

LEISURE & ARTS

**Motown's Field of Dreams Closes --- With His Childhood Buddies, A Fan Bids Farewell To an 88-Year-Old Stadium**

By Bryan Gruley

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Detroit -- Now that **Tiger Stadium** has seen its last major-league baseball game, the secret can be told: None of us -- not Brownee or Eegs, not Tinman or Mac, not Zeus or Byrd -- ever worked a day for Truse Elevator Co.

For years, when the Detroit Tigers played at home, my boyhood buddies and I parked our cars, free of charge, in the weedy lot that Truse owned barely a block from the stadium. While other fans jostled for parking on the narrow streets of neighboring Corktown, we'd breeze into the lot the company kept for the exclusive use of its employees.

The attendant was Elmer, a white-haired man who wore a Tiger cap low on his big ears and listened to games on a radio in a tiny garage. "Can I help you?" he would ask, peering into our car at four or five young men in jeans and Stroh's beer T-shirts. "Truse," we'd declare, as if we were the company's executive committee, and Elmer would cheerfully wave us into a spot. Luckily, he never asked us what we supposedly did for Truse.

This week, Detroiters are mourning the end of their team's 88-year home stand at **Tiger Stadium**, which began life in 1912 as Navin Field. On the day the Tigers play their final game at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull, there are fans in the ballpark who had been there back then, and down the decades watched greats like Al Kaline and Babe Ruth, Hank Greenberg and Mark McGwire. For me, though, the stadium's passing is more about Elmer than Kaline, less about what happened on the field than what happened around it. Other fans are scheming to carry some piece of the park home with them: a wooden armrest, a baggie of bullpen dirt, a ketchup dispenser. I came merely to collect old memories. This is what I found.

Just after dawn, the neighborhood around the stadium comes to life beneath a pearl moon. Ice trucks make their rounds of the taverns, a barkeep rakes garbage from behind an overflowing dumpster, and roadies erect a stage where a rock band will play. It feels like Opening Day. But a mile to the east, the sun makes silhouettes of boom cranes hovering over Comerica Park, where the Tigers will open the 2000 season.

I can't walk these streets without thinking of my Dad. He took me to my first Tiger game when I was 10 years old. I don't remember much, except that my younger brother Dave and I stood along the first-base rail hoping for an autograph from Boston Red Sox star Carl Yastrzemski (we never mustered the courage to ask).

I recall more vividly a story my Dad tells of his own childhood. At 14, he was chosen for an all-star baseball team that had a chance to play for the city championship at **Tiger Stadium** back when it was called Briggs Stadium. First they had to beat a rival squad in a best-of-three playoff; they lost two straight. To this day it rankles my Dad that the team's captain refused to let him pitch.

"I was a pitcher, that's all I did," he has told me probably 100 times. "He put me on first base, I guess because I was taller." Every time I hear this story, I want to go back in time and make that bonehead put my Dad on the mound.

Today's game doesn't start until 4:05 p.m., but by noon hundreds of people in orange-and-blue "final game" T-shirts are filling the striped tents outside Nemo's, Hoots and Shelley's Place. The air tastes of mustard and hops and hamburger grease. Along Trumbull, beneath the towering gray walls of the stadium, fans pose for photos next to a plaque commemorating Ty Cobb as the "greatest Tiger of all."

It's funny that I don't recall seeing this plaque before, because I spent a lot of afternoons on this sidewalk when Mark "The Bird" Fidrych pitched for the Tigers in the late 1970s. The Tigers then

were as bad as they are now, but the stadium filled up when the mop-headed Fidrych, with his habit of talking to the ball, was scheduled to pitch.

On those days, my pals and I would leave work early to meet at the old Stroh brewery for a complimentary beverage. Then we'd head to the stadium, where we stood in long lines for bleacher tickets that went on sale a few hours before the game. A case of long-neck bottles doubled as a chair until we filed into the center-field bleachers, a splendid place to watch Fidrych fire knee-high bullets past flailing New York Yankees. Those were tough years for the Motor City, what with Japanese imports and high gasoline prices hammering the Big Three; Fidrych helped people forget about that for an evening.

Across the street I meet two of the friends who stood in those lines with me: Michael "Brownee" Brown, who has a ticket for me today, and Michael "Zeus" Cecile. I've known them for nearly 30 years. Brownee laments having muffed a foul ball that bounced near him at a game last week; an usher assured him that no one who missed such easy catches would be permitted to stay in that section long. Zeus recounts the day the Tigers won the 1984 World Series. He was watching on television at Nemo's when outfielder Kirk Gibson blasted a dramatic eighth-inning homer. The game wasn't over yet, but Zeus and everyone else jumped up and ran out into Michigan Avenue, yelling and clapping.

At 2:45, I ascend the ramp to the field. In an instant that never fails to surprise me, there it is, a vast and majestic cavern of blue and orange and shimmering green. Standing here, I know I'll miss this frozen moment more than anything. It's like seeing someone you love whom you haven't seen in a while; she's the same, but she makes you catch your breath a little.

Huge as the stadium seems, I feel I can see into every corner. Far off in the center-field bleachers sit my youngest sister Kim and her husband Joe; they sat there on their first date three years ago. Out in left is the fence that my friend Eegs joyfully vaulted when the Tigers clinched the 1984 East Division title; he bought himself a broken wrist, a broken ankle and a lifetime of ribbing from his buddies. Next to me, near the visitor's dugout on the first-base side, are the seats my Dad and I sat in when we took my son to his first Tiger game in 1985. Today they're occupied by a group with Ford Motor Co. scion Edsel Ford II.

The usher who put us in those seats, and who fetched my son a baseball from the field, was Mike Paluk. He's a family friend -- met my Uncle Al in the Army -- and worked as an usher here for 30 years. I find him standing in a ramp one section over, sipping a beer and sporting a bright orange usher hat. He's just a guest today; he tells me he stopped ushering five years ago so he could spend more time watching his two sons take their shot at pitching in the big leagues. They didn't quite make it, but you'd never know it listening to Paluk. Goose bumps break out on his arms as he talks about their minor-league exploits.

Brownee and I take our seats in the lower deck near first base. They remind us of why this is such a wonderful place to watch baseball: You can look into the eyes of Kansas City Royals as they sulk to the dugout after striking out. But the seats are also one of the reasons the stadium has to go: They're so cramped that it's tough to balance a hot dog and a pop without getting pickle relish on your scorecard.

Zeus, who works for one of the beer distributors that supply the stadium, drops by. I tell him I talked with a woman out by the Truse lot who said she knew Elmer. Truse is long gone, she told me, and Elmer now helps his sons park cars near one of the new casinos here.

"Zeus," I say, "wasn't it your brother who turned us on to this scam?"

"Yeah, it was Scotty," Zeus says, "but he got it from John Pond." Now there's a name from the past. John Pond is the guy who married the first girl I ever loved.

The game is about to begin. Brownee fiddles with a camera. "This gets panoramic views," he says. "I'm gonna get the first pitch."

Before the stadium lights go dark, a rookie named Robert Fick will hit a colossal grand slam to seal a Tiger victory -- the last hit in **Tiger Stadium**. Old men in white uniforms emblazoned with the Tigers' old English "D" will hobble onto the field for a final curtain call. Thundering boos will assault each mention of Comerica Park. Grown men and women will cry.

But now I'm sitting next to an old friend with a cold beer on a warm afternoon. It isn't easy to feel so happy and so sad at the same time. The leadoff hitter digs in, the pitcher kicks and deals, and Brownee's camera clicks along with the crack of a bat on a ball.

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