

# Massachotts

## Fock 3: Boston

Being Massachusetts born and raised, it would seem that I would have thousands of yarns to spin about that Commonwealth. I probably do, but none really leaped to mind as my brief visit thither waned.

You always miss certain things when you move away, but I think what I missed most about Boston was its sports. Though the luster of the Celtics' glory days faded, and that venerable barn of the common people called Boston Garden was replaced with what I call a Sterile Viewing Facility, and the Red Sox always find a way to lose in the most heart-wrenching ways, the Boston sports scene always provided great entertainment. And the show was even better when you got to sit in a friend's corporate season ticket seats.

Dash, Ban, and Cliff were especially generous, and I was never one to decline a free ticket. The low box seats at Fenway were the best, though: excellent TV-op seats, and prime foul ball snagging seats. Once we almost even got a bat that came pinwheeling through the air from a batter's loose grip.

But one night, above all others, was The Ball I Should Have Had.

I knew immediately. The second the ball left the bat. Just the angle of the bat, the initial spin of the ball. The way it rose in its slanting arc against the indigo Boston night sky. I was one of the first to lift his cheeks off the red plastic of the lower box seat. Patrick's were a mere jiffy behind.

Allegedly, a "jiffy" is a measured unit of time, equal to "one one hundred thousand billion billionths of a second." I have not been able to corroborate this fact. It comes from the same source that informs me that:

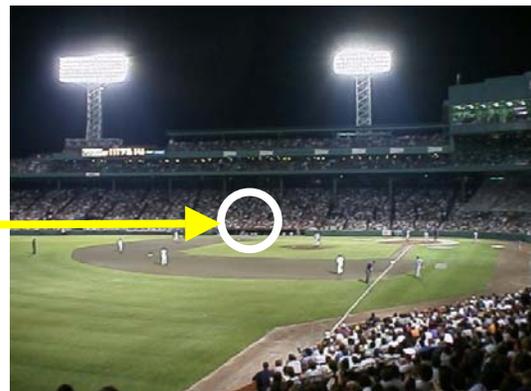
- there are 293 ways to make change for a dollar
- rats can't vomit
- a dime has 118 ridges around it
- an ant has 5 noses, and
- a snail takes 115 days to travel 1 mile.

So, if you believe all that balderdash, then believe the jiffy thing too. But I must have had a bigger jump than that on Patrick: at least 5 jiffies. Maybe 6.

It was an awesome June night for a ball game, and it was great for this Rochesterian to revisit The Olde Towne Ballyard. The left field wall bore an elaborate painted sign trumpeting the upcoming 1999 All Star Game. Cliff, Patrick and I were the beneficiaries of Dash's Xpedx company seats – the ones I like the best, the second row behind the first base dugout seats. We were pretty much on our usual pace as far as the beer lines went, and Cliff had just left to lose one beer and pick up two more.

Some right-handed visitor – I think the Sox were playing Oakland – had just undercut an outside slider and launched a foul pop that was destined to drift out of Brian Daubach's reach and in among us rabid rooters.

I stood first, but everybody else in our box was just a tick behind. I had the height advantage on the row in front, and I had position (and a ready hip) for Patrick. I was feeling good about my chances. The flight of the ball had peaked, and its path was dead-on to my hand. Both arms were outstretched, trying to close the distance on the coveted souvenir.



*Cliff, Patrick, and The Blinger, up close ... and from a distance.*

It was not to be my first Fenway foul. Back in 1967, I was in the grandstand, about 30-40 rows behind these Xpedx seats, with Dave Raftery, a 7<sup>th</sup>-grade crony who had ridden the “T” in from Riverside with me for the afternoon game. That foul fly had not aimed for us, but had angled about two sections over – so far over that we didn’t even bother to stand up. The ball dodged everyone’s hands, bounced sharply off the concrete, and tunneled avidly under the slap-down wooden seats. As frantic fans dove and groped furiously, it cleverly spun like a top under a whole 36-seat row and came to rest under the aisle seat, just across from my own. A 5-year-old boy was sleeping soundly, curled up in his chair right above it, and I calmly reached across that aisle, and claimed the horsehide sphere as my own.



*The famous Green Monster, with sign.*



*The view from the remotest seat.*

This time in 1999, though, the catch would have to be hard-earned. I reached above my neighbors, and the ball struck the base of my index finger. In the instant it was taking me to close my grasp around it, the bastards behind me crashed forward and bashed my wrist. Not even trying to grab the ball; just flagrant-fouling my arm to dislodge it (the ball, not my arm, though it almost did that too). It worked. The treasured souvenir jarred from my grip, and all hands – including mine – clutched wildly for it.

