

Big League Dreams

By Victoria Taft

July, 2002

“Baseball is religion without the mischief.”

—Thomas Boswell, Washington Post sports columnist

It was well after midnight in the parking lot. The lights were half a football field away—way over there—and a group of us was off in the dark spot enclosed by a make shift cyclone fence. We waited. Soon, headlights cut the darkness. Good. They were coming.

The door “shooshed” open. Filing out of the luxury bus were these supposed polished, professional ballplayers—who were embarrassed to show their faces back home. Tony Gwynn, Goose Gossage, Graig Nettles, Steve Garvey—the entire 1984 San Diego Padres Baseball team—came ambling out, their duffles slipping over their slumped shoulders. They were down 0-2 to, when the Yankees aren’t using the moniker, “America’s Team,” the Chicago Cubs, in the National League Championship Playoff Series and they had to win three in a row to make it to the ultimate “show.” Impossible. They came home expecting no one to greet them but their wives and some surly reporters, and instead confronted dozens of smiling fans, carrying signs emblazoned with their homespun versions of “We still love you.” Players gladly talked to reporters and fans. This wasn’t an autograph session this was family therapy.

Three days later we were in the left field seats at Jack Murphy stadium to watch in jaw dropping disbelief as the Padres won their first ever National League Pennant. Players told reporters they’d been spurred on by the fans that came to cheer them in that dark parking lot.

It was September 17th 1987. Day game. Time to baptize my first born into the church of baseball. With the obligatory order of service (complete with score sheet), and dog and soda at the ready, I prepared to instruct my child on the finer points of the game that Walt Whitman proclaimed would, “repair our losses and be a blessing to us.” Garry Templeton even hit an inside-the-park-home-run—an epic event considering he was a heavy smoker. Alas, Rebecca missed Templeton’s dinger. She was busy sleeping in her baby pack. That’s an eight week old for you.

Humorist Dave Barry once said that if a woman had to choose between catching a fly and catching a baby, she’d choose the child over the ball—without considering whether there were men on base. He’s wrong. Any self-respecting woman would have caught the baby and looked the runner back to second. A person’s got to have their priorities in order.

I’ve watched Orel Hershiser break Don Drysdale’s record for consecutive scoreless innings pitched, seen Charlie Hustle dive for third, watched “Fernando’s Fadeaway” screwball get better with every inning pitched, witnessed Tony Gwynn routinely will

frozen ropes between two infielders, and marveled at Ichiro Suzuki—amazing Ichiro—confront a junk ball and program it at will as if it had eyes.

Portland Mayor, Vera Katz, still rhapsodizes over her Brooklyn Dodgers and beloved Ebbetts Field. City leaders and business executives giddily visit big league parks when they're out of Portland on business.

Anyone who's spent any time in a big league ballpark has a baseball story. Even a town like Portland—which doesn't have one—has a baseball story. So pull up a chair. You won't need your rally towel—unless you plan to use it for a good cry.

“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. Bart Giamatti, former Commissioner of Baseball.

LITTLE LEAGUE TOWN

Portland has long been first in line to pat itself on the back for its accomplishments, real or imagined. Elected officials and civil servants travel the world to tell everyone the Portland, Oregon story. First with a bottle bill! Pretty light rail trains! Leader in smart growth! Owls/fish over people! For Portland, it's always been a great idea as long as it's P.C. and somebody else was paying for it. Retailers pick up the tab for the bottle bill infrastructure, the rest of the taxpayers in the country paid for our light rail experiment, developers, home buyers and other taxpayers pay the artificially inflated bill for what passes as “smart growth” (twice if Metro is giving kick backs-er-subsidies to developers).

So, why is the city that prides itself on being “first” behind the curve on baseball?

“We're either 30 years ahead or 30 years behind on every issue,” says KFXN sports talk show host and Channel 8 sportscaster, Colin Cowherd.

Portland's not lacking in intellect and not lacking in money. It's lacking in ambition. [Because of that] baseball is a pipe dream—in my lifetime anyway.”

Put another way: when it comes to baseball, Portland doesn't have the cajones to step up to the plate and swing for the seats.

“Portland has a little league mentality,” declares Jim Mark, a local business leader with real estate development firm, Melvin Mark and Company.

“Sometimes we think too small, we don't look at the big picture.”

Oldtimers will remember that Portland was almost first in the northwest with major league baseball AND football. In 1964 Portland drew a bead on becoming first city in the northwest to win major league baseball and football franchises. The so-called “Delta Dome,” a 45,000 seat football and baseball complex, was proposed to be built at Delta Park. Both major league baseball and professional football were expanding at the time and Portland leaders were sure of their “Field of Dreams” plans.

