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A Field of Dreams Needs a History

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A field of dreams needs a history

Touring the new stadium

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EVEN WITH its admirable attention to architectural authenticity, Oriole Park at Camden Yards -- which I suspect will be called "the new stadium" by most natives of this generation -- is not yet a local landmark. A tour of the stadium may evoke a flash of memories more than a flood of enthusiasm for the modern-day business of baseball.

It made me remember my first visit to Memorial Stadium in the early '50s to see the old Orioles play a night game. How different that bright emerald diamond from my field of dreams while listening to Chuck Thompson describe the games on radio!

Baseball in Baltimore already had a long history, but it was all fresh when the major-league team returned in 1954. The players -- Cal Abrams, Gus Triandos, Willie Miranda, Connie Johnson -- were ours, not the owners', and they were every bit the middle-level talents whose agents negotiate multi-million-dollar contracts. Our rallying cry then (created by Jesse Linthicum, sports editor of The Sun) was born of an earlier-age innocence: "Stick with those Birds!"

The intervening years were full of now-extinct Sunday double-headers observed from splinterly bleacher benches or nickely obstructed-view seats. These were the facts of spectator life. Much more important were the games themselves, accumulating as they did into a succession of near-miss seasons. In those early days, though, the wait-'til-next-year hope still sprang eternal in the human breasts of Baltimore. "It can be done in '61!" It wasn't. But the pennant that came five years later presaged a golden era of Oriole predominance.

Each of us has his or her treasured moments, none of which will be forgotten simply by setting foot in the new ballpark. But make no mistake about it: This will be a beautiful place to watch baseball.

Every seat is a good one, with the exception of those directly behind the right-field foul pole and along the front row of the upper deck, where a clear view is severely impeded by the guard rail. And the lower deck is so much clearer to the field than at Memorial Stadium that sharply hit foul balls will be more dangerous. The seats themselves, though, are all wider and have more comfortable backs and legroom than their predecessors.

The walkways behind the stands are twice as wide as the one on 33rd Street, and the ramps are sloped at a much milder pitch. But most people will be able to walk down to their seats from the street-level entrances.

The scoreboard, a huge edifice whose complicated cantilevered understructure contributed mightily to its $7 million cost, is spectator-friendly: It will enable fans to follow all the out-of-town games, and it will likely render state-of-the-art television an integral part of the paying customer's experience.

Part of the park's $105 million price-tag also went into making the big-money boys comfortable as well. The mezzanine boxes are entered via a promenade trimmed with designer carpet and walnut paneling, highlighted by fancy flourishes of fine wood grillework. The owners' suite features a private bath and bar and a circular staircase leading from the wide-windowed viewing area to a luxury lounge below.

Not to mention the players' capacious locker-rooms, filled with the latest training amenities, a doctor's and dentist's office and a Jacuzzi.

Great pains have been taken to make the new Oriole Park an old-fashioned place -- even down to having the scoreboard clock simulate the face of the Bromo Seltzer Tower timepiece, which is clearly visible in the skyline backdrop from a first-base vantage point. The landscaping and architectural result is so pleasing that other new stadiums around the country are already trying to emulate Baltimore's. (It's no small coincidence that those in Cleveland, Denver and San Antonio are being designed by the same firm.)

But real turf, open air and architectural authenticity do not a ballpark make, at least not one with which the savvy Baltimore baseball fan will identify. The new stadium at Camden Yards will be little more than a nice-looking shell until the Orioles start winning games -- creating new memories with the crack of the bat, the diving catch, the roar of the crowd.

Fields of dreams require the sod of history.

Kenneth Lasson is a law professor at the University of Baltimore.

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