

Take Me Out to the Nosebleeds

By WILL LEITCH

OCT. 6, 2015

WHEN I was a kid, if I had completed my week's worth of chores, my dad had a reward for me. He'd wake me up at 6 a.m. on Sunday and say: "Good work this week. Get in the car." We'd pack the cooler, turn the radio to KMOX and drive the two-plus hours from central Illinois to the old Busch Stadium in St. Louis. Then we would wait in line.

The old Busch Stadium — a massive concrete AstroTurf-ed monolith, just as charming as its current successor, the "new" Busch Stadium — had a policy: General-admission tickets to the bleachers were sold two hours before first pitch, and they cost only six bucks. For an electrician from farm country Illinois trying to get his son into baseball, this was too good a deal to pass up.

But it required an all-day commitment: Two-hour drive, two hours in line and then a sprint through the gates. Only the truest fans were willing to occupy the cheapest seats. Not surprisingly, we saw the same people in line every Sunday and cheered the Cardinals on with them, from seemingly miles away in the Busch Stadium bleachers. We even shared binoculars.

My father is retired now, and because he invested wisely, he can afford closer seats. We still go to games together, but now we sit farther down, where you can order beers from your seat and see the right fielder Jason Heyward's arm muscles ripple. Everything is set up for us: We don't even start walking toward the stadium from the bar down the street until five minutes before first pitch. We sit in our assigned seats every game.

And you know what? Different people sit next to us every time. Sometimes they're even, the horror, Cubs fans.

A friend has season tickets in the upper concourse, Section 434. He never misses a game, and neither does his whole row. Sometimes I'll go up and see him. Sitting in the upper

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deck has always been seen as an object of ridicule in popular culture — think of Bob

Uecker’s line “I must be in the front row!” from the famous beer [commercial](#) — but I like it up there.

In my years as a fan, and as a sportswriter who eschews the press box at every opportunity, I’ve found it a far more engaging place to watch a game than down with all the fancy folks in business attire clutching tickets that were comped by whatever corporation they’re in town for a meeting with. The nosebleeds are where you find the die-hards, the devotees, the ones who are watching even when their team is down. Especially when their team is down.

That is the measure of fandom, isn’t it? Look at Citi Field right now. The [Mets](#) are in the postseason for the first time since they built their charming, if a bit too Amway-ed, new stadium out in Flushing in 2009, and, as it turns out, the years the building has been open have been among the worst in the team’s history. (Which is saying something.)

If you’ve looked at Citi Field over those six years, you’ve seen more than your fair share of empty seats. But the die-hards are always there: You often see more empty seats closer to the action than you do farther away.

For the playoffs, though, Citi Field will be packed, with the most expensive tickets of the stadium’s whole life span reserved for Mets fans (and others) who seemingly just noticed that Queens hosts a baseball team. But the real noise comes from those upper deckers, the ones who were there all along. Citi Field will be packed, but let’s not kid ourselves: It’ll mostly be packed with people who weren’t there during the lean times.

Not up top, though. There is devotion to the game itself, rather than the “stadium experience,” up there as well. The amenities in the upper deck are always more sparse: No ordering from your seat up in Section 538, no sir. There are fewer concessions, fewer

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restrooms, fewer distractions to keep the kids occupied — something many stadiums have begun to offer in our short-attention-span world.

This keeps you glued to your seat, and to the game, in a way that the amenities of sitting courtside never can. You're not there for anything other than to watch the game. By sitting farther away, you are in fact more connected to the game itself.

And there is a camaraderie up there, a shared experience of being the forgotten fans — often you can't even see the video board, or your view is blocked by a big concrete plank — and sometimes it's as if you are watching the game from an entirely different location from where it's happening, just you and your seatmates.

I went to a basketball game once on election night, and because cellphone coverage is so much worse in the bleachers, none of us knew what had happened until we left the arena. When the first to finally get a signal updated the others on the election news, it was as if we were explorers from a distant land, all encased in the same small shuttle, back from the same journey. You are watching the game in a massive stadium, with thousands of other people. But up there, it feels like just you and your friends, even if they're strangers.

The next month of sports is generally the most riveting of the calendar year: the World Series, the start of the N.B.A. and N.H.L. seasons, college football and the N.F.L. Every game will have a differing roster of fans who catch the camera's eye, closer to the action.

But the real stories will be in the upper deck, from the ones who were there all along. You might not get a foul ball up there. But you'll get everything else.