Public cheerleading by Oregon Journal sports columnist George Pasero and business leaders such as Glenn Jackson to pass the \$25 million bond issue to build it led another noted sports columnist of the day, Royal Brougham, of the Seattle Post Intelligencer, to break out his worry beads,

“Talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, but no action. What has become of something we used to call the Seattle spirit? ...It may not be long before thousands of us will be beetling down to Oregon to watch the NY Yankees play the Portland Beavers in the World Series. Sometimes you wonder if can't-can't-can't is replacing the go-go-go which made this richly endowed city vibrant and beautiful and great.”

On a ballot full of bond measures, Portland voters narrowly turned down the Delta Dome. By 1969 Seattle had its major league Pilots. Even after the rocky years with the Mariners, the “go-go-go” city has never looked back.

And Portland? Forty years later we're still talking about getting a baseball team and a decent ball yard. Royal Brougham's city of “can't-can't-can't” migrated south leaving Portland fans to cry in their beer.

While in the club car.

On the train.

To Seattle.

To watch the Mariners play in their new ballpark.

Ho Bartender! Can I get another Sodo Mojo over here?

“Baseball is a game where a curve is an optical illusion, a screwball can be a pitch or a person, stealing is legal and you can spit anywhere you like except in the umpire's eye or on the ball.”

—Jim Murray, legendary LA Times sports columnist

SCREWBALLS

The death of the Delta Dome evoked a lament and a prophecy from Pasero in a 1964 column, “What must be realized is that Portland stadium-wise is in a worse pickle than ever. As it stands now, Multnomah Stadium is only make-do, won't generate anything resembling “major league” sports...unless you're content with a couple of pro ‘exhibitions’ each year.”

Major league dreams went fallow as the Beavers and then the Mavericks stumbled their way into the 70's. No one, not city fathers, sports writers or the guy next to you on a barstool, thought major league ball would come to Portland.

The 80's brought the Phillies Triple A club, the Beavers, and then they too went away. Portland didn't get excited about baseball again until Jack and Mary Cain were persuaded to move their single A, short season, club, the Rockies, from Bend to Portland. The Cains were well known for their promotional gags. While in Bend a hot tub down the third base line was part of the stadium “luxury box” seating.

The Rockies' success with the fans gave hope to the dream of bringing major league baseball to Portland again. The Cains spoke to any group that asked, were profiled in the local papers, and became the darlings of the local media. Baseball became fun and saleable again.

A guy by the name of Lynn Lashbrook was then on the sidelines rubbing two sticks together in hopes of creating a larger spark of interest in baseball.

Lashbrook, a sports agent and former college athletic director, grew up in Kansas City and came to Portland six years ago to start a new life after a divorce. He heard talk of bringing a Triple A team to Portland, but when he found out just how big the metropolitan area was, he was shocked that nobody was talking about bringing in major league baseball.

It wasn't tough for him to find out where the problem was. Portland was a "selfish little town" that ran sports for the rest of the big city surrounding it. The Multnomah Athletic Club, and the private Portland Oregon Sports Authority, he believed, was calling all shots—to the detriment of getting major league ball.

"Why is Portland so insulated, so arrogant about making sure we're a competitive city? We're always talking about how we'll have big traffic problems; that we'll turn into a big city. Shoot, we're already a big city. We're already stuck in traffic. Why can't we listen to our own team on the radio while we're stuck there? We should have had major league baseball ten years ago."

Lashbrook got busy. He gathered followers of the church of baseball, pulled some money together, took out ads, got local ink and airtime and began re-building the hopes of backslidden fans. He started the Portland Baseball Campaign, now called the Oregon Baseball Campaign, to lay the groundwork for the bigs to come to P-town.

Oh, and he ticked off a lot of people, too. Saying that kind of stuff out loud will do that.

While the Sports Authority was trying to twist Paul Allen's arm to land NHL Hockey, and concentrating on the big World Cup Soccer match held in Portland, Lashbrook was busy with a local architect to show how run down Civic Stadium could be reworked to accommodate big time baseball.

Suddenly, the smell of chew was in the air.

"Managing baseball is like holding a dove in your hand. Squeeze too hard and you kill it; not hard enough and it flies away."

—Tommy Lasorda, former LA Dodgers manager

SQUEEZE PLAY

Lashbrook and company were rubbing their sticks together in a stiff wind hoping to keep the major league spark burning but city hall had other concerns.

Now that someone else had already done some dreaming to re-work Civic Stadium, Katz and company needed somebody with money to get it going.

Talk of baseball contraction hadn't even started at the major league level. A couple of franchises, Montreal and Oakland, were in trouble, but the chances of getting a big league club were unknown at best. The mayor and the Sports Authority didn't care who moved in, they just need Civic overhauled and a team or teams installed there so the place would start paying for itself.

Lashbrook figured such talk would forestall any major league plans and he was right.

Syndicates were being asked to submit plans to rehabilitate the stadium and land a team. After working to build up excitement for rehabbing Civic, planning a new ballpark, and bringing major league baseball to Portland—a bona fide grand slam, Portland, the biggest market NOT to have baseball, was settling for a triple on an error.

