

## POLO GROUNDS

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by James Collins

In 1954, a doubleheader between the Dodgers and the Giants in the Polo grounds on a Saturday filled the stadium to capacity and then some. There was standing room only in the bleachers. Every kid who showed up to work as a hustler that day was hired and I was given beer because I was over 18, 6 foot two and 141 pounds. This is a day to make some real money.

The beer carry consisted of a large metal box large enough to carry a full case of 24 cans. It had a large wraparound handle, which went over the case from side to side the long way so that you would carry the case in close to your chest. The beer weighed in excess of 20 pounds and the case weighed another 20 pounds. Carrying this monstrosity stressed you out during the day and at a doubleheader, you worked for your money. The trick to keep from being exhausted was to run to an area where many people congregated and then start to work selling beers. I serviced the lower deck, which also included the box seats up front. These are the people with a lot of money and when they were drinking, they gave big tips. This is my target and for the first game, I did very well with the number of beers sold and after a while, the tips really started to increase as the patrons got soused.

For every group of five or 10 rows of seats in the lower deck there was an usher. His job was to keep order, take the patrons to their assigned seat, verify the ticket and with a glove that looks like a kitchen utensil, he wiped off the seat whether it needed it or not and then held out his hand for a tip for his work. He usually collected a quarter. After the second inning, he had no more arriving because he filled all the seats and then he just sat around and waited.

The bleachers, known as the cheap seats, attracted the bargain hunters, and in those days, you got in for about three dollars. A hot sunny day, like this day, fried you out in the bleachers and if you came late, you did not get a seat. You had to stand. After the seventh inning of the first game, many of the teenagers used the seventh inning stretch as an opportunity to climb over the anchor chain fence that separated the paying customers from the bleachers. They tried to meld in with the crowd on the lower deck. They did not have tickets and were obvious if they were standing around a lot and eventually security would throw them out. Here is where the ushers got innovative. For a quarter, they would allow these miscreants to sit in the aisle on the concrete steps. It was extra income for them, and the young miscreants had a place to effectively hide and yet watch and enjoy the game.

By the 7<sup>th</sup> inning, I sold 14 cases of beer and was in my stride. I just collected a full case of beer and rushed down the aisle to get to the box seats where I knew the money was flowing. Halfway down the aisle I came to an obstruction. Two tough looking, wide bodied, 20-year-olds were sitting side-by-side blocking the aisle. I could not get past them.

**“Excuse me, gentlemen, could you move over just a little bit so I can get by. I got to get this beer down to the box seats.”**

**“Hey man we ain’t movin.’ We paid for these seats.”**

**“You may have paid the usher 25 cents, but he didn’t want you to block the aisle. You have to sit behind one another.” At this point, I noticed the usher a few rows down apparently heard the discussion. He turned around and ran down the aisle away from the confrontation.**

**“Hey guys, you’ve got to move. I’ve got to get past you to sell the beer. If you don’t, I’m going to have to call security.”**

**With that the guy on the right turned to his buddy and said, “We’re going to have to teach this bastard a lesson.” He started to rise, reached into his right pocket, pulled out a switchblade and said, “I’m going to cut him a new ass hole.”**

**He rose halfway when the blade came out and I swung the case of beer like a rifle with my right arm. The right hand of the metal case caught his jaw and broke it. I could hear the sound, as he fell like a dead weight.**

**The second thug tried to rise but I was behind him and above him. I slammed that 40-pound case of metal on top of his head and he collapsed. The people around started yelling “Fight! Fight!”**

**I yelled at the top of my voice, “Hustler fight!” This was code for all the hustlers that one of their members was under attack and everyone rushed to assist. Within a minute, there were twenty kids all dressed in white with white kepi’s mulling about adding to the confusion. I slipped away.**

**After the game, there was a lot of discussion in the changing room about the fight with the two guys left lying on the ground after being decked by some Hustler. Both needed medical attention but they lived. I never admitted to having caused the carnage, and the confusion generated masked my identity.**

**THE END**