It’s amazing the furor that cheap toy can provoke. Any of us could go to a sporting goods store and buy a dozen of those for the price of a Red Sox ducat, but we would never even *think* of doing that: what would we want with a frigging *baseball*, for Christ’s sake? But somehow, you just feel like King Shit to have that Major League baseball on display on your desk or on your bookcase or on your mantle or in the drink holder of your car.

Ban’s foul-ball-souvenir story is the best. Banman is an avid Sox fan – the type who would often take the walk over from his Boston office and catch a few innings before tackling the 50-minute commute home to Paxton. Well, one such night, apparently, it had come time to leave. Regretfully, he bid his compatriots farewell, and strolled down the aisle among the left field grandstand towards the exit – true fans always exit toward the field to steal a closer look on the way out. As luck would have it, a foul ball hot-hopped onto the roof of the visitor’s dugout and bounded completely over the box seats. Without breaking his stroll-stride, Ban calmly raised his hand, caught the ball cleanly, motioned back to his pals, and continued on his way out of – as he and Dash call it -- Fanway.

In contrast, amid this furious grappling of fingers, the ball struck several hands, keeping it above head level for what seemed to be a long time. It finally found a hole and slipped from view. I judged its path and flicked my hands downward to waist level to intercept it.

Patrick’s arm motion was more to the point, however. As the ball began its downward plunge, it angled towards him and, using his infielder’s instincts, he clutched his arms to his chest and caught the ball cleanly against his shirt.



*Patrick, with the hard-fought foul.*



*Pedro taking our drink order.*

I keep meaning to ask him what he's done with the coveted sphere. My souvenir was with me for years – about 15 or so, I believe. Most of that time, it cooled its stitches in my desk drawer, only getting touched when I moved it out of the way to get at my calculator, stapler, or dope.

Eventually, though, I decided that the ball should go public, and I brought it out to my van – my first van, The Roadhouse. I autographed it, and put it on display in the cupholder. Soon, most of my friends had autographed it as well, and it wasn't long before it became an ink-smeared mess.

At that point, I removed the ball from Display Status, and re-activated it. I took it out one afternoon as I waited for my Cross Country team to come out for practice, and repeatedly flung one-bouncers off the side wall of the school gym. The autographs disappeared quickly, as did most of the cover, and bits of the stitching. The seams let go shortly thereafter, and I vaguely remember slowly unravelling the twine and feeding it out the open window as I drove down the highway one day. I'll bet the folks driving behind me loved that!

But I think I know where Patrick's baseball ended up: in Davin's crib, covered with drool. A fitting fate. Better than ending up in Sebbie's paws, covered with doggie drool.

Not that there's anything wrong with doggie drool, mind you. ☺

I know I'm a bit biased, but the Bay State is a cool state, all in all. First off, the nickname fits: the single most distinctive characteristic is Massachusetts Bay. From Provincetown at the tip of Cape Cod to Cape Ann on the North Shore, that big yawning bay has always welcomed in any and all seafaring traffic.

And Boston, of course, at the mouth of the mighty Chahhhles Rivva (translation from Bostonese = Charles River), is right in the middle of it. If the bay is a big open mouth, then the Charles was the esophagus. Now, there's a metaphor you don't hear every day.

The Hub is even a good nickname for Beantown. As towns grew up around Boston, they seemed to spread pretty equally in all available directions. A look at the map shows the highway belts around the city – the infamous Route 128 has now been disguised as I-95 but it still makes me cringe – describe a pretty good  $\frac{3}{4}$ -circle, and all the roadways leading straight inward to downtown Beantown are like spokes on a wheel with Boston as the – yes – hub.

So, those names makes sense, unlike Empire State and Big Apple.

You know where "Big Apple" comes from? Gambling. Horse racing, to be specific:

The term dates to 1921 and is a reference to the race courses in and around New York City. These were the big money courses, and the "apple" is associated with a prize, something desirable. By the late 1920s, the term had been adopted by jazz musicians and generalized to the city as a whole. A tourism advertising campaign in the 1970s that used the term as a theme reinvigorated usage and brought the name to the attention of millions who had not otherwise heard it. Ahh, and a damn proud moniker it is. Humbug.

In addition to the above, the settlers of the Bay State did what settlers should do: toss off the names of their former land and adopt a name befitting their new home. Massachusetts, though admittedly a cumbersome word (and a bane to young children in their Geography Spelling Bees) blended the existing culture of the Massasoit tribe into the new page of their lives.

