



Oakland's Coliseum proves flawed stadium doesn't deter team

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OAKLAND – On a beautiful Sunday morning to throw a bullpen, Dylan Axelrod needed pinpoint control working on the visitors' mound at O.co Coliseum.

Axelrod prefers to work the corners anyway, but on this day he dared not throw anything too inside and let it get away to an imaginary hitter. Between the White Sox starter's right arm and the box-seat railing was a steady procession of youth baseball players, their parents and their siblings soaking up their first day on the field on the host Athletics' "Little League Day."

"It was a good bullpen," Axelrod said of his session. He nevertheless admitted to the distraction of the East Bay's biggest parade of the day.

You heard it right. Here's a stadium where the bullpen is on the playing field – considerably on the field amid the yawning amount of foul territory here – and a march of thousands of visitors hugging the field's boundaries would pass by a pitcher on his throwing arm's side.

Two days earlier, dozens of high school students walking in single file in the same area came out to sing the National Anthem. Assorted Sox players near the foul line had to zig and zag through the procession to get back to their snug dugout. That in itself is a throwback to the mid-20th Century with just two steps down and no barrier or fence to fend off hot foul balls.



Foul territory is so expansive at O.co Coliseum that the visitors' bullpen location permitted a parade of Little League Day attendees to walk between the box seats and Dylan Axelrod's workout session.

Whenever you complain of tough aesthetics of the poles and men's room troughs at Wrigley Field or the overall plainness of U.S. Cellular Field, think again of O.co Coliseum, formerly Oakland-Alameda Coliseum back in the three straight World Series winners of 1972-74 and 19- and 15-inning night games the Sox played with the A's in '72.

At their worst, Wrigley and The Cell can't hold a candle to O.co for its cobbled-together look, a stadium looking as if spare parts were constructed atop an oval concrete shell that's the last remnant of the cookie-cutter multi-purpose stadiums of the 1960s.

'Mt. Davis' a top stadium eyesore

Making it worse is the monstrosity known as "Mt. Davis." That's a 1996-vintage side of the stadium, now taking up the outfield, built to help lure the NFL's Raiders back to Oakland. The upper stands of "Mt. Davis," rising more than 100 feet to the top row, are closed for baseball. They are tarped over in A's green, and used to honor the numbers of the franchise's greatest players like Reggie Jackson, Rickey Henderson and Dennis Eckersley.



"Mt. Davis" is tarped over by the A's – and will soon be similarly-covered in darker colors by the Raiders. The upper stands are closed for both baseball and football games.

When "Mt. Davis" -- named sarcastically after the late Raiders owner Al Davis -- was built, the structure replaced old-style bleachers and an open-air feeling that afforded a cityscape view of the Oakland Hills. Now, even the Raiders are abandoning the upper deck of the structure. They'll tarp it over in their own dark colors since they could not sell out the stadium with that nosebleed vantage point.

The original upper deck from foul pole to foul pole has long been closed and tarped over, too, for baseball. That meant the jumbotron scoreboard, with no place to go on "Mt. Davis," was placed at the back of the upper deck down the left-field line. An old manual scoreboard in right field had room to list just eight games at a time.

Such O.co sights offended the Eastern literary elite. When CBSSports.com's Jon Heyman covered the A's-Giants intra-bay series last week, he tweeted, "A shame the a's and giants have to play these games at the coliseum while ATandT sits empty. #shame."

Mind you, A's ownership has wanted to flee its antiquated, goofy-looking home for a long time, but has been frustrated with the inability to build a new stadium in the preferred location near San Jose, 30-some miles south. That's smack dab in the middle of Giants territory.

The world champions object to a possible intrusion into their drawing area, and desire the A's to stay put in Oakland. "They feel if we move further away, it'll hurt their business," A's managing partner Lew Wolff told Sports Business Journal.

But a new stadium is a necessity for Wolff and GM Billy Beane, who has managed his tight budget adeptly since "Moneyball" was first published, then hit the silver screen. Beane's team stormed from behind to win the AL West last season despite the majors' second smallest payroll.

"We think we could get to that if we had a new ballpark," Wolff responded in the Sports Business Journal article when asked if he could ever have a \$100 million payroll.

Giants-A's relationship like Cubs-Sox



It's a package deal if you attend A's or Giants games: You can ride those famous cable cars half-way to the stars, to paraphrase Tony Bennett.

The Giants-A's relationship is much like the Cubs-White Sox. Bolstered by their two World Series titles in the past three seasons and privately-built A T& T Park, regarded as one of the best new stadiums in the majors, the Giants are flush with revenue. They play on the fashionable side of the bay. The A's, like the Sox, are the second team in the market, in business close to the most economically depressed part of the Bay Area. Soaring violent crime in Oakland, separated from the stadium by big parking lots, sometimes overwhelms its under-staffed police department.

Interestingly, the Cubs-Sox comparison extends to the Giants-A's fan bases. Giants fans travel well since their titles. Even Wrigley Field has become colored with orange-garbed, vocal fans in the past three seasons. Less in number, the A's fans mimic Sox fans for their baseball savvy.

"We have a fan base that is quite loyal," Wolff said.

Noticing Heyman's slam at O.co, A's reliever Sean Doolittle, another Beane home-grown success as a converted first baseman, responded with his own tweet: "All I know is (when full) the O.co is one of the best atmospheres in MLB. Outdated? Yes. But fans make up for it & we love it."

Over the weekend, the reaction of A's fans to their surging team was reminiscent to the "Sox Supporters" of the 1970s in the left-field stands at old Comiskey Park.

The lowest section of seats in "Mt. Davis" has the most loyal of the loyal, with more seats occupied for a Sunday day game. In left field was a A's-green-and-gold handmade sign: "Respect Oakland Baseball." Over in right field was another similarly-colored

banner: “Coliseum Pride.” Next to that was a sign boosting A’s right fielder Josh Reddick. Fans in this section periodically waved green and gold flags.

While the ballpark crimped Wolff’s revenue, it also proved a good baseball organization can overcome a stadium’s deficiencies. The A’s produce their own players, like Doolittle. Hitters come up to the majors knowing how to work counts, long after the original “Moneyball” characters have departed. Beane expertly lands patient hitters from organizations that have mimicked him, like Reddick and Jed Lowrie (with a stop in Houston in between) from the Red Sox.

At one point last season, the A’s seemingly had more starters than rotation spots. Their pitching staff is almost always one of the AL’s leaders. Despite its ugly-duckling status, O.co is one of the game’s best pitchers’ parks with its massive foul territory and cool weather for night games. No way will a pitcher get tired due to heat here. They should be able to pitch all night in 60-degree weather that lacked the capricious winds of old Candlestick Park across the bay.

Ken Holtzman of two no-hitter Cubs fame said decades ago the contrast was astounding between the physically-draining day games of Wrigley Field and the pitcher-friendly climate of night games in Oakland. Holtzman, somewhat inconsistent and a bit of a malcontent in his last season as a Cub under the imperious Leo Durocher, achieved his potential with the three-time champion A’s of the 1970s.

Moral of the entire story is a flawed, aging ballpark – and Chicago definitely has one on the North Side – can be a detriment that nevertheless can be overcome by a good baseball organization. While they wait for the politics of a new stadium to grind its gears slowly, the A’s on the field have turned O.co to their advantage with pitching and patience at the plate.



A modern-day quest for silver in northern California leads you to this appropriately-colored man on Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco.