

For Baseball Heaven, Meet Me In St. Louis

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MARTIN FENNELLY

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ST. LOUIS - She's in her kitchen, pouring strong coffee for a stranger. That's what you do in her neighborhood. The owner of the home at 5447 Elizabeth Ave. had spotted you staring at the sidewalk plaque out front, the one that says her uncle, Lawrence "Yogi" Berra, grew up here.

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"People always take pictures," Mary Frances Brown said. "Sometimes I invite them in. That's this city. It's a baseball town."

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A few blocks away, across the street from the Italia-America Bocce Club, and a 10-minute drive west of the new downtown ballpark, old men gather inside an auto repair shop, their custom when the days are raw. In the spring and summer, or even at the hint of either, the shop owner, Harry Berra - no relation to Yogi - hauls lawn chairs outside. Then they get down to business.

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"We talk baseball," said Mickey Garagiola, 85, Joe's brother. "No matter what, it gets back to baseball. And it gets back to the Cardinals."

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It's another Red October on the Mississippi. The St. Louis Cardinals are back in the World Series, and so is the best baseball town in America.

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Dizzy, Daffy and Ducky's town. Stan The Man's town. The town of Brock and Gibson and Whitey and the Wizard.

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Cardinals center fielder Jim Edmonds joined the team in 2000. The first time he entered the St. Louis clubhouse, he was greeted by the mayor of St. Louis at the time, Mark McGwire.

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"Welcome to baseball heaven," McGwire said.

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Pitcher Jeff Weaver joined the Cardinals in July of this season. Not knowing anyone in town, he did one TV interview, then "went and had some Outback by myself."

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Weaver sat at the bar. A waitress walked by.

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"Hey, Jeff," she said.

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Love baseball?

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Meet me in St. Louis.

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Jack Buck On KMOX

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Rather, meet me at the Musial statue, the gathering place outside the old and now the new Busch Stadium. It's where friends hook up. No one tells anyone that they'll be easy to spot because they're wearing red, because everyone is. It's like a college football game, only it isn't.

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There are other monuments at the ballpark, including one for each of the Cardinals' nine world championships (only the Yankees have won more). But the Musial statue is the attraction. Before Game 4 of the Series on Wednesday, a game never played because of rain, there was a line of fans waiting to stand next to the bronze sculpture of the greatest Cardinal of all just to have their pictures taken with it.

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It's the best.

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It's not unlike Green Bay and its love of the Packers.

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Tigers first base coach Andy Van Slyke played four seasons in St. Louis.

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"I felt like I was playing on my high school baseball team, but making money," Van Slyke said. "You always felt like you're their guy."

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St. Louis is the baseball town where fans still stand and clap hands at the beer anthem of the brewery that once owned the team.

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St. Louis is the baseball town where fans sit in sweltering summer heat, where families plan vacations around homestands, where visits from the Cubs mean Red Alert.

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St. Louis is the baseball town where fans feel they know the players and where even the greats play not just for them, but to them. Ozzie Smith did back flips for Cardinals fans. Musial, 85, still occasionally serenades fans with "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" on his harmonica.

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St. Louis is the baseball town where parking lots hold not just Missouri license plates, but Illinois and Indiana. And Iowa and Kansas. And Arkansas, Tennessee and Kentucky. And Oklahoma.

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St. Louis is the baseball town where generations lived for summer nights and the soft strains of Jack Buck on KMOX radio, 50,000 watts covering America's heartland.

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St. Louis is the baseball town where seldom is heard a discouraging word.

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"It's like we're one of them," Weaver said.

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When McGwire, now a fallen god, was chasing Roger Maris and 61 in 1998, he was ejected from a game late in the season. Normally polite St. Louis fans hurled boos and debris at umpires. Before the next game, the iconic Buck stood at home plate with a microphone and reminded Cardinals fans of their stock.

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And so it was that baseball history was made. When the umpires took the field, they were given a standing ovation.

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Nothing Quite Like The Hill

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If there's an age-old heart to this baseball nation, it beats most loudly in the tight-knit, predominantly Italian St. Louis neighborhood known simply as "The Hill."

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Inside the Harry Berra's repair shop on The Hill, they're talking about these latest Cardinals. Mickey Garagiola tells you he's not sure anything can match the '34 Gashouse Gang.

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Another voice:

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"If my life depended on it, give me Bob Gibson on the mound."

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And another:

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"Ted Williams was better than Musial? Get outta here."

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The Broadway on The Hill might be the 5400 block of Elizabeth Avenue.

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The Berra and Garagiola homes, 5446 and 5447, face each other. Down a ways is 5405, one of Jack Buck's early St. Louis homes. All have sidewalk plaques, as if presidents slept there.

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Mary Frances' grandparents, Peter and Angelina Berra, raised five children, including Yogi and Josie, who's Mary Frances' mother. Eventually, Josie got the house. She passed it on to Mary Frances.

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A lot has changed. The brewery sold the Cardinals. Jack Buck died. KMOX no longer carries Cardinals games. Mark McGwire sure isn't the mayor anymore. And the old Busch Stadium was replaced this season, on nearly the same spot, by new Busch Stadium. Josie Berra went into assisted living. She rested on her bed the other day. She was tired, but not too tired.

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"Cardinals in six," Josie said.

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Some things never change.

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Wednesday night, the children of Red October made their way to the stadium in the chill and rain. They wore red parkas and red wool hats and held red umbrellas. The line at the Musial statue moved slowly, but happily.

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Mary Frances isn't sure she'll make any Series games. Maybe if Uncle Yogi sends tickets. But she's tired, too. In February, she found a lump on her breast. The chemotherapy is still going on. Out front, Halloween pumpkins sat on the steps. There was also a Cardinals banner. Snoot, the family Chihuahua, wore a red sweater.

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"I'm a fighter," Mary Frances said. "I got family and friends."

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She smiled.

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"And we all got the Cardinals."

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