What's "New York?" What kind of a name selection was that? We want to get the hell out of Britain, so let's name this place after the place we just left. Duh. And let's give the city and state *the same damn name!!* WTF is up with that?? Clean slate, fresh start, and you can name the place *anything you want!* Uhhh, duhh, I can't thing of anything; shit, let's just call them both New York.

Actually, it's even worse than that, since it was originally New Amsterdam, and then they *changed it* to the duplicate name. How moronic is that?? Had to be all politics, English finally outnumbering Dutch and such. Pinstripe pinheads.

Makes me wonder, though, about the meetings they must have had as they were choosing the names. What names did they turn down? What lost out in the final vote? Did New York actually come dangerously close to being named Bleebo?

Boston's biggest negative, as any local or frequent visitor will tell you, is its traffic. Lordy, lordy. All large cities choke with cars in the peak traffic hours, so it is not mere volume that makes Boston a driving nightmare. Built up around horse and carriage paths, which were themselves laid out to suit the topography more than any commercial expediency, Boston lacks the grid logic of cities built in subsequent decades and centuries. The curvy streets and narrow alleyways create a labyrinth of dead-ends and one-ways that takes years to understand.

If you miss a left turn in most cities, no big deal; you go left-left-right and you are on the street you had missed. Not so in the Hub Of The Universe! You miss a street in downtown Boston and you end up miles away with a river and a hundred red lights between you and your destination. Your next left is a one-way the wrong way. The one after that goes the right way, but leads to a Right Turn Only sign. That right turn gives you only one alternative: plunge into the harrowing traffic of Storrow Drive and find your way among the grand prix style traffic that zooms along the banks of the Charles. The access ramps come on you real fast, and by the time you read the sign, you missed the one you wanted. So, in exasperation, you take the next exit and find yourself on a big old green girder bridge and heading off toward Somerville.

Maps don't really help; they only show you where you'd like to be. You still need to figure out where the hell you are. Maps sometimes only complicate things; they don't show one-ways. And if they do, it's probably changed by now. For example, Charles Street, a major byway right in the very heart of Boston, used to be a one-way running north, but somewhere along the line somebody said About Face, and now it runs south. Some connecting roads through neighborhoods that used to exist have probably been blocked with Jersey barriers because too many cars were using them.

These directional and navigational quirks are compounded by a configuration that is very common in the area, but quite foreign to most visitors: the rotary. Cars dive inward *from* all directions and careen outward *in* all directions. They speed counter-clockwise around a circular center island, and criss-cross one another's paths on the way to or from as many as eight different feeder roads.

Rotaries are no place for the timid or the faint of heart. There is no mercy in Boston driving; it is survival of the meanest. Eye contact is a sign of weakness, and if your bumper is an inch ahead, then you have carved yourself Right Of Way. And there is no pity for the troubled and confused. Slow down at your peril; you risk the wrath and scorn of all others. You will not be "let in." You can easily be trapped in a rotary, and find yourself wheeling around it again and again before you can slip your way through to your street. The up side of that, though, is that you don't get lost for days in a crazed maze of one-ways.

So, it's no single thing that creates the frustration and ire in Boston drivers. As a visitor, you feel it, and are kind of wowed by it. But as a resident, it becomes second nature. Even the meek and mild undergo the metamorphosis, and become badass beantowners. Turning the key ignites not just the engine but your aggression and stress as well. Your mind tightens, and your brain tilts forward, and you raise a fine resentment to all those assholes who have the temerity to be using **your** road. They become detestable moving obstacles whose sole purpose is to block your path and derail your progress. They are evil and insidious, and their guile is without limits. At no point may you relax behind the wheel or they will pounce on your weakness and you will be cut off, forced up the wrong street, or shoved into gridlock.

You never want to be behind *anybody*. Each car represents a delay. All are potential landmines. If you were ahead of that douchebag, you would've made this green (yellow, actually) light, and hence, the next sixteen green lights, and been free and clear and well on your way. But now, you languish behind him and you fume. Then the light changes, and, ignorant of the No Left Turn edict that is clearly posted, this idiot flicks on his left turn signal, and sits stupidly watching the unbroken line of traffic crawl by in the other direction. The right hand lane surges past, car after car taunting you for being stuck, giving no quarter, offering no opening. Their mockery deepens your rage. It's bad enough to be trapped, but to be overtaken by all these idiots that you just spent the last half-hour cutting off and jutting past in your quest to win the urban road race, well, that just stokes the fires of rage.

