

For someone who has never driven in New York City before, the story of visiting the stadium has to start with getting there. I had not expected to be away from home for the weekend, and didn't pack the map because I can find my way to the Hampton Inn Allentown in my sleep these days. I have a mapmaker on my computer, though, so I copied down the directions and started out at 9:30 in the morning for a 1:15 game.

I made excellent time in getting to IH-95 in Newark, so all I had to do was find 495, which would take me within sight of the stadium. I was pretty sure I had gone too far, though, as I had remembered from looking at the computer map that Shea was pretty far south, and my sense of direction on an overcast day was suggesting that I was getting too close to due north of the Empire State Building. I exited to catch the George Washington Bridge, and hopped south so I could stop at a gas station or drug store or somewhere, anywhere, to find a map. Well, every exit was either to another interstate-type highway or a bunch of assorted high rises with no parking to be found. Desperate, but unusually resourceful considering the panic I was in, I remembered that Shea was next to an airport. I followed a couple planes in the air to LaGuardia, drove to the rental car returns, and got a rental car map from the office there. I then learned that New Yorkers don't want visitors, because you have to know the names of the highways rather than what number they are. Once I replaced numbers with road and landmark names, I was there in ten minutes.

I parked at Flushing Meadows Park (it's not like you have a choice, the police have every exit marked off, so whichever exit you take determines where you park, options are nonexistent – never take an exit for Shea on a game day unless you plan on parking and watching the game, because that's where you're going, resistance is futile, etc.) and walked about a half-mile, past the US Open Tennis courts. As I walked in, I was handed a Mets hat, except it had a green bill and green trim. It reminded me of one of those St. Patrick Day things, but it wasn't the 17th of the month or anything, and I went to find my seat and get lunch, as I was wandering too much to stop anywhere and eat on the way. A real nice hat, though, with nary a corporate logo to be found on it.

I came to the first concession stand, and it had four choices – Hot Dogs, Pretzels, Cracker Jacks, and peanuts. Not much of a line, but I wasn't in the mood for a hot dog and went to the next stand - Hot Dogs, Pretzels, Cracker Jacks, and peanuts. I could go on, but you get the idea. There were about 15 concession stands, and no wonder there was no line – they all served the same things. By this time I was on a mission, and I finally found one section of four stands behind home plate. One served pizza, one hamburgers, and one nachos. I had a half-hour to game time, and the line was about that long when I heard cheering on the field. Figuring I hadn't come all this way to stand in line, I accepted defeat and got a hot dog.

The cheering turned out to be for some Irish tenor that was singing Danny Boy when I got to my seat and "Happy Irish Day" was flashing on the scoreboard. Then there were some Irish dancers. They weren't bad, but I couldn't help think that if they would just

learn to do something with their arms other than just hold them down at their sides, they could be cloggers and then they'd be really entertaining. Then they had the police bagpipe corps that got out there and refused to stop that annoying excuse for music until the start of the game was delayed ten minutes.

One thing I noticed is that every event I've been to everywhere since last year, there have been mobs of people wearing NYPD and FDNY hats, shirts, whatever. Not here, though, even though I was sitting with four off-duty policemen. What I did see was Mike Piazza. Piazza shirts, hats, jerseys, the guy was everywhere. Strangely enough, Mo Vaughn got lots more cheers than even Piazza. The fans have really taken to him, so forget that trade to Boston stuff.

The one they don't like is Jeromy Burnitz. I have never been to any event where there was as much and as loud booing as I heard, and the poor guy wasn't doing anything except coming to bat! We're talking about some solid booing by 46,000 unified people, broken up only by the occasional "Burnitz, you suck!"

During another break there was a thing on the diamondvision interviewing people and asking their favorite food at the ballpark. What a surprise that everyone said the hot dogs, except for one kid that said Cracker Jacks. I told the guy next to me that it was a no-brainer, since that's the only food they serve in the park.

There was also an appearance by Cow-Bell Man. It's some guy with a Mets jersey that has Cow-Bell Man 10 on it, and during the whole game he walks around shaking hands with all the vendors until someone starts chanting Cow! Bell! Man! A few times then he rings the cow bell a little before going to shake more hands. I'm told there's a guy on the first base line that wears a Mets emblem with a Superman cape, but I didn't get to see him.

Well, later on I got to live through one of those Baseball Moments that just gives you the chills all over, like that Wild Thing scene from Major League. The game was tied 1-1 after Cincinnati batted in the top of the 9th, and all during the break there was every big pep talk from every sports movie you could think of, from Hoosiers to Rudy. As that wore down, the diamondvision shifted to show the back of a uniform – Vaughn 42, waving like a flag. Silence from the PA announcer and the stereo for about 15 seconds, then the deep classical bass of Darth Vader's theme from Star Wars plays as Mo Vaughn slowly walks out of the dugout and the place just ERUPTS. I was eager for Vaughn to pop one out of the park, and I wasn't even rooting for the Mets. I told the guy next to me that if Cincinnati's new pitcher was a rookie, he'd hit the backstop with the first pitch for sure.

It wasn't a rookie, and Bruce Chen struck out Vaughn. Then the mood swing took place after Alfonzo popped out, and the booing started. That's right, even with two outs in the bottom of the ninth of a tie game, these people just won't stop booing Burnitz. It's like

they would be disappointed if he actually hit the ball. But he didn't, he was out looking for the third time in the afternoon and the Reds scored in the 11th for the win.

At the end of the game, the lines were 20 men thick to get in to the men's rooms, as these were big time baseball fans that wouldn't leave their seats in a 1-1 extra inning game, and that was the fun of it. These were real fans, just a little psychotic when it came to Burnitz. I listened to the WFAN talk show driving back, and they had a contest as to the turning point of the game. The first three callers said it was when Bobby Valentine wrote Burnitz' name on the lineup card.