. I won't be taking any baseball-related vacations, spurning semiannual trips to Camden Yards and Wrigley Field for excursions to Alaska, British Columbia or maybe Montana. I'm sure I'll miss the game every now and then, but I can sleep in on week-ends, take more hikes, read great books and eat fewer hot dogs. I'll make new friends. I'll hang with my wife. My days never have felt so free.

It's not like I had a choice about baseball; in my family, passion for the sport is in the blood, like genes for a bold personality and a big nose. For us, the first true sign of spring always has been the day pitchers and catchers report for spring training. My maternal great-grandfather sold peanuts at Yankee Stadium in the 1920s. My paternal grandfather traded in overtime pay for tickets to the Polo Grounds. Dad grew up in the shadow of Ebbets Field—on warm summer nights, with his bedroom windows open, he could hear the crowd cheering when Duke Snider went deep. I, myself, started early; my mother watched Carl Yastrzemski play at Fenway Park two months before I was born, and since then, I've visited 28 ballparks, including 22 of the current 30. I keep ticket stubs from every game in a Ziploc under my bed. At last count, I had more than 800 stubs.

In 1998, my first year home after college and four months at sea, my family bought season tickets in the Bronx. We signed up

for tier box seats, the first few rows that ring the upper deck. We ended up in Box 622, right above the right-handed batter's box. During the next four years, Box 622 became my home away from home, our neighbors my extended family. As a unit,



GOOD OLD DAYS: What I'll miss is the camaraderie and sense of place; they flowed like draft beer in Box 622

we developed rituals: the pregame pastrami-and-corned-beef sandwich at the Court Deli, the fourth-inning feast of Bronx-made Stella D'Oro cookies and our neighbor Big Dan's 15-second operatic rendition of the "Charge!" cheer. We even compiled a 30-page guide of acceptable fan behaviors titled "Baseball 101," with rules about using cell phones inside the stadium (only in emergencies), taking bathroom breaks during play (never), and participating in the dreaded "wave" (not on your life). For six months of every year, this was our reality, and it never got old.

We embraced this lifestyle even when

baseball wasn't a reason to do so. After every postseason, we met for brunch, or just for walks in the park. Each year someone threw a holiday party. Together, Box 622 began to weather the home runs and strikeouts of life. Pedro and Rosa got divorced. Sharon beat cancer. Joanne learned to samba. Dean and Dawn moved away. Big Dan launched a Web site. Swivelhead, the guy who always turned around to gawk at my heckling, became a father. In the days following September 11, 2001, when the very fabric of our city was crumbling around us, my boxmates and I found comfort in the Stella D'Oro, "Baseball 101" and each other. It didn't matter that the Yankees blew the Series that year—our passion, our hope and our love for everything that the game had brought us made us winners of a much bigger prize.

Gradually, however, the game that saved us lost its way. Management banned beer in the bleachers. Prices skyrocketed: for the price of one Poland Spring inside the stadium, we could buy three at the corner market on River Avenue. The league went Disney on us, banning the word "suck" from chants and T shirts, elevating hecklers and First Amendment fanatics alike. The last straw came in the form of steroids. According to the chorus of press reports, Jason Giambi apparently admitted to a grand jury that he had taken them, Jose Canseco purports to have told all. Barry Bonds, of course, denies everything. At the end of the day, it doesn't matter who's on the juice. For us who were reared on the sport's purity, it is the culture of cheating that is simply hell on earth.

The truth is that I won't miss baseball at all; like any failed relationship, the end of this love affair had been brewing for a while. What I'll miss, however, is everything that baseball stood for in my world: community, camaraderie and a sense of place. These are things that flowed like draft beer in Box 622. Every now and again, from my new house on the beach in northern California, I steal away to the office and log on to Big Dan's Web site to play audio files of his cheers. These moments transcend any record or title; at a time when even "low-budget" teams charge \$12 a seat, they are free reminders that sometimes the best and most enduring pastimes are the ones we create ourselves.

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