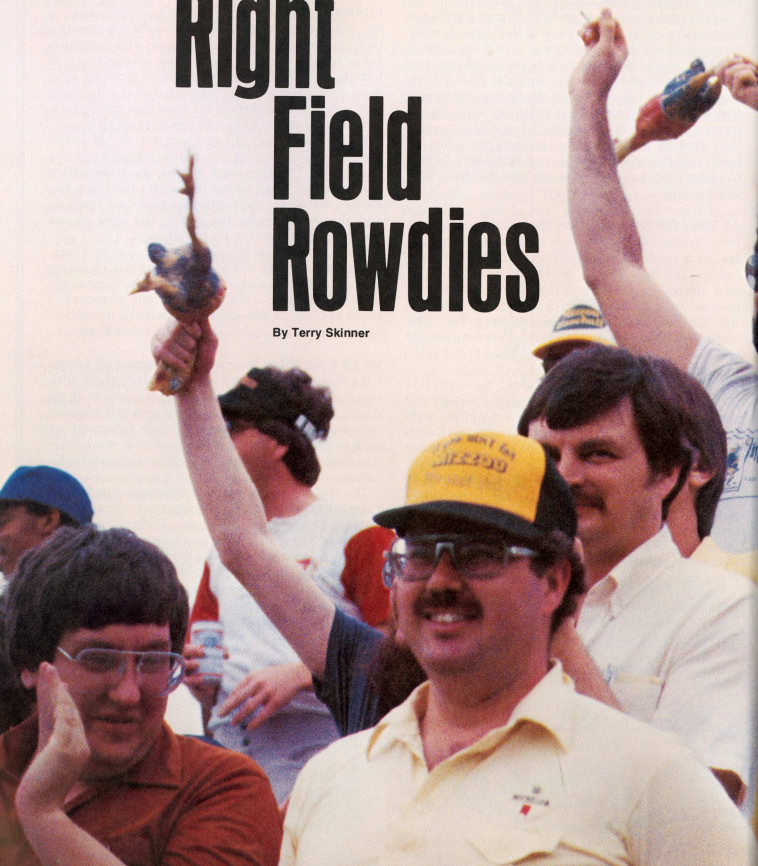


The Right Field Rowdies

By Terry Skinner





Mark Kempl

NOTHING IS SACRED in the right field bleachers at Mizzou baseball games. Not mothers or sisters, not football players or designer jeans, and certainly not the umpires and players on the opposing teams.

The friendly confines of Simmons Field are only friendly from the left field foul pole to the first base dugout. That's where the right field bleachers begin. And that's where the "rowdies" root for the Tigers.

The rowdies are Tiger fans who specialize in harassing the opposition. Made up mostly of former Mizzou students, the 10 to 15 fans that form the core of the group bring an infectious enthusiasm to the fans who join them in the right field bleachers.

Many are baseball aficionados. Good plays by the visiting team often draw appreciative applause. The fans simply like to, as public address announcer Mark Fitzpatrick says, "have fun at the ol' ballyard."

Baseball, although the national pastime, can be boring — between-inning lulls, cat-and-mouse games by pitchers and batters, conferences on the mound.

But thanks to the promotions and wit of Fitzpatrick, baseball fanatic *extraordinaire*, and the barbs of the rowdies, Mizzou baseball games are more than just a bunch of guys playing hardball.

Package this with an outstanding 1981 Tiger baseball team, one that's been nationally ranked in the top 10 all season, and you've found an enjoyable way to spend a spring afternoon in Columbia.

Weekend Big Eight doubleheaders draw the biggest crowds, often more than 1,000 fans. When Mike Cole and Dwight Detmer, a couple of the original rowdies, started going to the games six years ago, only about 50 persons attended. "That's when we used to sit in the grandstands, right on top of the catcher," Cole says. "The radio announcer called us the 'vultures.'"

Now, for such arch rivals as Kansas, the fans really come out of the woodwork. Take this typical Saturday afternoon conference game at a typically windy Simmons Field:

The afternoon begins innocently enough, with both teams warming up as the sun dances in and out of flowing gray clouds, a stiff wind blowing the flag in center field from right to left. The stadium is much improved over recent years: Wooden outfield fencing has replaced the chain link fence; the infield and outfield grass is green and well-manicured; and bleachers have been added down the left and right foul lines.

Tiger fans filter into the stadium as the first inning is played. Doubleheaders begin at 1 p.m. and often last past 5:30 — a long afternoon on hard bleacher seats, although this minor inconvenience doesn't bother the rowdies.

THE ROWDIES STAND for most of the game, possibly for better voice projection; red and white beer coolers dot the metal rows around their feet. Several already have popped their second beer tab of the day.

Over the PA, Fitz announces it's Three Mile Island Day, a salute to radioactivity. "Between games, we're going to split an atom right here at the announcer's table to show that radioactivity is not harmful," he says. (Other Fitzpatrick promotions have been Anti-Disco Day, when anyone dressed like John Travolta couldn't get in the game, and IRS Day on April 15, when a 1040 short form was inserted in each program).

