Panem et circenses. Bread and circuses. That was the Roman phrase for the concept of a type of amenity given to the public, helping to keep the peasants docile and loyal without materially improving their lives. This concept has stayed consistent throughout history, as various ruling classes find ways to entertain their populations and, later, instill a sense of national pride within these forms of entertainment. One such example in America’s case is baseball. Baseball was the preeminent national sport of our parent’s generations; dubbed ‘America’s pastime’, the sport was synonymous with the idea of America. Baseball is no longer the juggernaut that it was 50 years ago; ratings drop every year. But that doesn’t diminish the history within the sport and the stadiums that have housed it.

For baseball’s entire existence, from its heyday through its decline to its position now, there has been one constant. Fenway Park. The oldest park in the majors, it was built in 1912. Over the years since, changes have been made slowly, resulting in the park being a bit of a Frankenstein. Parts of it are objectively poorly designed. Some were constructed out of fear by owners that fans would be able to view for free. Some things are just kind of… there. But due to the park’s long, storied history, no one can ever really criticize it. All the quirks are taken in stride; it’s just Fenway. It has this revered status in the minds of Bostonians and others alike; it’s untouchable. The park is synonymous with the Boston Red Sox, and baseball itself, and because of that inextricable connection, taking issue with Fenway is like taking issue with baseball itself.

So if Fenway represents baseball, what does baseball represent?

Sports got very important during the Cold War. Earlier, too, they were important, as the government used them to try to keep morale high during the World Wars, but they really saw their important spike as the Cold War began in earnest. The Cold War was a propaganda war, and what’s better for propaganda than sporting success?
The “Miracle on Ice” is an example of this front of the Cold War; America beat the Soviets in Olympic Hockey once in about 40 years, and we immediately made 3 movies about victory over communism. Because we began to tie ideology to sports, people began to use sports as a canvas to paint their ideas about what America was, what it represented. Baseball, especially, came to be fundamentally intertwined with the abstract notion of American-ness, due to it’s overwhelming popularity over other sports at the time.

The powers that were took this new association of baseball with America and ran with it. The sport was an easy way for the nation to keep her people happy, something simple and universal that people could tie their disparate conceptions of what America represented to. Despite the various different understandings of what America was, if everyone connected their idea of America to baseball, it didn’t matter how different their ideals were. Baseball provided the common thread connecting all of these different ideas.

The way baseball achieved this commonality was through community. Every major city has a team, and some have multiple. Everyone’s got a home team, a team they’d watch with their parents and then talk about in school the next day. It binds you to your city, to your country, to the people around you. That sense of community, of shared experience, it makes you feel at home, like you’re around your people. It unites those with nothing in common. It makes no sense that a person from Hollywood Hills and a person from Compton would share anything other than being from the same vague geographical area; and in truth, they don’t. Their lives are entirely different, and they share next to nothing. Except for the Dodgers. By attaching the Dodgers to the LA area, rich and poor people from LA have something in common. That’s how baseball unites; because everyone from the LA area now share something, different classes are less likely to see one another as “other”, and are therefore more likely to unite in patriotic zeal.
Baseball also united people through their dreams for a better life. Professional sports are a beacon in the sky, a shining city on a hill. They are the truest form of a meritocracy. No matter your background, no matter your upbringing, if you were good enough at smacking a ball with a piece of wood, you could make it in the world. There was a place for you. In our parents’ generations, the NBA, the NFL, the NHL, they all took backseats to the MLB. Every kid, regardless of differences, grew up dreaming of playing baseball for their hometown.

Fenway is an icon of the boiled down form of all of these different methods of uniting different groups. Were some of these methods lies? Yes. Maybe the kids’ dreams were naive, and the community was to distract from class differences, and the patriotism was to earn carte blanche for the ruling class. But the effect is the same. These people were united. Through their dreams, their patriotism, and their communities, they were brought together by this stadium where they watched the Red Sox. Were they brought together under false pretenses? Probably. Does that matter? The fact is, they all came together, and Fenway tells all of their stories equally.

Fenway wears its history on its sleeve. It's old as hell, and it wants you to know that. It’s worn, it smells a little. It’s full of weird stuff. Every little quirk has a story behind it, and it wants you to know them. From the red seat commemorating the longest shot ever hit in the park to Pesky’s Pole, covered in the signatures of fans, everything around instills in visitors this sense of awe, of discovered history. This place was around before you came and it’ll be around long after you’ve left. And yet, it still feels like home. Those same landmarks that made you marvel at the history of the park during your first visit start to feel familiar after a while, and the park becomes more and more a place for you. Because that’s what it is. It’s a monument to the city of Boston, which means it’s a monument to everyone who’s ever passed through. It’s a monument to the history of baseball, spoken by older fans than you who heard the stories when they were kids.
The little landmarks aren’t the whole experience of the history; they’re just the spark to get you to ask. Fenway park is a constantly changing landmark, shaped by the stories that happen in it day in and day out. I don’t even like baseball, and it’s one of my favorite places on earth. Probably because it’s the only place I can do this.
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