

CLASSIC PHILS TRY NEW BALLPARK ON FOR SIZE

Callison, Schmidt, McGraw assess the team's new home

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

WHEN THE Phillies unveiled the design of their new ballpark, it was difficult not to become caught up in the seductive quest for a field of dreams.

"If you build it, they will come" has become the mantra for the team's owners, who hope to "ease their own financial pains" by bringing back the fans who once filled the now frequently empty ocean of blue seats at the Vet.

But for the sake of those who still entertain childhood fantasies, let's say the Phillies were building their 43,000-seat natural-grass ballpark to resurrect some of the heroes of yesteryear. How would they fare in the new venue?

Tug McGraw, who spent his Phillies career pitching in the sterile confines of the Vet, is excited about the "fan-friendliness" of the new park. With the playing field located 23 feet below street level and the bowl-style seating arrangements where all 21,000 lower-level seats are angled toward home plate, McGraw believes the new park will be a much more intimate setting than the Vet, one that will let fans "follow the action constantly, even while they're at the concession stands."

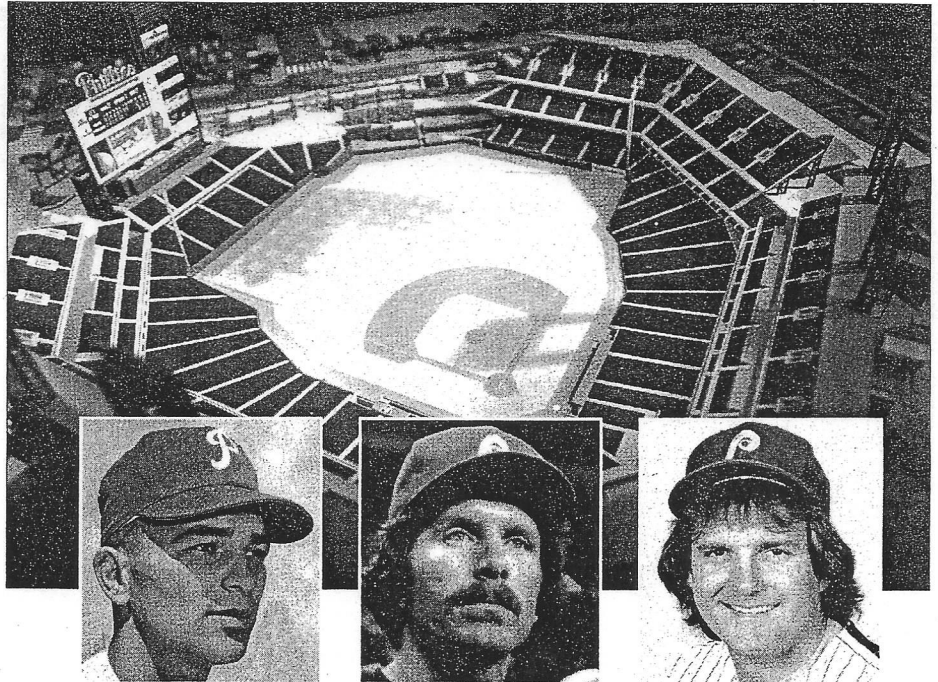
McGraw, a fan favorite, insists that "moving into a new crib has to take a player's level of performance to an all-time high." "I'd do well in the new ballpark," he said, "because it's more exciting to be closer to the fans. You'll be able to interact with them and feed off their energy."

"Another wonderful thing about the design is that it harkens back to Philadelphia's history," said McGraw, who has a strong appreciation for the past. "Like William Penn's plan for the city — which is build around five public squares — the new park will have a large public gathering place at each of the four entrances, with the 'fifth square' being the playing field itself. Those spaces also present a wonderful opportunity for the Phillies to honor their past by erecting statues to some of the greatest players in the team's history."

Johnny Callison, who played at Connie Mack Stadium in the 1960s, is also enthusiastic about the design. "The homey feeling that we had at Connie Mack is lost in Veterans Stadium, which is practically indistinguishable from the other huge, multi-purpose fields built in the late 1960s and '70s," he said.

"But I sure would take South Philly over 21st and Lehigh any time! I can't see all this fuss about a downtown ballpark. You take your life into your hands playing downtown, and there's no parking. The new ballpark is better off staying in South Philly."

Callison was anxious to don red pinstripes again when he heard the preliminary distances for the new ballpark: 325 feet to left field; 365 left center; 403 center; 383 right center; and 335 to right field. "I'd do really well hitting in a park like that," he



said. "Wouldn't even have to change my swing. I'd just hit straight away."

"Connie Mack had that big old wall in right center that killed me," said the hero of the 1964 all-star game. "It was only 329 to the fence, but the fence was 50 feet high to accommodate a 60-foot scoreboard. Sure, I'd get a lot of triples off that scoreboard — but they don't pay you for triples. It was also 447 to center field with a 32-foot fence. Now what kind of a chance did you have to hit the ball out there? ... The distances in the new ballpark will definitely help the hitters."

If so, just imagine how the new park would have added to Mike Schmidt's totals. So, does Schmitt think that his 548 career home runs might easily have been 600 or better? Not necessarily.

"Those distances are only a few feet shorter than the Vet's," said Michael Jack. "It was 335 down the lines when I played and 408 to center field. So it's hard to say if I would hit more home runs if I played in a park with those dimensions."

Schmidt does like the idiosyncratic dimensions of the playing field and the smaller center field fence in front of the bullpens. "The unusual dimensions should raise fan interest in the history of the game and the old ballparks as well as create some exciting play," he said. "The outfielders won't be able to play the ball off the wall as easily as at the Vet, which is symmetrical and has a wall the same height from left to right field."

Nor does the Hall of Fame third baseman necessarily believe that playing on grass would have prolonged his career. "Obviously a player is less prone

to injury on natural grass because it's softer on the body," he said. "But there were also some advantages to playing on an artificial surface. It's fairly easy to field the ball on, easier to get base hits on, and it's a lot faster to run on than natural grass. So I really can't say if I'd have enjoyed a longer career or greater success if I played on a natural surface."

LIKE McGraw and Callison, Schmidt is also excited about the effect the new ballpark will have on rekindling fan interest. "The Phillies can expect good-sized crowds for the first few years after that park is built," he said. "All the cities who have built new ballparks have enjoyed a significant increase at the gate. They've proven that building an old-time ballpark is good economics, as well as the right thing to do for the fans."

"What will matter more in the long run, though, is if the Phillies can produce a consistent winner."

Maybe that's too much to ask — even for this fantasy, Mike.

Finally, no Philadelphia field of dreams would be complete without Pete Rose's return from exile. In this fantasy, Charlie Hustle enters the pearly gates of the Phils' new ballpark on opening day 2004.

"Is this heaven?" asks Rose, in awe of the green cathedral and thrilled at the prospect of being back in baseball again.

"No," reply the owners. "It's South Philly ... and that'll be \$25 general admission." ★

William C. Kashatus is author of "Mike Schmidt: Philadelphia's Hall of Fame Third Baseman."

Stadium Photo:
DAVID
MAIALETTI/
Daily News

Former
Phillies
stars
Johnny
Callison
(far left),
Mike
Schmidt
(center)
and Tug
McGraw
think the
new
stadium
will be
grand.