The rowdies warm up by tossing some minor in-

sults at the visiting team. Names aren't used since no one in the right field bleachers buys a program. Umpires are called "Blue," and opposing players are called by their numbers. "Hey, Two-Two, hey, Double Deuce." Or some players and coaches are noted by some outstanding physical trait. "Hey, Lunchbox. Yeah, you on the food scholarship."

The top of the second inning opens with a walk to No. 8. The right field bleachers are so close to first base that the fans can talk to the runner, coach and first baseman, almost without raising their voices. Matter of fact, everyone in the ballpark can hear the rowdies with the exception of the left fielder.

The runner takes a lead as the Mizzou pitcher goes into his stretch.

"Lead off, Eight. He wants to pick you off."

The pitcher throws to first base, but the runner gets back safely.

"Take another step. Eight. That's right, take another."

On the third pick-off try, after a lot of help from

Waving off some ribbing from the rowdies, Mark Fitzpatrick uses a remote unit to announce the game from the right field bleachers.



the rowdies in measuring his lead, No. 8 is picked off. The right field bleachers erupt in joy. No. 8, embarrassed by the whole scene, gets a standing ovation.

As the game heads into the third inning, Fitz gives today's trivia quiz. "Who was the only major leaguer to hit into an all-Cuban triple play? The winner will receive a Missouri baseball press guide and a hearty handslap."

AS THE UMPIRE BENDS to sweep off home plate, a rowdie yells, "A clean plate is a happy plate." The ump stops cleaning the plate, looks up and laughs.

No. 16 steps to the plate for the visitors, swings at the first pitch and misses.

"That's it, One-Six. Listen for the sound in the catcher's mitt, then swing."

On the next pitch, No. 16 drills a single to center. The same fan applauds, "Nice hit, One-Six." While the rowdies love to raise Cain, they love good baseball too.

More bleacher fans arrive, one guy wearing a tuxedo jacket, frilled shirt, blue jeans and tennis shoes. Several Mizzou football players wander over from the practice field to watch the game.

"Hey, you guys don't have to wear shoulder pads. It ain't formal." A fellow bleacherite answers, "But hey, da coach sed we cud." The rowdies, for their size, have a lot to say.

In the bottom of the third, the second Mizzou batter laces a "frozen rope" to right for a single. The pitcher, No. 17, makes a pickoff attempt.

"My sister has better moves than that, One-Seven.

"Hey, Blue. Get that coach back in the box and on the gravel. We got fresh grass seed planted there."

The Tigers score a pair of runs before they're retired in the third. Ticker tape clicks run across the PA system as Fitz runs through NCAA tournament basketball scores. "Oh yeah," he adds, "we have some far, far west scores. At the half, it's Tahiti Tech 37, Guam A&I 25. ("If I ever felt I was distracting from the game, I'd quit doing some of this stuff," Fitzpatrick says. "But I think the players enjoy the craziness. It keeps them loose.") Fitz left the assistant sports information director job last year to work on a master's degree in business administration. He also is the part-time managing editor of the Alumni Association's *Tiger Sports* bulletin.

Never likely to let a chance for a standing ovation slip by, the rowdies next give a "standing O" to a young woman who kisses her boyfriend in front of the bleachers. Her face turns deep red.

It's the top of the fourth and the visitors lead, 4-2. During infield warmup, the opposing shortstop throws wild to first and the ball whistles into the bleachers 20 feet from the rowdies. Collective bleacher eyes open wide.

"He was throwing that ball at us."

The Tigers threaten with bases loaded and one out. The visiting coach sends a catcher to the bullpen to warm up a reliever. Unfortunately, the sun-glassed catcher must pass in front of the right field bleachers.

"Hey, which way to the beach, Two-Three?"

As the game enters the top of the sixth, Fitz announces the next promotion will be Izod Day, when anyone wearing Izod clothing to the game will be bitten by a crocodile. Coming soon, Fitz says, is Roberto Duran Day, when anyone with an upset stomach may leave between games.

The right field bleachers are nearly full by now. More and more fans take part in the good-natured harassment. "There were only three of us when we first started going to the games," Cole says. "But we tell somebody how much fun it is, and once they come they can't stay away from it."

REMEMBER NO. 8? The guy picked off in the second inning? He opens the sixth with a ground out.

"Hey, Eight. That's okay. You would've just got picked off anyway."

No. 8 flips an obscene gesture, which endears him to the fans for the rest of the doubleheader. (Cole and Detmer say they remember another "endearing" situation several years ago when the Tigers took four straight from K-State and some K-State players threw baseballs at the rowdies as they pulled away in their car.)

As the game goes into the bottom of the seventh and final bat for the Tigers, they find themselves trailing 7-4. Time for action! Fitz pumps up the players and crowd with a tape of John Belushi's inspirational speech from the movie *Animal House*.

"Over? It's not over till we say it's over. Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor?" The crowd yells, "NO." "Just remember. When the going gets tough . . . the tough get going!" The fans stand to cheer on the Tigers. □