

From the Bullpen

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CALLING ALL ANGELS

Men,

I cringe to even see these words in print, but I have to admit that I was starting to question my passion for Major League baseball. Heresy, I know, but the 2006 season has had too much Barry Bonds, too little action by Bud Selig and George Mitchell, and no reason to anticipate any real change to clean up baseball. Add to this the injury to Albert Pujols while well into a record-shattering course, and now the Jason Grimsley story and the ugly smear of innuendo on the game's brightest young star, and you can perhaps identify with my internal struggle over the game I have so dearly loved these oh so many years.

Now, I recognize that there may be a few sneering cynics in the brotherhood who may believe that I am a Glum Gus this campaign only because of the overwhelming suckiness of the 2006 **Senators**, and that my prospects for a first-ever Senatorial finish in the league's lower intestine may have transformed me into a premature Sore Loser. But, gentlemen, I can assure you that there is not a whit or shred of truth in this analysis. I really mean it. I do. But to all of the skeptics who believe otherwise, it's beside the point, anyway.

The point is, as I was making my way down from LAX to Anaheim this Tuesday afternoon past, fighting the brutal L.A. freeway rush-hour traffic, I was beginning to question whether it was even worth my while to make the drive to see a game. After all, it featured the last place Western Division Angels against the last place Central Division and '62 Metsian-bad Royals in a meaningless June contest, and only one player on my **Senators** team (Scot Shields) on either squad. Why bother? I mean, I thought, what would Itchie or Mouse or Magpie do if they were here in my shoes? Why not just head to my commodious Biltmore hotel room in downtown L.A. and grab a nice dinner, a perky bottle of white wine, and then have the concierge send up a couple of lesbian call girls? Again, not exactly the point, but let's just leave it at the fact that I was feeling a little bit less than properly motivated as I pulled my rental vehicle onto Gene Autry Way and into the Angels parking lot.

After a considerable walk to the ticket booth, I learned that a "pretty good seat" was available to me for exactly half of a C-note. After fighting the mean streets of L.A. for an hour and 15 minutes to get there, I wasn't going to go cheap on my ducat. As I soon learned, this was a good decision. After being misdirected by the first usher I encountered to a seat in a higher section of the stadium, and after suffering a near-Turk, I soon realized that my seat in Section

113 was down low, and I mean way down low, in the 4th row, between third base and home, a mere 15 feet away from the Angels' on-deck circle. As they took their turns on deck, I was closer to Vladdy and Garret and Darin than I get to my wife some days, and if I ever had a better seat to watch a game, I can't remember it.

Everything about the game was a pleasure of the senses. It was a gorgeous Southern California evening, with nary a trace of humidity in the air. The beer and the dog and the goobers were worthy of praise. The atmosphere inside Angel Stadium was festive, with the park fully accoutered with all of the visual trappings of baseball, and the speakers serenading us with the rock hit "Calling All Angels." Best of all, the game was a good one, with the Angels going up 1-0, the Royals tying it up, the Angels going up 2-1, and the game remaining a fight to the end, with the hometown Halos eventually outlasting the visiting Royalty by a score of 4-1. Vladdy hit a laser to left that bounced off the left field wall, but he was erased at third when he overreached and tried to turn a doubloon into a trifecta. Chone Figgins, not the most prolific hitter in the world, got on base and promptly stole second and third, then scoring on a weak grounder to third before the ball was even in third sacker Teahen's glove. This Figgins guy gets a serious jump on the pitcher and has serious speed. No wonder he has stolen 26 bases out of 28 attempted steals this season.

All of the aforementioned were well and good and undeniably pleasing, but my two favorite moments of the game — not counting when the two blonde coeds nearby rose to stretch and unselfishly brought so much joy to so many fans — were emblematic of my appreciation for this game. The first was when rookie Angels pitcher Jered Weaver blew a play covering first base and completed an entirely unnecessary Little League error, which allowed the punchless Royals to score their lone tally. After finally retiring the side, Jered walked off the mound toward the dugout — literally right at me — and covered his entire mug with his glove as he cursed loudly (presumably) at himself for giving up a run on a bonehead mistake. He is the reincarnation of Nuke LaLouche, to be sure, and a neophyte member of the many-peopled club of true flakes and colorful personalities in the game of baseball. The episode also reminded me that as my two baseballing sons learn to play this great game of baseball, both the physical and mental aspects of it, it is a game which demands perfection of those at the Major League level, and that perfection is extraordinarily hard to come by.

The second remarkable moment was after the Angels put runners on second and third with none out in the 4th inning, and former Husker Darin Erstad followed with a skillful and deliberate, if unspectacular, ground ball to the right side of the infield, scoring the runner and giving the Halos the lead, for good. To my great satisfaction, this seemingly simple (but not) and unglamorous act of Erstad in doing his job to score the run was met with an unusual amount of applause, signifying a knowledgeable baseball crowd that appreciates the finer points of the game, and does not always demand home runs from its supposed power position players. I tip my hat to the denizens of Anaheim.

Probably the truest measure of one's enjoyment of a game is how fast the innings fly past. This one seemed like it was over in twenty minutes, and if only I could have willed it to continue on, I would have. It was one of those games and one of those evenings that simply should not have had to end.

As the game unfolded, I was thinking to myself that I made a pretty good decision to go to last night's game. But come to think of it, I have never made a bad decision to go to a baseball game. And never will.

The only thing that could have made the night more perfect is if Joe and Will could have been with me for this wonderful contest. Or one of you guys, who aren't bad company at these things, either.

It's a glorious game.

See you in St. Louis, brothers.

Skipper

P.S. Oh, and the **Bears** are still in 1st place, and belated happy birthday wishes to Shamu*, who turned something close to 50 yesterday. See, it's not all about Skipper.

E.