

# My Kind of Town

*While the NHL Winter Classic will likely move on, Wrigley Field served as the perfect site*

Having lauded the NHL Winter Classic, in a column last year, as one of the inspired new events on the North American sports calendar, I decided it was time to put my money where my pen was. Or, more accurately, to put my hand warmers where my Barcalounger was.

Last year, I watched the New Year's Day hockey game between the Buffalo Sabres and the Pittsburgh Penguins—held at Ralph Wilson Stadium in New York—from the comfort and warmth of my living room. When it was announced that this year's game would match the Detroit Red Wings and Chicago Black Hawks at Chicago's Wrigley Field—the shrine of my youth—I could not resist attending in person.

So it was that on New Year's morning, I arose early—a phrase as uncomfortable to write as the act described was to do—to catch a flight to Chicago that would have me at Wrigley Field well in advance of the dropping of the puck at noon. The game-time temperature of 27 degrees, with a wind chill factor of 5 degrees, did not deter 41,000 fans (a significant number of whom had driven from Detroit or were otherwise Red Wings fans) from creating the same neighborhood festival atmosphere that surrounds Chicago Cubs baseball games.

This was the third NHL hockey game to be played outdoors—after one in 2003 in Edmonton and last year's in Buffalo—and the first in a venue dedicated to baseball. Staging a hockey game in a baseball park presented unique challenges. For one thing, the closer to the field a fan is at a baseball game, the better. Not so with outdoor hockey. Those in the lower box seats were forced to stand in order to see over the side boards, which created a reverse domino effect that caused all rows behind them in the box seats up through the grandstand to do the same. Thus I was on

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By Bob Latham

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my feet in the third-base grandstand for three straight periods, which accomplished two things: It created an enhanced feeling of excitement, though there was plenty in the park already, and it allowed me to run in place to stay warm without people noticing. While the players clearly reveled in the atmosphere before and

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after the game, once the puck dropped it was all business. The ice surface was good, and the pace of play seemed higher than last year as the Red Wings prevailed 6-4 in a game that saw 80 shots on goal.

There are several things to take away from the experience: the enthusiasm of the players, the incongruousness of seeing athletes on skates rather than on spikes in a venue so dominated by the latter, the Chicago Cubs and Black Hawks icons that were trotted out, the decades-old cross chants that took place in the stands between archrival Black Hawks and Red Wings fans.

But one thing was uniquely notable: There were no rituals for this event. There was no standard operating procedure, even for Cubs season ticket holders, as to what to do at Wrigley Field on New Year's Day. It was all left to improvisation. Which vending places are less crowded at which times? When do lines to which rest rooms decrease in length? Where are the best seats? It was all virgin territory.

As an example, after the game, rather than retreat to the familiar surroundings of Murphy's Bleachers, I opted for a several-block walk to

Cullen's Irish pub for warmth and warm food. And as I pondered the *tabula rasa* on which the live event was created, it occurred to me that the NHL now has a dilemma. There is no question that the New Year's Day tradition of an outdoor NHL game will continue, but it is most likely to continue as a TV tradition where viewers, perhaps overloaded with the cornucopia of college bowl games, can reliably tune in at noon on New Year's Day to see hearty souls braving the elements in an outdoor venue normally reserved for baseball or football. It is, no doubt, a great boost for the NHL on television. But it's a shame when television traditions cannot be turned into live fan traditions as well.

To not have an encore performance at Wrigley Field next year would deny dedicated fans the chance to make the event a New Year's tradition along the lines of the Dallas Cowboys and Detroit Lions hosting National Football League games on Thanksgiving every year. And there is no question that using an iconic venue like Wrigley Field increased both the local and national appeal of the game.

But not to move the event would deprive fans in other NHL cities the chance to experience the same atmosphere, a national television audience the opportunity to see hockey played in another sporting shrine—Fenway Park and Yankee Stadium seem to be leading contenders for 2010—and two new squads of NHL players the chance to re-create the outdoor pond hockey feeling of their youth. It's fairly certain that the NHL will opt for the latter—which makes me even happier that I traveled to Chicago to see this year's event at Wrigley. ■

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