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Feature Story

**Take Me Out to the…Cookout?**

Peanuts? Check. Cracker jacks? Got ‘em. Overpriced hotdog. Yep. Ice cold, $12, locally brewed beer? You know it. Must be baseball season again in the Rocky Mountains.

Another sun-drenched Opening Day has come and gone at Coors Field, home of the Colorado Rockies baseball club. Once again, a sellout crowd of 50,445 excited fans flocked to one of the most beautiful parks in all of baseball to be part of what has become a local holiday in the Denver metro area. Fans ducked out of work or school early on the particularly pleasant Friday afternoon and made it with time to spare to see the 2 o’clock ceremonial first pitch. Dinger, the large, purple dinosaur mascot of the Rockies strolled up and down the first base line and shot t-shirts out of a large tube into the stands. Mother Nature decided to cooperate with temperatures in the low 70’s and the stage was set for another laid-back season of baseball in the Mile High City.

With a new skipper at the helm, a healthy starting line-up complete with two superstar hitters, and an opportunity for a fresh start, the Rockies opened the year with a somewhat unexpected win over the division rival San Diego Padres. The team has shown potential for a vast improvement over the disappointing season they had last year and the fans could finally have a team they could really get behind.

But is Opening Day really about the game anymore in Colorado? Has it ever been? The team was well under .500 last season and with the sub-par pitching rotation remaining mostly untouched, educated fans know they may have very little to look forward to this season. Despite all that, every single seat (even those uncomfortable “rock pile” bleachers) was occupied by smiling faces, soaking up the rays and stuffing their faces with ‘Rockie Dogs’ on that early April afternoon.

Coloradoans view Rockies’ games like most people view a mid-summer neighborhood cookout. Friends gather outside in one of the most beautiful climates known to man, eat hotdogs, drink beer, and socialize to their hearts content. It doesn’t seem to matter which opposing team happens to be in town. Nobody really cares who is taking the mound that day or what Tulo’s batting average is. It is a social event. It is an opportunity to get the family or the guys together outdoors and have a fun, relaxing time. It’s a glorified picnic complete with the occasional excitement of a hard hit homer flying through the thin air.

Coloradoans have the Broncos for the times they want to really care about a sports franchise. The Nuggets are a nice little fill-in between the final game of the football season and the NFL Draft in April and the Av’s just don’t really seem to exist anymore.

This is not to say that Colorado baseball fans are not up to par. Let us not forget the incredible run the Rockies had in 2007, making it all the way to the World Series after the exhilarating 21 game win streak and extra playoff game that qualified them for postseason contention. The fans were rabid during that stretch. The truth is Denver has some of the most passionate fans in the country (When their team is winning) but baseball exists in the Rocky Mountains mainly to give us an excuse to sit out in the sun at Coors’ Field, work on our tans for a few hours, and forget about our troubles. It transports us back to our childhoods when our fathers (the true baseball fans of the world) taught us the game.

My own father, a man who can still effortlessly rattle off the starting lineups and the pitching rotations of “his L.A. Dodgers” for any particular year in the 1960’s, sat next to me during this Opening Day game and quietly swore under his breath at every ground ball or pop fly the home team hit.

“These people don’t watch the game anymore,” he said to me during the seventh inning stretch as the people around us all danced and sang along to ‘Hey Baby’. “They’re here for the booze and the atmosphere.”

Cantankerous as my old man’s statement may have been, if one were to ignore the giant green field and the diamond of dirt sitting out in front of them, they might indeed get the feeling that they were actually at a concert at Red Rocks instead of a sports event in the heart of Lodo.

Daniel Baker, A man in his early thirties sitting next to me with his wife and young child told me he has attended every opening day game since he was in his early twenties.

“It is just an atmosphere that can’t be beat,” He said. “My wife and I are pretty active, we do a lot around the city from concerts to skiing and biking and there is just nothing else like opening day.”

Daniel sat with a Blue Moon in hand most of the game and talked with a couple sitting on the other side of his family while he sipped his beer (that was likely brewed about twenty miles to the west). He frequently got up and visited the concession stand or bathrooms and probably rarely knew what the score of the game was.

There is an essence to opening day that is present all around the country at countless ballparks. A magical, nostalgic, carefree innocence that is unrivaled by anything else in the sports world. It serves as a reminder to us all that we should enjoy the game. In the same month when most sports fans go a little nuts stressing about which 20-something phenom their football team will draft in the first round, there is an unusually calm and enjoyable Zen garden of sports that is baseball’s Opening Day. There is a childlike innocence that fills the air, and as long as games remain this relaxed and enjoyable, you can take me out to the ballgame and I won’t care if I ever get back.