

In memory's mist, the field still beckons

It's a long way from Exhibition Stadium to Skydome

THE TEENAGER put on his gloves, zipped up his coat and slipped out of his car, pushing the door closed so that it made as little noise as possible.

He stopped and looked around, unnerved somewhat by the eerie shadows of the streetlamps on dark sidewalks and deserted streets normally associated with crowds of people and flashing lights. It was early 1977, at Exhibition Stadium, months before the Blue Jays would play their first ever game. Major league baseball was coming, but he couldn't wait.

He had done this before — just gazing out onto the playing field and dreaming. But this time it was going to be different. He was going all the way.

MURRAY TOWNSEND ON THE LOOSE

He made his way up the ramp that led to the left-field bleachers and went to his usual perch, where he could see the whole field. He couldn't be sure they didn't have security guards somewhere around, but he was willing to take his chances.

He climbed the wall, grabbed the fence and pulled himself around to the other side, his heart going into extra innings as he came down.

There was no outfield fence yet, so he walked onto the playing field

and down to the infield. It was exhilarating, in a way he didn't care to try and understand. All he knew was that he was standing in a place where major league baseball would be played in the near future and perhaps, someday, the World Series.

He stayed as long as he dared, absorbing as much as he could, and then left, climbing back up the same way.

Sneaking into the Gardens

He wasn't a stranger to that type of thing. For years he had been sneaking into Toronto Maple Leaf practices. Some mornings, on his way to high school in Etobicoke, he'd get to his bus stop and forget to get off. The alternative was far too appealing.

He'd stay on the bus to the subway and then go downtown to Maple Leaf Gardens, where he knew the team would be practicing.

They had guards at the gates along with a sign that said, "Closed Practice" but he knew the secret.

He just walked by them. It was that simple. You just had to look like you knew where you were going and were in a hurry to get there. On the few occasions he was questioned he didn't stop walking, he just turned his head, looking annoyed, and told them he had to go to the Marlie office (the Junior A Toronto Marlboros), like they should have known that in the first place. Worked every time.

Then he'd go in, sit in the golds near the player benches and watch

all his heroes up close. It was a thrill—and too exciting not to do on a regular basis. At least until the high school vice-principal questioned his far too numerous absences and suggested, rather strongly, that missing any more school would not be in his best interests.

Helmet too small

That was after he had taken another day off with some friends and attended the Toronto Argonaut training camp in Guelph. They had just signed running back Anthony Davis, who had been a big star in U.S. collegiate football. After each play, everyone would run back to the line of scrimmage but him. He'd just sort of swagger back while everyone waited for him. His head was too big for his helmet, which was why he probably ended up being a flop.

After the players went for lunch, the teenagers took over the field, hitting the blocking dummies and throwing a football around.

Then there was the time in Florida that he wanted to see the Blue Jays training facility in Dunedin. Nobody was playing there that time of year and he couldn't see inside, so he came back later that night and climbed a fence. It didn't do him much good. It was way too dark and he couldn't see but a few feet ahead. Besides that, he had heard some stories and was a little worried about things that go hiss in the night. He didn't stay long.

Naturally, the teenager grew up to be a sportswriter, and can get into Maple Leaf practices any time he wants to legitimately, or attend almost any professional sporting event legitimately. There's nothing he needs to sneak into anymore.

Mock game

Well, there was that one time, not long ago, when he attended a stag at the SkyDome Hotel in a suite overlooking the field. Long after the game, in the wee hours of the morning, a bunch of guys (including other sportswriters) snuck down onto the field and played a mock game, running around the bases and having the time of their lives. He missed it though. Being older and more responsible, he left before he had too much to drink.

It was late, this past Friday night, when the teenager turned sportswriter was finished his work at Maple Leaf Gardens after the Leafs had beaten Detroit. It was the eve of the first World Series game this year, and he was thinking baseball on his way home to Milton. He was thinking pre-baseball too, about that night back in 1977 when he had snuck onto the field.

On a whim, he pulled off the highway and went back to Exhibition Stadium. The spot where he had climbed the fence some sixteen years earlier had long since been built up but he could still look inside.

Gone were the outfield fences, the artificial grass, the bases, everything. There was nothing left but memories.

And one place that looked climbable.

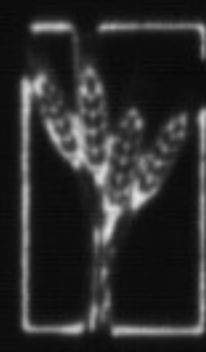
He looked for a second. Then he smiled, got back in his car and went home.

I thought about it though.

Everyone's coming
to Mohawk's Fall Fair.
Well, almost.



This Friday Oct. 22 & Saturday Oct. 23

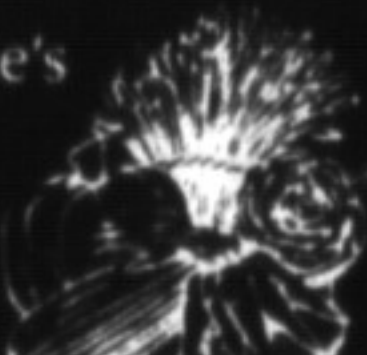


Everyone except this guy. He knows the rest of his family will be enjoying the music, crafts, exhibits and world class racing while he waits by the front door.

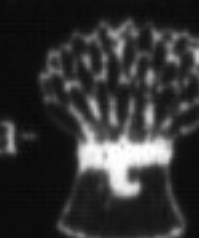


905-854-2255

And by the look on his face, he's heard about the Mennonite apple pie and Oktoberfest sausage. So bring your family to Mohawk for the 14th annual Fall Fair this weekend, but



remember to bring back a little something for you-know-who. Gates open at 6:00 p.m., races start at 7:30 p.m. Admission is just \$3.50. For more information, call 905-854-2255.



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