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2008 BASEBALL PREVIEW

The Planes Above, the Mets Below

In '64, Shea Was Like 'Heaven';
Now It's Hard to Find a Saving Grace



Ron Frehm/Associated Press

Coneheads, inspired by the "Saturday Night Live" sketch, at a start by David Cone in 1988. More serious fans included Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, clapping in front row, center, during the 1969 World Series.



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At Shea Stadium, five dollars sometimes covers the cost of a seat way at the top of the upper deck but not the Sherpa to lug the oxygen tanks. The view is comparable to that from the ubiquitous low-flying planes, whose passengers, if so inclined, could reach out the window and take a bite from your Italian sausage. Buying another one would involve navigating a concourse roughly the width of a coffee table and sidestepping the bathroom line that started forming five innings earlier.

By any objective standard, Shea is bleak and outdated. It has not aged, shall we say, gracefully, its imperfections and architectural shortcomings growing more prominent over the years, particularly as glorious baseball-only parks have sprouted around the country. Those flaws are now magnified by Citi Field, the [Mets'](#) new home in 2009, whose beatific presence beyond Shea's right-center-field fence prompted Ron Darling, the SportsNet New York analyst and former Met, to make this comparison: "It's like driving a VW bus with a Maserati in the lot."

Of the municipally owned, multipurpose, symmetrical eyesores that sprung up in the 1960s and early '70s, Shea was the first to arrive, preceding those concrete monstrosities in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Cincinnati and now, alas, it is one of the last to go; after this season, it will be dismantled to clear parking space for Citi Field. And it will be missed, adored as it is reviled, if not for its aesthetic value but for the fact that, for most Mets fans, Shea is the only stadium they have ever known.

“It’s a dump,” said Gary Cohen, the Mets’ play-by-play announcer on SNY, who grew up in Parkway Village, Queens. “But it’s our dump.”

That dump has served as a vessel of nostalgia, in its 44 — soon to be 45 — seasons as the backdrop for some of the most iconic moments in the city’s sporting and entertainment history and, by association, people’s lives. It has played host to 39 postseason games, including the still-hard-to-believe Game 6 of the 1986 World Series, and provided comfort in times of distress, rumbling after [Mike Piazza’s](#) dramatic home run in the first game in New York after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. [John Lennon](#) and the other [Beatles](#) sang there. [Mick Jagger](#) shimmied. [Pope John Paul II](#) blessed.

[Nolan Ryan](#), [Tom Seaver](#), [John Smoltz](#), Billy Wagner, Ron Guidry — all threw their first major league pitches at Shea, according to the Elias Sports Bureau. It even holds significance for opposing hitters: the [Braves’ Chipper Jones](#) named his newborn son Shea, though that tribute stemmed from his success there, naturally, not for any affection he had for the place.

“I remember one day, when I was pitching against the [Dodgers](#) late in one game, the crowd was at such a fever pitch that I could literally feel the sound waves hitting my chest,” said the former Met Jack Fisher, who started the inaugural game at Shea on April 17, 1964, in a telephone interview. “I never felt that way anywhere else but at Shea.”

Ron Hunt, who started for the Mets at third base that day, said he was particularly fond of Banner Day, now defunct, when fans marched

onto the field carrying signs with often-witty slogans. His favorite? One pointing out that the Mets would be in first place if the standings were looked at upside down. Al Jackson, a pitcher on the 1964 team, said he memorized flight schedules in and out of La Guardia Airport and could tell what time it was based on which planes were flying overhead.

Darling said: “Those planes just let you know that you’re not in Norfolk or Memphis or New Orleans or wherever. This is New York City, where everyone flies into. Everyone’s flying in and out of the city that you have the privilege of playing in. That’s never been lost on me.”

The actual size of Shea is perhaps best appreciated from a distance. Every time, the approach toward the stadium, be it from the Van Wyck, the Grand Central or from aboard a 757, inspires the same impression of its size: gigantic. Even in its heyday, Shea would never win best in show in an architectural competition — Fredric Bell, the executive director of the New York chapter of the [American Institute of Architects](#), said the stadium looked as if it had been designed on an Etch A Sketch. But when it opened a few days before the 1964 World’s Fair next door, it stood tall as a symbol of the future and a monument to progress.

Unlike the Polo Grounds in Harlem, where the Mets spent their infancy, and at the remaining older ballparks, there were no steel girders to obstruct sightlines (although that came at the cost of pushing the seats farther back). The steep ramps had disappeared, replaced by escalators. Jackson recalled gazing around in the park’s infancy and thinking: “This isn’t a stadium. This is like going to heaven.”

But as the years progressed, few used that word to describe Shea. Consider that Dodger Stadium, which is two years older than Shea, still impresses with its spotless floors and pastel seats and overall

beauty. Shea? Well, there is that apple that goes up and down after Mets home runs.

“There’s no redeeming architectural value in Shea,” Bell said bluntly. “It looks like it was built in a hurry. It’s a temporary structure that has outlasted its usefulness. It’s an expansion stadium for an expansion team and a replacement stadium for a replacement team. If Yankee Stadium is like visiting the Metropolitan Museum, then Shea is like a visit to the dentist’s chair.”

To be fair, Shea played host to an era of Mets baseball that was often overshadowed by what was occurring in the Bronx. And if Yankee Stadium conjures memories of Ruth and Gehrig, DiMaggio and Mantle, Jackson and Jeter and the 26 World Series titles, then what does Shea evoke? There is 1969 and 1986 for sure, but also many lackluster seasons along with the leaky pipes, the paucity of bleacher seats as a landing spot for home runs and that calf-crushing climb to the upper deck. The flaws have been many, although in some ways they provide Shea with a personality, even if slightly perverse.

“It’s dilapidated and obsolete, sure, but I could say the same thing about the apartment where I grew up, in Bayside, Queens,” said Howie Rose, the Mets’ play-by-play broadcaster on WFAN. “That apartment was home. My memories there are happy, warm and indelible, just like they are from Shea. To me, Shea is home.”