

Wild, Crazy and Green

Self-described No. 1 fans of professional teams have a long history of adding amusement to live events



BOB LATHAM

I have a peculiar appreciation for a particular breed of person who might be viewed as annoying—if you didn't respect the commitments they have made to get to where they are. I speak of the self-described No. 1 fan of a professional sports team. This is not the official mascot but rather the guy who one day shows up at a

stadium with a drum or some nutty outfit and out of 60,000 people manages to be the one leading a cheer. And if he does it for long enough, he becomes an institution. I've always wondered how these aspiring icons get past the idiot stage to achieve the status they now enjoy. In fact, how do they even get past security the first time?

For instance, there is John Adams, the Cleveland Indians "drummer" who has been practicing his craft for 38 years. Initially he bought two tickets, one for himself and one for his drum, until after a few decades the Indians provided him with standing tickets. Wild Bill Hagy, of Baltimore Orioles fame, became such a part of the team's scene in the '70s and '80s that when Earl Weaver retired as manager (for the first time) in 1982, his on-field swan song was to impersonate Hagy's O-R-I-O-L-E-S chant. The latest entrants into this legacy are the Vancouver Canucks' Green Men—two guys in green spandex who, in a twisted version of a Blue Man Group act, touch the glass in the visitor's penalty box and do handstands around opposing players who are serving their penance. Or at least they did, until the NHL barred them from actually touching the penalty box glass (labeled a distraction) and doing handstands (allegedly a "safety risk").

So, for anyone looking to join this pantheon of immortals (who were honored in the Visa Hall of Fans exhibit at the Pro Football Hall of Fame until the exhibit was discontinued), I offer these tips on how to get there.

1. Start when your team is in the tank. When Adams began showing up at Cleveland Municipal Stadium with his drum in 1973, the Indians were 71-91. When Crazy Ray began getting traction as a staple of Dallas Cowboys games in 1962, the Cowboys were 5-8-1. A team will be a lot more tolerant of nutty behavior when it's desperate for fans and enthusiasm. An alternate but more risky strategy is to try to take advantage of the euphoria that surrounds a team on a roll, and see if you can capture lightning in a bottle—or a

barrel, if you happen to be in Denver. Barrel Man appeared during the Broncos' magical 1977 season. In this scenario, your wacky character is viewed as emblematic of the broad appeal of a successful team.

2. Be prepared to be Cal Ripken. If you are going to be part of the fabric of the experience at a home stadium, you'd better be at every home game. Barrel Man did not miss a Broncos game for 30 years (1977–2007). The baseball guys face an even greater commitment. Adams missed only 34 games in 38 years (less than one per 81-game home season).

3. Reflect your community. While Bill Hagy personified the beer-bellied Baltimore guy, Fireman Ed of New York Jets fame (he of the "J-E-T-S" cheer) is New York through and through, and was a NYC firefighter. You get better traction with the fans, and are more likely to get the blessing of team or stadium management (after a couple of decades) if they view you as representative of the fan base.

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4. Don't try to export your act. While mascots might get some tolerance by opposing team fans in a hostile stadium, no such slack is cut to the self-proclaimed knucklehead. Just ask Chief Zee of Washington Redskins fame, who once took his act to a Redskins game in Philadelphia. The Eagles fans broke his leg.

5. Be of your generation. Crazy Ray and Wild Bill Hagy came on the scene when you could be "crazy" or "wild" simply by selling electronics at prices too low to be believed. The Green Men represent the performance art of our times—to paraphrase Breaker Morant, it's a new goofball for a new century. Plus, their spandex outfits are more conducive to rigid modern-day security measures than a barrel or a drum.

What other Green Men are incubating out there, not yet sure if they want to make such a commitment to their craft or fanhood? I do hope there are some. Much as this species gets mixed reviews, I would hate to see it become extinct, as it does add to the mosaic of a live sporting event. ■

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