

Remembering Field of Seams

People love to wax nostalgic about the charming old ballpark of their youth, that worthy cathedral where the boys of summer played the great American pastime (blah blah blah). But if your home field growing up was Philadelphia's Veterans Stadium, your memories are much less fanciful. How did Philly end up with the concrete ugly duckling?

By the early 1960s, Connie Mack Stadium was long in the tooth. Built when streetcars delivered fans to the ballpark, it didn't have sufficient parking to suit the automobile age. After the Phillies threatened to flee to another city, as the Athletics had done in 1954, the city got serious about building another venue.

In 1964, the first bond issue was approved — and the last payment will be made next year! — and Philadelphia was on its way to a new ballpark that would eventually cost \$45 million. To save money, one stadium would be home to two teams, the Phillies and the Eagles.

The architects' concrete bowl shape — an "octorad" — made it possible to accommodate both sports. The stadium was sleek and functional. In keeping with its purpose of being all things to all people, it was given a universal name — Veterans Stadium — to honor all veterans of all branches of the service of all times.

In the beginning, people complimented the new baby. On Opening Day in 1971, the Evening Bulletin enthused, "It's beautiful." The Montreal Expos' manager proclaimed the Vet the best new park in baseball, and congratulated Philadelphia on taking the good things from all of the other new parks. However, the new venue did little to inspire the Phillies, who finished 67-95 in the park's inaugural season.

After the novelty wore off, the Vet's attempt to serve many ended up pleasing few, as spectators in the upper decks strained to watch the game through binoculars. The extra-hard AstroTurf field surface earned the nickname "Field of Seams" because of its many gaps and uneven patches. It was blamed for numerous and even career-ending player injuries. In a way, the Vet was emblematic of its time, "with it" when it debuted in the '70s, but then, like earth shoes, quickly going out of fashion.

Were we duped? We only got 33 seasons out of the place, not much considering that Shibe Park/Connie Mack Stadium hosted 62 seasons of baseball. But we weren't the only town to fall into the multipurpose-stadium trap. Washington, New York, Houston, and others tried similar designs.

But looks aren't everything. There are the memories: Watching the newly born Phillies Phanatic prance around while we broiled in the orange, plastic seats on a steamy Sunday afternoon. Tracking stats for Greg Luzinski, Mike Schmidt, and Steve Carlton on the primitive electronic scoreboard with my parents and brother. Discovering that the Vet wasn't built for sound at a David Bowie concert. Seeing the railings wobble and shake as fans like my husband tried to egg the Phils on to victory in the '93 World Series.

Warts and all, the Phillies managed to eke out seven National League East Division titles, three National League pennants, and a World Series win during their time there.

Ten years ago, the Phillies played the final innings at the Vet, and then departed for the greener, all-natural, grass infield of Citizens Bank Park, a new old-fashioned park designed to mimic the baseball palaces of earlier times. The Vet was given a proper burial, imploded and repurposed as a parking lot.

The Vet was never charming, but that's OK. Historical places aren't always picturesque, but they can be evocative of a time. The setting of my childhood baseball memories was gritty and utilitarian, and I suppose that lends a certain authenticity to the story.