

# IMPLoding A LIFETIME OF MEMORIES

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

**B**ASEBALL historian Lawrence Ritter never had much use for Veterans Stadium. For him, like other purists, the Vet was little more than a "massive mega-structure with monolithic crowds and plastic grass surrounded by acres of parking." I can't argue. The Vet, to be imploded Sunday morning, certainly wasn't the cozy, idiosyncratic ballpark of yesteryear, part of the urban fabric.

The Vet was a creature of the 1970s . . . but so am I. The Vet was hallowed ground for me, the home of the Phillies, the only team I've ever lived and died with. From the first time I set foot in it (an April 1971 bar mitzvah party) to the last game on Sept. 28, the Vet and the red-pinstriped teams who played there served as treasured benchmarks in my own life.

My father and I sat in the nose-bleeds and shared a host of memorable moments: "Super Steve" Carlton's 20th victory in 1972; the drunken boo-bird who bared everything on Opening Day 1974; Dick Allen's return in 1975; Larry Bowa's grand slam against

Cincinnati's "Big Red Machine."

Those shared experiences allowed us to bond, even during my adolescence, when it seemed we didn't have much to discuss.

Back then, there were only two divisions in the National League and you could count on seeing the Cubs, Reds and Dodgers more than once a season.

By the early 1980s, the Vet had become a dating ground. Like my unconditional loyalty to the Phillies, I'll admit that I only gave my heart to one girl. Initially, she tolerated baseball, but eventually looked forward to going to games with me. We always sat along the third-base line, a testimony of loyalty to my personal hero, Mike Schmidt.

She quickly learned not to disturb me when Schmitt was at the plate vying for yet another of the 548 homers he would hit during his career. I threatened to propose to her over Phan-o-vi-

sion, but she swore that if I did, she'd not only turn me down but never go to another game. We've been married now for 18 years.

It was a long engagement that spanned the Phillies' glory days, when they captured their only world championship. Schmitt owned the Vet, the cornerstone of the franchise. But the supporting cast wasn't shabby, with players like Pete Rose, Tug McGraw, Garry Maddox, Greg Luzinski, Manny Trillo, Bob Boone.

In the blink of an eye, they became the "Wheeze Kids," and

though they managed to eke out a pennant in 1983, the team went into free fall. With the exception of '93, when the Phils went to the World Series, there wasn't much to cheer about during the next 15 years. When Michael Jack retired in 1989, I almost quit following the team.

But those who've been brought up

with baseball understand that a passionate fan falls in and out of love with the game for various reasons during a lifetime. When my second son developed an interest in baseball, he rekindled my own, and I rediscovered all the things I loved about the Vet.

Over the last five years, we've forged our own memories there, including Kevin Millwood's no-hitter, watered-down soda, Jim Thome's arrival and all those bobble-head giveaways.

Occasionally, my son will walk into my study and stare at a

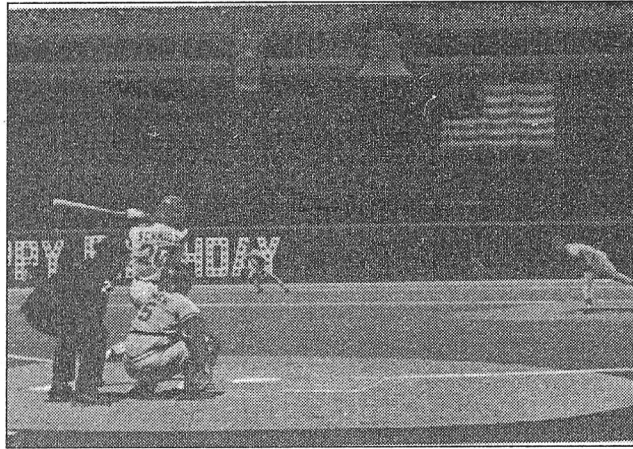
framed print of Mike Schmidt taking Cincinnati Reds pitcher Fred Norman deep to left field as shortstop Dave Concepcion watches the trajectory of the ball. It's a scene that recalls an April 26, 1976, game at the Vet. In the background is Philadelphia Phil with bat in hand ready to clout the Liberty Bell and set off the green-colored dancing waters that once formed the "home run spectacular."

"Happy Birthday" is written across the outfield wall in honor of the nation's bicentennial. When he asks me why I like the print so much, I say that it reminds me of my boyhood, my hero and a place I called my "baseball home" for more than 30 years.

He doesn't quite understand how difficult it is for me to let go of the past and come to terms with the self-evident truth that "nothing lasts forever" — not even the Vet.

Maybe so, but in my mind, I'll see Schmitt's home run swing and the ball clearing that left field fence for the rest of my life. ★

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BILL PURDOM/"Philly Spring Cleanup"