

courant.com/services/newspaper/printedition/sports/hc-stadium0420.artapr20,0,1339657.story

Courant.com

BASEBALL | DOM AMORE

Yankee Stadium Is Hallowed Ground For Papal Visit

April 20, 2008

NEW YORK

Little did the designers of Yankee Stadium know that one of the most distinctive and utterly ornamental features they included would one day prove most appropriate.

The copper frieze, or "façade," as old-time fans called it, formed a ring around the roof of the ballpark. In the Gothic style of the day, it gave the park a cathedral look long before it was used as one.

More than 40 years after the Stadium was complete, it was the setting for a papal Mass on Oct. 5, 1965, with Paul VI pleading for world peace, as Benedict XVI is likely to today in the third and final such event to be staged at the current Stadium.

"He moved to cheers and applause all day," wrote The Courant's Jean Tucker, who followed Paul VI through New York in 1965. "At the United Nations it was loud and polite. At Yankee Stadium, it was thunderous and unconfined. St. Peter's Square on Easter Sunday must seem hushed in comparison."

Yankee Stadium was the first of its kind, massive and multitiered, and it transcended baseball to become the logical venue for any event that needed a large, outdoor arena.

"We feel that the entire American people is here present," said Pope Paul VI, from amid the throng of 90,000 attending his "Mass for Peace."

Major college football games were played there, by schools looking for "America's Team" status, such as Army and Notre Dame. It was in a locker room at Yankee Stadium that Knute Rockne gave his famous "Win One for the Gipper" speech in 1928.

It proved to be the perfect setting for boxing, which was nearly as popular as baseball in the 1920s and '30s. Numerous championship fights were fought there, in a ring assembled near second base. The most famous was Joe Louis' quick knockout of Max Schmeling in 1938, the last was Muhammad Ali's victory over Ken Norton in 1976.

In 1950, Jehovah's Witnesses secured Yankee Stadium for their national convention, and more than 120,000 people, twice the seating capacity, moved through the turnstiles in the first use for religious



services. The playing surface was able to accommodate tens of thousands, but women were asked to remove their high heels before entering the field area. Jehovah's Witnesses continued to hold conventions at Yankee Stadium well into the 1980s.

In 1957, Cardinal Francis Spellman conducted a Roman Catholic Mass at the Stadium, and the success of the event set the stage for the papal visit, but the idea of a solemn ceremony in a baseball park still seemed odd. Paul VI spoke from under a canopy set up in the middle of the field. Members of the Knights of St. Gregory in New Britain assisted in the 1965 Mass.

"There was reverence in spite of the mobs — the explosion of light from flashbulbs and the fact that Mass was celebrated in a ballpark," Tucker wrote. "The park was quite cleverly camouflaged. Blue silk hanging hid the garish beer signs, for example."

Then, as now, the United States was involved in unpopular war, though protests against President Johnson's Vietnam course did not have the intensity they would in the coming years.

"First of all, you must love peace," Paul said, delivering his 2,000-word homily in English. "We must make our own the cause of peace, we must meditate on the real meaning of peace, we must conform our minds to the thought of peace."

"... Peace must be based on moral and religious principles, which will make it sincere and stable. Politics do not suffice to sustain a durable peace. The absence of conflict does not suffice to make of peace a source of happiness and of true human progress."

The magnitude and success of the papal Mass rang for years.

Pope John Paul II, while a cardinal, celebrated Mass at Yankee Stadium in 1969. He returned as pope to celebrate Mass in the remodeled Stadium in 1979, by which time the copper frieze was gone, replaced by a cement replica stretching only across part of the outfield, as it stands now. (It will return in the new Stadium, but cast in steel; the cost of copper is now prohibitive.) The Stadium was also the site of a rally for South Africa's Nelson Mandela in 1990, and for a memorial service for 9/11 victims in 2001.

A week after those attacks, when the Yankees returned to work, they gathered around the pitcher's mound in the near empty stadium. In uniform, they knelt and prayed for the victims of 9/11, each in their own way.

As ever, Yankee Stadium seemed the right setting for solemn ceremonies.

damore@courant.com

The Courant periodically will write stories about the final year of Yankee Stadium.

For photos and video and to leave your memories of the stadium, go to www.courant.com/yankeestadium