And the turn signal blinks and blinks. And the light turns yellow. Opposing traffic slows. Left Turn Man still sits, blinking. The light turns red. He doesn't move.

This is why God, in His wisdom, created horns. The good folks at General Motors installed that device for a reason, damn it, and the reason is now. You rear back from the shoulder and thrust your arm forward, leaning on that horn with the foolish thought that it somehow honks louder when you apply hellish force. Even so, you drown out its trumpeting with a long and blunt bellowed expletive. Your grip on the wheel is stingular, your urge to kill is deep.

Hearing your blast, but sincerely not giving a rat's rectum about you, Left Turn Man extends his arm out his window and flips you off. *That tears it!!!* You grab the hatchet from under your seat and explode out of the car...

Well, maybe not, but you'd like to.

That actually did happen to my good friend Richie one day. He was in his pitiful blue and white Grabber – a lame “sporty” variant of the already lame Ford Maverick -- with crutches on the passenger seat beside him, when the driver in front of him in tight traffic, stormed from his vehicle brandishing a hatchet. Yelling incoherently, he raised the hatchet high. Richie, quite helpless, could only watch in horrified disbelief and try to hold up a crutch as meager defense. The man then let the hatchet fly, throwing it with all his might, right through the Grabber's left rear window and into Richie's back seat. He then returned to his car and screeched away.

Obviously rattled, and showered with broken glass, Richie sought out the nearest police station. He crutched his way in and reported the road rage incident at the desk, barely getting a grunt and a glance in return. He countered their “yeah, whatever” attitude by plunking the hatchet down on the blotter, and at least got their attention. Still, nothing ever came of it; for all any of us knew, the cops never even checked the license plate number. Nobody died, buddy, why even bother reporting it?

If Boston driving wasn't notorious enough already, there is now The Big Dig, that ten-plus-year, multi-billion dollar construction project that changes Boston's busiest artery (I-93) from an elevated highway to a tunnel, without ever closing it down. The scope of this project is so huge that The History Channel has already done a special on it, and the tunnel was not even close to being finished at the time.

[A friend of mine once commented on something by saying, “he wasn't even remotely close.” *Remotely close?* Exactly what kind of “close” is “remotely close?” *Remote* means “distant.” So he wasn't even close from far away? Who is?? How *could* he be? Dumbass drunk.]

The Big Dig caused so many alterations and relocations of small roads and access ramps that even lifelong Bostonians were getting lost. The Massachusetts Avenue exit from inbound I-93 North was always a left-lane exit. And on that clogged highway, you had to know well in advance where you were going so you could squirm into the correct lane. Suddenly, one day, the Mass Ave exit was on the right. A few days later, it was on the right, but moved nearly a half-mile further up. And that's just one example out of hundreds of such temporary roadways and ramps and lane switches that this project required. Cartographers all over town must have been hitting the sauce heavily since it began. Drivers, for sure, have been driven even more nuts than they already were.

But that's Boston. It is the 20<sup>th</sup> largest city in the US, and it suffers some serious automotive constipation woes (which The Big Dig will not even serve as laxative for, since this \$10-billion “upgrade” will not be adding *any* new lanes of traffic).

Massachusetts itself is larger than only five other states, and it is just half the size of Switzerland. It ranks 13<sup>th</sup> in population, though, with an almost identical number of people as Israel. The Bay State stands third in population density, though, with over 769 people per square mile. If you spread them out equally across the state... ehhhh, never mind.

Once you get away from the Hub and out past the 128 wheel, you can ease your grip, drop your defenses somewhat, put more faith in maps and logical roads, and enjoy Massachusetts' aesthetics. The outlying towns have quaint colonial-ish centers and plenty of trees (more of those soothing negative ions!), and the remote parts of the Bay State have some grand byways for touring and relaxing. Route 2, stretching out WNW of Boston and extending cross-state, becomes a beautiful pastoral road that is very good for the soul. My golfing cronies and I always eschewed the Pike for the mellower Deuce on our treks to Crump (people still do drive like bats out of hell on the big highways).

And I'm sure that's the route that Dash and Ban took to travel out to Wachusett CC, escaping to that far mellow end of Massachusetts. They and Mark and I played our own usual unusual version of The Game Of Gawlff till Day One of RR2K waxed deeply dusky. The lads then saddled up their mounts and headed home to wives and kinder. With a very fond farewell, I climbed aboard Blue Man's California Not-So-Express, and headed on south to Sacramento!