

Opinion: Take me out to the California League

By Joe Mathews

Take me out to the ball game? Sure, as long as you're taking me to San Jose or Lake Elsinore.

Those cities don't have major league teams—that's the point. In California, Major League Baseball is miserable. Big league games run long and cost hundreds of dollars for families to attend. The stadiums in Oakland and Anaheim are dumps, as are the teams in San Francisco and San Diego. In Los Angeles, the championship-contending Dodgers greedily cling to a contract that prevents most Angelenos from watching them on TV.



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But there is an antidote to big-league baloney: the California League—our very own minor league. The games are fast-paced (the lack of TV commercial breaks helps), the ballpark entertainment is fun, and tickets are affordable.

Of course, the California League is Californians, and mirrors the challenges of our high-cost, high-poverty state. The league has teams in Stockton and San Bernardino, cities known for surviving municipal bankruptcies. The California League is strongest in two of the state's most economically challenged regions—the San Joaquin Valley and the Inland Empire each have three teams. The other two squads are in Lancaster, in L.A.

County's high-crime High Desert, and San Jose, a city with wealthy residents but a starving government because it has too few sales-tax producing businesses.

Like California itself, the league has had trouble with out-of-state migration. After the 2016 season, two of the 10 teams were shut down and shifted to the Carolinas. One, the High Desert Mavericks, left after the city of Adelanto canceled the Mavericks' lease in the publicly owned ballpark. The other, the Bakersfield Blaze, departed after seven years of unsuccessful attempts to replace aging Sam Lynn Ballpark.

Charlie Blaney, the California League's president, told me that the state's elimination of local redevelopment agencies earlier this decade has thwarted attempts to build new ballparks. It's hard to construct housing in California—for people or minor league teams.

At the same time, the history of the league (it dates to 1941, nearly 20 years before major league teams arrived) help make it great. In Visalia, you can watch the Rawhide play in Recreation Park, built in 1946, a place so intimate you can hear the players chatting with each other. In Riverside County, you can join the passionate crowds at The Diamond, home of the Lake Elsinore Storm, a Padres affiliate that draws 200,000 fans a year in a city of 55,000.

But there is no place better to watch a ball game in this state than in the league's oldest park, San Jose Municipal Stadium, which opened in 1942.

The San Jose Giants, an affiliate of San Francisco's Giants, spruce up the old place with paint-baseball cartoons, baseball quotes, and baseball banners cover every flat surface. The lovely old grandstand pleases nostalgists. The open picnic space down the left field line appeals to party-throwing millennials. Behind the plate, Giants staffers keep their office doors open so fans can walk in. The players are close

enough for fans to get to know personally; in the right field corner, young women spent much of the game I saw flirting with pitchers in the Giants bullpen.

The stadium shows signs of age-worn spots on the field, and a lack of bathrooms that requires the presence of port-a-potties. But I paid \$13 for a ticket and sat just to the right of home plate, 10 rows up. (You can't sit in Dodger Stadium for less than \$21 even at the cheapest game.)

The game was played well and fast—just over two hours. Every minute between innings was filled with entertaining promotion. Fans played blackjack against the mascot Gigante (to promote a local casino). In a nod to a plumbing company sponsor, a toilet was carried onto the field and a child was invited to throw balls into it. Late in the game, two fans faced off in an air guitar contest.

The crowd was diverse in ethnicity, race and age, and large for a weeknight. Fans really came alive when the night's designated "Beer Batter," Arturo Nieto of the visiting Modesto Nuts, came to the plate. The fans taunted Nieto until he struck out swinging, which triggered the announcement that beer would be half-priced for the following 15 minutes.

"Don't run too fast and don't drink too fast," said the public address announcer, as one-third of the crowd scurried to the beer stands.

I hadn't planned to stay the whole game—I had to get to Salinas for an interview the next morning. But the hot dog and the Fritos nachos tasted great, and I was having too much fun to leave early. And I can't wait to go back.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.