

also more formal matchmaking sites specifically designed to bring singles together. Though they are the Internet Age equivalents of newspaper personal ads, web-based matchmakers offer much more information than a few cryptic, haiku-like words of description about potential mates. Members of Match.com, one of the largest and most popular sites, complete a 50-item questionnaire about their characteristics and their preferences in a match, as well as composing essays describing themselves and their ideal mate. They can search for potential mates by specifying criteria, such as religious preference or smoking tolerance, and by reading member profiles. Other sites match people by zeroing in on those who share interests or experiences, such as animal lovers (www.animalpeople.com), sports fans (sportmatesearch.com), or senior citizens (www.seniormatch.com).

While in the past taking out a personal ad was heavily stigmatized, today's singles don't appear to be similarly dissuaded from joining online dating services. Indeed, Match.com's revenues increased by almost 200 percent last year, spurred by exponential growth in new memberships. The more specialized dating sites have also proliferated, numbering in the hundreds, if not thousands. The Internet may yet prove to be the ultimate singles meeting grounds, offering much more information about potential mates in the early stages of a relationship than we typically can obtain in other settings.

What none of these new institutions do not do, however, is increase the role of chance in meeting our mates. While we might meet different people over the Internet or in a speed dating session than we otherwise would have, a marriage is based on much more than a date, and the regularities of social behavior will still influence this important decision. We will still want to get married when it seems financially feasible to support a family, and we will still want to marry someone we feel compatible with, who will likely be someone like ourselves. Indeed, it would be surprising if the world didn't work that way—how else could we sort through all the potential mates out there? In the marriage market, demography may not be destiny, but it gets you a long way towards the altar.*

letter from Brockton, Massachusetts



The Rox play their home games at Campanelli Stadium, where comfortable seats, good sight lines, and a sense of intimacy let fans feel like they are part of the action.

BY ROBERT JABAILY Marlynn is a true fan. Even when two minor league clubs are playing for nothing more than pride, she never gives up on the home team or leaves before the final out. And that, along with 500 other reasons, is why I'm lucky to be her husband. ¶ On this particular June evening, we're headed to watch the Brockton Rox battle the Berkshire Brown Bears. Both belong to the independent Northern League, and the Rox, in their



first season, are creating quite a buzz in the old shoe-manufacturing centers and onetime farming towns south of Boston. Local papers have given the team lots of ink, and ticket sales have been brisk. The home opener sold out within five days.

Thinking we might have to scramble for seats, we get an early start for the ballpark, but a MapQuest mix-up sends us on an unplanned side trip through the backstreets of Brockton. By the time we spot the light stanchions over Campanelli Stadium, the opening pitch is less than five minutes away. So, while I try to find the three-dollar parking lot, Marlynn makes her way to the box office.

While standing in line at the ticket window, digging for her wallet, the person behind Marlynn asks her a question you never expect to hear at a ballgame: “Did you bring a gun?”

The middle-aged dad smiles to let her know he’s not serious, or at least not *entirely* serious. But his stab at humor raises an uncomfortable issue: Deserved or not, Brockton has a certain reputation.

The day before our game, the *Boston Globe* carried two Brockton stories: one on the city’s battle against rising crime; the other on 13 Massachusetts cities that missed out on the economic boom of the 1990s, which, in a way, was more disheartening than the crime story. After all, if a red hot economy isn’t enough to boost a city’s fortunes, what is?

But if Brockton isn’t exactly *Our Town*, neither is it New England’s version of *Blade Runner*. A healthy assortment of small businesses and a fair number of family-owned restaurants line its main streets. And in the neighborhoods, people are working on their houses, watering their tomato plants, relaxing in lawn chairs, playing cards (or dominoes), and taking their kids to buy ice cream.

True, the factories and machine shops that gave this place the nickname “City of Shoes” are long gone, but Brockton still has a thing or two going for it. An ample mix of good-quality housing and a new commuter rail line are making it a more attractive alternative to pricier metro Boston communities.

And now Brockton has the Rox, too. The Northern League’s newest franchise could be one of the most exciting things to hit this sports-mad city in a long time.

For starters, there’s the new ballpark. Named for the Brockton-born builder whose \$2 million gift helped make it a reality, Alfred Campanelli Stadium is a great place to watch

baseball—4,750 comfortable seats, good sight lines, and a sense of intimacy that lets you feel like you’re part of the action.

But more than that, the \$17 million project is a sign that people are still willing to bank on Brockton’s future. In addition to the Campanelli money, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts came up with a \$6 million grant, the City of Brockton approved an \$8 million loan package, and the Northern League kicked in \$1 million for stadium equipment—with little of the acrimony that often surrounds publicly funded stadium projects.

