

Play Ball!

IT'S OPENING DAY IN SAN FRANCISCO, AND AS usual, I'm running late. Traffic along the Embarcadero is hopelessly snarled, as if President Bush were in town. Which is impossible, of course, because he'd never come here. Down at the corner of Third and King, it's complete pandemonium: throngs of fans dressed in orange push past men holding cardboard signs reading, "I Need Tickets."

I finally make it onto the field just in time to see John Miller stride up to the podium dressed in a Tuxedo, a big change from his usual shorts. "What a day on the shores of McCovey Cove," he says into the microphone.

It's hard to disagree: red, white and blue bunting hangs from the upper decks under a flawless bowl of cobalt sky. Out in centerfield, sunshine gleams off the brass section of a military band. And I haven't even mentioned the grass, because it's a tired cliché in baseball writing to wax poetically about how green the grass is.

Except it is impossibly green, and so perfectly manicured that it looks like it's been cut with nail clippers. The Giants' groundskeepers, to their credit, don't go in for any of those ridiculous patterns so enamored by the other clubs: no plaids or pictures of mascots. Just perfectly cut, perfectly green grass.

In his trademark caramel-soaked voice, Miller introduces the players. First come the Dodgers, with ex-Giant Jeff Kent drawing violent boos. (They'd persist for every at-bat by Kent throughout the entire series.)

Then the Giants. He introduces Barry Bonds, who'll be missing his first opening game since he joined the club 12 eventful seasons ago. As his name is called, Bonds strides out of the dugout with only the slightest hint of a limp. He raises his hand triumphantly above his head, beaming out at the crowd like a man without a care in the world, which of course he most definitely is not.

The applause is thunderous. The full crowd on their feet applauding and cheering the man for an impossibly long time, and then even

longer. The carefully choreographed ceremony comes to a halt for a full three minutes.

Bonds stands by home plate, wearing a spotlessly clean uniform. It's easy for the faithful to imagine he's about to step into the batter's box. This, unfortunately isn't the case, the team having set no date whatsoever for his return to the lineup, a situation which casts a pall over the otherwise sunny day.

The first pitch is thrown out by the winner of the Giant's Tsunami Relief auction, instead of the Mayor, which is the custom. This is probably a good thing because the reporters in the press box are still talking about the time Gavin Newsom threw the first pitch clear past the catcher, almost hitting Willie Mays in the head. "It could've killed him," a TV sports anchor said.

As Huey Lewis and the News begin singing the National Anthem, I head upstairs to the press box to grab a seat. Except there aren't any. The place is as crowded as a New York subway car at rush hour.

Rather than stand there for nine innings, I wander through the park.

In the third inning I'm up in the Club level, it's 2-0 Dodgers, and I spot Santa Claus. He sits in an aisle seat wearing his usual suit and a full white beard. Straight out of Miracle on 34th Street.

He tells me his name is Bob Ray; that he's from Saratoga. I ask him the obvious question. He says he does this every year, "To remind people that it's special. That Santa's back in town." For some reason, he hands me a miniature American Flag, just as Edgardo Alfonzo belts a two-run home run to tie the game.

I head up to the View level where it's like a block party: sunny, and scented with suntan lotion and the smell of frying foods. I watch Jason Schmidt throw a pitch up-and-in to Jeff Kent, who staggers backwards from his whiff of the ball.

The crowd goes wild.

The calm green waters of McCovey Cove are eerily devoid of the usual kayak flotilla - another reminder of Bond's absence. The giants go ahead



Fans George Shultz and Mimi Silbert

when Ray Durham scores an error by Jose Valentin.

Today is Giants' owner Peter Magowan's birthday, and he must be having a good one. The scoreboard flashes the attendance: 42,788, the largest crowd in the history of the five-year-old yard by the bay.

It's now the bottom of the eighth, and I'm down in field Club. The Giants score another run playing small-ball on a bunt by Marquis Grissom. They manage to hold the lead in the bottom of the ninth with a high-light-reel double play: Omar Vizquel springing into the air like a Jack-in-the-box to avoid Jeff Kent's spikes-up slide.

The final: Giants 4, Dodgers 2.

Later on, in the clubhouse, the players are subdued. After all, it's only one win in the long season: 161 more games to go. But they've shown the world they're capable of winning at least one without number 25.

Speaking of whom, in a deserted corner of the clubhouse, in front of the locker with Bonds name on it, sits an electrified massaging recliner. The chair sits empty for a moment. But it remains plugged in, at the ready, a bright orange extension cord snaking across the room, as if waiting for its owner to return.

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