



DISABILITY CULTURE &  
LIFESTYLE

# DIAMONDS *are forever*

A new stadium construction boom may make America's pastime accessible. At last.

BY DOUGLAS WINTHROP

**T**he mood in San Diego was tense that night. The Padres weren't scheduled to take the field for several hours, but upstairs at the stadium club another game was under way.

For years the Padres organization – like major-league teams across the country – had fought for a new ballpark. They'd haggled with politicians, cut deals with corporations, debated with taxpayer associations and finally appealed successfully to the voters.

Now they were up against something new.

Now they had to face a room full of disability activists.

Nervous but confident, the organization put its best players in the game – Padres officials who'd developed a relationship with the disability community and architects who would design the new ballpark. They also brought in Kevin McGuire, a nationally known ADA consultant who himself uses a wheelchair. After a dinner of baseball fare – hot dogs, hamburgers and potato chips, they presented their plans for a facility they believed would become a model for people with disabilities.

But then came the question and answer period, and the curve balls started flying.

"Why are the wheelchair seats all clumped together?" asked one audience member. "How come the rest rooms all have only one wheelchair stall?" asked another. Regulations were quoted. Horror stories were told. Overall, the mood was one of extreme skepticism. After all, they'd been promised access before and it hadn't happened. Why should it be any different this time?

The Padres were taken aback. Winning over the disability community wasn't going to be a cakewalk.

## A Boom in Access

Of all public facilities affected by the ADA, sports venues are among the hardest hit. And the decade

since the ADA's passage just happens to coincide with the biggest boom in construction of sports facilities in nearly a century. This is particularly true of baseball. Driven by the economic forces, the birth of new expansion teams and the need to replace aging facilities, nearly every major-league organization has either built a new stadium or has one planned. Those that haven't are renovating their existing venues.

And throughout the 90's, the ADA has been a major league player. Starting with the construction of Camden Yards in Baltimore, baseball clubs have faced not only the new local but an increasingly vocal disability community.

"The law is telling them what to do," says Kevin McGuire. "The hardest part about that sometimes is interpreting what they have to do." For that they can rely on consultants like McGuire or on interested local people with disabilities, many of whom can quote the ADA's accessibility guidelines chapter and verse.

Stadium access – like all access – initially had to be won, sometimes in court. But these days, ball clubs and architects are approaching accessibility with the competitive zeal of a pennant race, all eager to claim their new ballparks as showplaces of accessible design.

---

**"The law is telling them what to do.  
The hardest part about that  
sometimes is interpreting what  
they have to do."**

– Kevin McGuire

---

Will this mean that wheelchair users – who have long been relegated to back rows of second tier seats where standing fans block the view whenever the action picks up – can soon enjoy the sin at every ballpark and catch fouls at field level? It remains to be seen. The signs at least are promising.

“Different communities have different concerns,” says McGuire. At the football stadium in Tampa Florida, people with disabilities indicated that they wanted most of the wheelchair seating in the shade. “Then you go to San Diego and the issue is almost the opposite. They actually wanted a more exposed environment.”

## Sightlines

When Jack Michaels, executive director of PVA’s Northwest chapter, first joined an accessibility advisory committee for Safeco Field – the Seattle Mariners’ new ballpark that opened in 1999 – he and other committee members were concerned primarily with sightlines for disabled spectators. Since the Justice Department had recently issued new ADA guidelines on stadium seating, they were being used for planning.

The ADA guidelines, however, stipulated only that disabled patrons be able to see over standing spectators two rows in front. At sports events, where patrons frequently rise to cheer their team, this can be problematic. “Until they actually saw the paper regulations put into practice, they assumed that you would be able to see over standing spectators the first row in front of you, and that’s not the case.”

“Since ADA came out there’s been a lot of learning about sightline issues,” says Ralph Belton of NBBJ, the architecture firm that designed Safeco Field. “The current sightline standards,” he says, “work just fine in a movie theater or performing arts theater, but when you go to a sports event or rock concert-type venue... then you have the issue of how [wheelchair users] see over the standing patrons.”

Since the ballpark opened, additional work has been done to improve sightlines in most of the wheelchair seating areas. In addition, Belton and the advisory committee give Safeco Field high marks for ensuring “universal access” – meaning that people with disabilities can use all of the facilities, not just those designated as accessible – at rest rooms, concession counters and ticket windows and wherever else is feasible.

## Dispersement

Dispersement of seating – as opposed to corralling all the wheelchair users in a single section – is a hot issue in stadium construction. The disability community in San Diego insisted in the widest possible seat dispersement – in the sun and shade, in the cheap seats

as well as at field level. At an early stage, the Access Center (an independent living center that also does ADA consulting) invited the Padres to seek community input with the goal of setting new standards for accessibility.

“The way [the Padres] have gone about this process is unique,” says Louis Frick, the Access Center’s ADA coordinator. “They seem to be making the effort to go above and beyond, and I think part of that’s a result of the vocal nature of the disability community.”

The Padres brought in Frick and McGuire as access consultants and formed a 12-member task force made up of people with a wide range of disabilities. In addition, the ballclub held two forums with as many as 150 members of the disability community in attendance.

Erik Judson, the Padres’ director of ballpark planning, says the process was a highly educational experience – challenging the organization and the architects to think beyond mere compliance with the law to acting in a spirit of partnership with disabled baseball fans. “It’s really important,” he says, “to design a facility that works well for all people who will use it – to have a player’s perspective, to have an owner’s perspective, to have a fan’s perspective, to have the perspective of the disability community.”

As planned, the Padre’s new ballpark features wheelchair and semi-ambulatory seating in all sections, including some near the front row of each level – a first for a major league baseball facility.

## It Ain’t Over ‘Til It’s Over

Judson admits to having been a bit nonplussed by the grilling the Padres received at that first forum in San Diego, but feels it helped to clear the air and make the rest of the process go much more smoothly.

“The only way you can build credibility is by listening and then acting,” he says. “I hope at the end of the day people came out of that [forum] and said, ‘They did the best they could, and we made a difference.’”

Of course, construction of the park has barely started – it’s scheduled to open in 2003 – and as Frick says, “The big issue is going to be making sure what is on paper is what’s actually built.”

As in the game itself, people with disabilities – in San Diego, Seattle, Phoenix or anywhere else – can’t afford to leave the field just because they’ve taken an early lead. There are a lot of innings left to go.