

Sunday May 14, 2006

Bill Plaschke

Waiting Is the Hardest Part at Stadium

Home Edition, Sports, Page D-1

Sports Desk

31 inches; 1133 words

Type of Material: Column

By Bill [Plaschke](#),

The slowest person at Dodger Stadium is not Olmedo Saenz going to first or Grady Little going to the mound.

It is the concession lady going for the nachos.

She. Sighs. She. Shrugs. She. Walks. To. The. Other. End. Of. The. Counter.

It is the top of the third inning, I'm standing in a field-level line, there are 11 people ahead of me and the painfully loud rumors of a baseball game somewhere behind me.

She. Chats. With. Another. Concession. Lady. She. Walks. Back.

It's the bottom of the third inning, and now there are eight people ahead of me, and the only Dodger I have seen in 15 minutes is a dude wearing a Bill Mueller jersey crying, "How can you be out of beer lids?"

She. Frowns. She. Shrugs. She. Reaches. For. The. Chips.

It's the top of the fourth inning and I'm almost at the front of the line, and it's comforting to hear everyone still talking excitedly about the game, until you realize, they're talking about the Clipper game in Phoenix, which they can see just as well from here.

She. Stares. At. The. Computer. She. Stretches. Her. Finger.

It's the bottom of the fourth inning and finally, I've been served. The hot food is cold and the cold food is sweating, but I pump my fist and head for the condiments line.

Where. Eight. People. Wait. In. Front. Of. Me.

Welcome to the ravine at the Ravine, the black hole into which thousands disappear for long stretches each night, their ominous last words often being, "I'm going to get a Dodger Dog."

Welcome to Levy's Lost World, horrendous nightly concession lines that shed a new harsh light on old baseball favorites.

"Buy me some peanuts and Cracker Jack, I don't care if I never get back?"

Good.

Because around here, you might not.

\*

It would seem that the most important numbers in a Dodgers' recent victory against the Houston Astros would be the 9-6 final score.

For the 33,595 who actually attended the Wednesday night game at Dodger Stadium, though, the important numbers may have been different.

Like, maybe 25?

That's how many minutes I stood in a food line even though the stadium was at just 60% capacity.

Or, perhaps, 1 1/2 ?

That's how many innings I missed while trying to buy food amid the third-smallest crowd at the stadium this year.

I can't imagine what it would be like during a sellout.

Actually, I can, having heard from fans this season who have gone missing, worrying their friends and family by leaving their seat in the second inning and not returning until the fifth.

"These have become the slowest lines ever," said fan Jim Orland, sweating next to me that Wednesday night. "Standing here turns a thoroughly enjoyable evening into something very different."

Something frustrating, as you hear the unexplained cheers and strain to see the tiny television.

Something angry, as you realize you have missed 20% of the game standing in a stinking line.

Something really angry, when the guy in front of you pulls out a credit card, and the concession lady explains that the credit card machine is broken.

It has become the biggest Dodger Stadium mystery since somebody ran off with Kirk Gibson's home run ball.

In recent years, the stadium has grown by only 1,000 seats, yet the lines have seemingly grown by 1,000%.

In its 44-year history, the stadium has accommodated more than 125 million fans, yet it suddenly can't handle the dozen people standing in front of you in the beer line.

Now that the McCourts have replaced all the seats, the No. 1 stadium complaint is those lines.

The No. 1 stadium amazement is that they can't get it fixed.

"Is there room for improvement? Absolutely," said Dodgers vice president Marty Greenspun. "We are working with the Levys to make it happen."

That seems to be the problem.

Working with the Levys.

When Frank McCourt bought the team in 2004, he rid himself of the tortoise-like Aramark folks and allowed Levy Restaurants to expand its concession reach from the premium seats to the entire stadium.

It was a huge break for the growing firm.

But, since then, Levy has been purchased by Compass Group, the world's leading food service company.

And we all know what happens when that happens.

Levy did \$470 million worth of business in 2004, but I missed three batters Wednesday while a counter worker counted the single bills in her cash register.

Levy now serves 73 sporting venues, including Staples Center, but on Wednesday one Dodger Stadium stand ran out of Dodger Dogs.

Levy also serves the Kentucky Derby's Churchill Downs, and at its slow rate, the race will soon be "the most exciting twenty-two minutes in sports."

"I always think we could be quicker," said Scott Goldberg, regional director of operations for Levy Restaurants.

Then what's stopping you?

"Our hands are tied sometimes," he said.

How can it be any harder than when Arthur Food Services efficiently served Dodger Stadium folks for nearly three decades?

Goldberg talked about the small size of the concession stands. "They're not the largest stands," he said.

Well, that hasn't changed.

He talked about the difficulty in transporting food when there are only two elevators running from their eighth-floor warehouse. "Very slow elevators," he said.

And that's changed?

The McCourts have added more carts along the concourses and opened a pleasant Loge Terrace this season, but there's only so much they can squeeze into this aging box of a ballpark.

There are laws and ordinances against hot dogs and beer being sold by roaming vendors, so they can't fix that, either.

"We are still focused on improvement," said Greenspun.

But how?

The McCourts gave Levy a 15-year lease, so Dodger fans may be stuck with them for a while.

The only option is to complain, complain, complain.

There is clearly more room behind the concession stands for more vendors. There are clearly ways for workers to provide quicker service.

And why did a fan have to grab a manager the other night and demand that a collapsed cup of soda be removed from the counter where it had been dripping for an entire inning?

And if complaints don't work, threaten the Levy folks with banishment to a place where they will be booed even more: the Dodger bullpen.

In 1991, Peter O'Malley dismissed Arthur Foods after 29 years of service because he said he wanted to "expand the menu."

Well, that dream has been realized. The Dodger menu now includes nightly helpings of heel-cooling, toe-tapping frustration.

Levy runs out of everything else, why can't they run out of that?