

Final Farewell

Today's game marks the end of making memories at Mile High Stadium



By John Moore, The Denver Post

The stories that made Mile High Stadium such a venerable old stomping ground have been told and re-told. You've heard them all: The Fumble. The Boss. The Pope.

But the stories that will be told around family dinner tables for generations to come are the ones you don't usually read about in the newspaper.

Mile High Stadium has been a dramatic backdrop for thousands of ordinary tales. Our engagements, birthdays and escapades. When it closes, so too will a chapter of our lives, and with it any future chapters.

Maybe that's why it's so hard to say goodbye, no matter how happy we are with its replacement. You can build a new building and put the old name on it, but that doesn't make you any less sad to see the original go. My old Regis High School closed in north Denver and reopened in Aurora, but that doesn't make it my old school.

When my bosses asked me to pen one last good-

bye to Mile High Stadium, my instinct was to revisit the Broncos' 20-17 AFC Championship win over the Oakland Raiders on Jan. 1, 1978; the Colorado Rockies' first opening day before 80,227 on April 9, 1993; and the pope's visit before 90,000 on Aug. 12, 1993.

But those moments have been gnashed and re-hashed. What else is left to tell? Well, our stories. Yours and mine.

My story of Mile High Stadium is told in the stubs. I still have Denver Broncos ticket stubs for games pre-dating my birth. When the Broncos debuted in 1960, the team provided season tickets to members of the media, including my father, a Post sports writer. For years we sat in the same section with the families of Post sports writers Joseph Sanchez, Irv Moss and Dick Connor. In those days, the teams were so bad, the tickets weren't worth the paper they were printed on. In the early 1970s, when the team got better and The Post got an ethics policy, we were allowed to buy and keep the seats. That kept alive friendships with other families from section 306 we may never find again in the new stadium.

Many Coloradans cherish their ticket stubs from the Rockies' first opening day in 1993. Not me. My prized Rockies stub is from the game against the Mets on April 15, 1993. We buried my grandmother that day, then about 15 of us did what she would have wanted. We took in a ballgame we had waited our lifetimes to see.

I have the stub for my first concert in 1978, when my brothers Kevin and Danny took me to Mile High to see Ted Nugent, The Cars, Heart, UFO and maybe The Rockets. I can't exactly remember because that was also the day I learned that plastic milk jugs can be used to hold liquids other than milk. I also have a stub for Bruce Springsteen in 1985, when I learned what they mean by "Rain, Snow or Shine."

I spent the entire summer of 1988 at Mile High Stadium, a giddy, underqualified 24-year-old beat writer covering the Denver Zephyrs Triple-A baseball team for *The Post*. I sat in the press box right next to Frank Haraway, Denver's version of Grantland Rice. Haraway, a former *Post* sports writer who has been the official scorer at Mile High Stadium for about 300 years now, offered insider tips and critiques of my game stories. I soaked in Frank's advice like a sponge. By my count, 147 blind squirrels found acorns that summer.

I met a beautiful girl that summer who reminded me of the Baseball Annie in "Bull Durham," and I knew better than to ask if she was dating me because she liked me or because she liked the way I said, "Billy Joe Roooooobidoux!"

On most summer nights, only about 2,000 people populated Mile High, or about three to a section. I told all my friends to wander in front of the press box behind home plate and flap their arms and I would join them in the stands for an inning or two. Little did I know then when an old high school pal named Scott wandered by one night, I would nearly wind up in jail.

Scott introduced me to a couple of college friends as an eager beer vendor targeted the only persons now populating his section. Scott ordered beers for himself and his two friends, and even though I wasn't partaking, I insisted on buying the round for a friend I hadn't seen in three years. Within moments a Denver cop was checking all of our IDs, and it turned out my 25-year-old friend had brought two 20-year-olds along. I would have sworn I had already heard, "Would you come along with me, sir?" for the last time in my life, but I was wrong.

Considering *The Post*'s Woody Paige had made recent headlines with an undercover investigation blowing the lid off Aramark's lax enforcement of alcohol age requirements at Mile High, I could see the headline in the next day's *Rocky Mountain News* flash before my eyes: "Post reporter jailed buying alcohol for minors." It was only after Scott convinced the cop I had just met his friends that he let it go as an honest mistake. No one at my paper was the wiser ... until now.

That was also the summer I landed maybe still the best interview of my life. Gary Sheffield came through town for a cup of coffee on his way to the Milwaukee Brewers, and he gave me his first interview. With his front teeth engraved in a gold cursive G and S, he told troubling stories about growing up in a dangerous area of Tampa, Fla., with his uncle, Dwight Gooden. At the time, two Zephyrs players were mad at me and one interrupted us, saying, "We don't talk to this guy, rookie."

Sheffield, only 19 years old and about 14 minutes into his Triple-A career, looked up and responded, "I'll make up my own mind." Turns out his teeth weren't his only body part made of gold.

I never thought going through my box of ticket stubs would be a difficult experience, until I came across the one from Oct. 3, 1993, the day I brought my girlfriend to her first Broncos game at Mile High. She was horrified by my vinyl and cotton Broncos bomber hat, complete with a chin strap that made me look like Snoopy on a fighter mission. Didn't she realize I wandered the scary streets of Brooklyn to buy that hat at a warehouse? (Of course she did; I had told her dozens of times.) Even though the hat and sunglasses made me virtually unrecognizable (her only consolation), I was stopped before entering the stadium by another old friend named Scott, one I hadn't seen in years. He introduced me to his wife of two months and I introduced him to my girlfriend, who apologized on my behalf to the one friend of mine who would never need one.

It was an unremarkable game — the Broncos took a 35-0 lead, but I refused to leave early because if I left a Broncos game early, how could I then make fun of all those losers who leave Broncos games early?

The memory only became painful when I realized this week that chance meeting in the parking lot was the last time I saw my friend alive. Years later, I returned from a trip abroad to find out my friends had buried him that day. Married, a father and with everything to live for, he had become momentarily lost.

In the same box with my ticket stubs, I came across a heartfelt letter my friend had written me in 1984, long before e-mail and cellphones with free long distance. In

it he called me his best friend, and I hung my head in shame. When someone calls you their best friend, there is an unspoken agreement that they can count on you to find them when they are momentarily lost. I was lost in Ireland.

So forevermore my last memory of my friend will be of him standing in the parking lot at Mile High Stadium, not only not embarrassed by my silly hat but wishing I had a second one for him to wear.

Mile High Stadium holds such stories of our lives. Some good, some bad, some painful. Just like life. There is another place next to it, but there will be another place like it.