Many people acknowledge, but are unwilling to say publicly, that Mayor Katz made sure old pal Marshall Glickman and his Portland Family Entertainment business partner, Mark Gardiner, an old city hand, won the contract. Glickman, whose father had at one time run the Blazers, was persuaded to stop looking for a place to play in Hillsboro and gussy up Civic in a taxpayer-subsidized deal that cost nearly \$40 million.

“There were some, uh, question marks about that deal,” says one sports insider who acknowledged there was some inside baseball going on at City Hall.

And what did Portland get? Depends on whom you ask.

Portland's Mr. Baseball, Jack Cain, got kicked out of his stadium and paid about \$4 million for his rights to the Portland baseball territory. Cain didn't want to go. He'd step aside for the majors, but for Triple A?

Can't fight City Hall. He and Mary packed their bags (more on that later), “He got screwed,” says one who was knowledgeable about the deal.

And what did taxpayers get: A shiny new-like Civic Stadium perfect for---what, exactly? High school and college football? Yes. Minor league soccer? Yes. Major league baseball? Nope.

Oregonian reporter, Ryan Frank, who couldn't understand the tremendously long lines for everything from bathrooms to beer when only half the new ballpark's nearly 20,000-seat capacity showed up for games asked, “[It] raises a \$38.5 million question: If the park can't gracefully serve close to its capacity, did Portlanders buy a Class A ball stadium for a Triple A team?”

The old Civic—now reborn as PGE Park, was shorn up for earthquakes, handicapped access, and was shiny and newer, but wasn't built to accommodate major league crowds. Time and money prevented it, but something else did too.

“The city lacks the will,” says Cowherd.

“Our mayor is not a pro-business mayor. She can't galvanize the masses. At some point you've got to take a chance and say ‘we want baseball’ and take a gamble and be assertive. Nobody wants baseball more than I do, but we don't have enough Lynn Lashbrooks. We don't have enough guys who believe.”

“This is a simple game: you throw the ball, you hit the ball, you catch the ball.”

—“Skip” in the 1989 movie, “Bull Durham”

WARNING TRACK

Marshall Glickman and Mark Gardiner were fired. The managers of Portland Family Entertainment paid “twice as much” for the Albuquerque Dukes than they were worth, overstated potential revenues, and negotiated an untenable lease agreement with the city that the Tribune’s Dwight Jaynes called, “a very mean lease for a minor league baseball team.”

They hemorrhaged money even though more people than ever were coming to watch Beaver games.

In October of 2001 the Goldklang Group, with principal Mike Veeck, was brought in to take over day-to-day operations. His first job was to coax Jack Cain out of retirement and into a top spot in Portland. His second was to make peace between the arguing baseball factions.

“I stupidly told them they had to get together and be friends,” he laughs, “We had a secret meeting with everyone—including a major league baseball guy.”

Veeck, whose back yard was, for a time, a patch of grass at Wrigley Field, during his father, Bill Veeck’s, ownership of the Cubs, also has inherited his father’s passion for the game. And he may have been displaying another family trait—a knack for hyperbole—when he promised major league baseball in “three to five years.” But he hastens to add, “We have to be second in line because D.C. will get a team first.” Got to keep the lawmakers happy who can take away baseball’s anti-trust exemption.

Meantime, efforts to get a \$150 million bonding measure to build a Camden Yard-like baseball park had the support of 2/3 of the Oregon’s legislators and the governor in the last session—but was never brought to the senate floor. The financing package was unique in that all the revenues spent to build it would have been more than made up by the ballplayers’ salaries, property and income taxes. It was so attractive that at least one other state plans to use the model to fund a new ballpark.

The Portland Oregon Sports Authority’s, Drew Mahalic, says that kind of defeat won’t happen again because he’ll be involved.

“Coming close doesn’t mean much to me. We’ll do it more professionally next time.”

Lashbrook laughs at the ‘dis.

“Some of these guys just want their pictures up at the MAC. They want to throw out the first pitch when we finally get major league baseball. All I want to do is catch the first foul ball.”

Glad we’re all friends now.

Veeck admits there’s a ways to go. Five sites have been identified for a future ballpark if PGE Park can’t be expanded—the lead site being the Portland Public School District

Headquarters near the Rose Garden in Northeast Portland. Talk of tearing down Memorial Coliseum and replacing it with a baseball park has been squelched by plans to turn it into a sports complex for recreational athletes.

And Veeck dreams of getting Portland in the big leagues one day soon, “I think there’s a tremendous amount of skepticism here. [But] you’ve got to dream. Dreams are possible.”



“The one constant through all the years has been baseball. This game is part of our past. It reminds us of all that once was good, and what could be again.”

—James Earl Jones as Terence Mann, *Field of Dreams*, 1989