

I don't like the Phillies or the Red Sox, so coming to this park was all about seeing a new place and getting together for the sixth annual (the third that I have been able to make) USBL League Ballpark Excursion. Our original plan was to meet at one of two famous Philly Cheesesteak places, but the lady at the hotel explained that there's no place to park around there, the lines are ridiculously long, you would need to leave around 3PM to eat one and make the 7PM game, and they weren't any better than the ones you get at Tony Luke's at the ballpark. So we all piled in a couple cars and took off for the stadium.

We were plenty early, and parking is plentiful since the football field, basketball arena and ballpark are all on adjacent property right by the interstate – beyond convenient. Entering the stadium, there is a huge statue of Robin Roberts.

Now I'm always a little fixated about ballpark food, but this was pretty amazing. Not only a large number of concession stands, but an amazing variety and lots of specialization. Having a little time to kill and some discussion about where we would all meet, I looked up the ballpark ahead of time and realized there were two other places I needed to check out: Chickie & Pete's in right field had a menu listed, with a disclaimer that not all items may be available at all times – the entire menu consisted of Crab Fries and Cheese Sauce. Crab fries turned out to be French fries with crab seasoning sprinkled on them, so I quickly moved on. All the guys got in a stupid long line at Tony Luke's, but I had something else I had to check out – Everyone talks about the Bulls BBQ thing, but another place had intrigued me, and I wanted to know what The Schmitter Sandwich was. Surprisingly enough with a name like that, there was neither creamed chip beef nor toast involved; it's a salami sandwich with about ten different things listed that they put on it. I was tempted, but there was absolutely no line, so I figured it couldn't be that good and I decided to go back and be social.

I've had many cheesesteaks in the Allentown area, all claiming to be the best. All are basically the same thing, give or take the quality of the cheese (real or wiz) or someone trying to fancy up the roll a little – the difference is that they all have a different signature sauce. So for standing in this long line, I was rewarded with the single worst cheesesteak I've ever had – the bun was greasy, there was no sauce I could find, and they had closed the sandwich before adding the onions so they were all just hanging around in the foil wrap. What actually was good was the broccoli raab I ordered on the side – broccoli sautéed with olive oil and garlic.

On our way up several escalators, we almost didn't make it. Someone had the bright idea to put the beer concession stand where it was the first one you saw at the top of the escalator, and it was starting to cause a problem that the line backed up all the way to the top of the escalator. One thing about being way up on the fourth level behind home plate (I'm pretty sure that had to be Bob Uecker sitting about twelve rows in front of us), the view was great. The stadium looks north at the city skyline, and there's a giant Phillie's sign in the north parking lot that shows up, except that it isn't lit up so you couldn't see it once the sun went down.

The pregame was both unusual and a little weird, which is always a fun combination. The Phanatic was driving around at high speed in his little four wheeler, and it was a little scary how close he was to the children's choir lining up for the National Anthem. Next was a video tribute to Pat Burrell to formally announce that he had chosen to retire as a Phillie. At the end of the

video he takes the field – and at the very last second, Chase Utley runs behind home plate and Burrell quickly throws out the first pitch – then the announcer says, “Uhh...actually, there’s another video.” The tribute continues, then announces that now he will throw out the first pitch to his longtime friend, Chase Utley...oops – he then hugs the other people that were there for the second video and gets out of Dodge.

Next, the video introduces the lineups and players for both teams, then has pop-ups of the umpires working the game with that bell sound from Law & Order – and something else I had never seen before, all the ballgirls were brought together to be introduced and pose for the big screen.

We had a great view of the jumbotron in left field, which included something I’ve never seen before – closed captioning. And it was really good until the eighth inning, when they finally messed up big as All Frayed Doe Aceves (at least they got the last name right, which seems to me like it would have been the hardest part) was introduced. Now all diamondvisions have player pictures of the batter these days, and many have corporate advertisements in the background. And it works when you have a background of locksmiths, hardware, even hospitals or financial advisors. But in the fourth inning someone wasn’t thinking – because there is Ty Wigginton’s big, boring, bland face – looking like he just woke up in time for his mug shot – and Dr. Seuss’ Lorax right next to his face. Seriously guys, you’re supposed to do that to the other team, not your own. Boston comes up in the top of the fifth and it’s the locksmith again. There must just be something about Wigginton, because he leads off in the sixth inning with that face on a big, colorful sign for Sugar House. It’s a casino, and it really didn’t look half as bad with Freddy Galvis’ big smile - but they never had anything like that for the Red Sox.

Nothing amazing in between innings on the field, but lots of dancing crowd shots – then in the eighth inning, it was time for Bongo Cam. They put these cartoon bongo drums at the bottom of the screen and people in the crowd pretend to be banging on these drums, and the cameramen position everything so well that it actually works. It somewhat makes me doubt my sanity, that it was actually so much fun to watch.

Going into the bottom of the ninth, it was finally time for something uniquely Philadelphia. The Phillies are down, so you know you’re going to get some kind of pep talk motivational video to get the crowd into it, and I had forgotten that they had the natural home advantage on this one – the coach telling Rocky how tough this fight was going to be, but that he was a champion and all that stuff. But the Red Sox got the win, we went down something like seven huge flights of steps to get out, and my only regret is that I should have had a Schmitter. Oh well, next time.

I’m still never likely to be a Philly fan, but this is a ballpark that is definitely worth going back to.