In fact, the only hint of controversy has been over the team’s name, which struck some people as a little too “out there.” But after you hear it a few times, the name just seems to fit. It’s upbeat and contemporary—“Brockton Rocks!”—yet it also recalls the city’s past by honoring the memory of native son Rocky Marciano, who punched his way to the heavyweight championship in the 1950s. Even the spelling R-O-X is a nod to that “other” Boston-area team—a playful jab that’s in keeping with the Northern League’s free-spirited approach to pro baseball.



Then there are the antics between innings: Tonight,

Established in 1903, the Northern League is a good match for Brockton—both have seen their share of ups and downs. The league had gone dormant for the third time when a handful of baseball-loving mavericks revived it in 1993 as a fan-friendly alternative to Major League Baseball. Its 18 teams have no ties to the majors, which means two things: They get no subsidy from a major league parent and they can’t afford to sign top minor league prospects.

So, what do they do? They make poverty a virtue. There’s a league-mandated salary cap of \$87,500 per team, with most players earning anywhere from \$800 to \$3,000 a month.

But there’s one thing that’s never in short supply at a Northern League game: fun.

Campanelli Stadium may not be the place to go if you’re trying to dazzle a *Fortune* 500 client. Nor is your date likely to be impressed with the fact that a 24-ounce beer sells for just \$3.75. And if you’re hoping to see flawless baseball, you probably ought to look elsewhere. But if you’re looking to enjoy yourself without running your credit card balance to

the max, you won’t be disappointed.

Even on a Tuesday night, more than two-thirds of the seats are filled and the place has a homey, neighborhood feel to it. Lots of fans are saying hello to one another, and they all seem to be having a good time—which is exactly what the Northern League tries to encourage. Funhouse mirrors at the restroom entrances are a nice touch; so are the concession stand menu boards that advertise “Pan-seared Tuna—Tomorrow’s Special” and “Eggs Benedict—8:15 to 8:30 a.m.”

And if there aren’t any marquee players in the Rox dugout, there’s at least one big-name celebrity who shows up at the park from time to time. Bill Murray—yes, *that* Bill Murray—is the team’s official director of fun and part owner. You won’t see him at most of the games, but his picture is in the souvenir program; and he was on hand to save the day when wet weather washed out the Rox’s Brockton debut.

Then, of course, there are the antics between innings. Tonight a kid named Patrick dons a pair of baggy trousers and wins a



a kid catches a wiener on the fly

Kayem Hot Dog hat when he catches a catapulted wiener on the fly. Midway through the seventh inning, a guy struggles mightily to knock down a cluster of five-foot-high bowling pins with a beach ball; and finally, with the encouragement of Rox manager Ed Nottle, he takes them all down with a running swan dive. Later on, two Rox employees dressed as “Men in Black” climb atop the dugouts and throw candy to the fans. It’s all a little lame, but that’s part of the attraction. Northern League ballparks are an oasis for the *unhip*, and I say that ever so gently and without a trace of irony.

But don’t get the idea that Rox games are carnival acts masquerading as sport. The players are pros who take their craft seriously. Some are in their early 20s and brimming with optimism; others, like shortstop Saul Bustos, are over 30 and hoping for one more shot at making it to the majors. Bustos began his pro career with the Chicago Cubs farm system in 1994 and chased his dream for nearly eight seasons with a string of Single A and “indie” teams. Then, midway through the 2001 sea-

son and three months shy of his 29th birthday, he decided to hang up his cleats. But now he’s back doing the thing he loves, and doing it well enough to be a starter on the Northern League’s Eastern Division All Star team.

Tonight’s game also gives Boston-area fans one more opportunity to see George “Boomer” Scott. Older Red Sox rooters have fond memories of the Boomer from his playing days as a first baseman on the 1967 “Impossible Dream” team. Now he’s managing the Berkshire Bears, and in the seventh inning when he ambles out of the dugout to argue a call, the fans give him a resounding cheer after the umpire runs him from the game.

The evening ends happily in a 4-2 Rox victory; and as the crowd heads for home, the public address announcer reminds everyone that Sunday will be Family Fun-

day with free face painting and a chance for kids to run the bases after the game.

On our way back to the car, Marlynn and I do the usual post-game wrap-up. Maybe this wasn’t the best baseball we’d ever seen, and maybe the game didn’t seem to mean as much as a late summer showdown between the Sox and Yankees. But as always, we’d stayed until the last out, and we’ll probably come back because when you get right down to it, none of the games, not even the “big ones,” mean anything more than what you bring to them. And in the end, maybe the best thing about a game is that it gives you a good excuse to sit outside on a summer evening and pass a few pleasant hours in the company of people you like, or, if you’re *really* lucky, in the company of people you love. *

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