



Hitting the Sacks

Cardinals fans catch an eyeful in a sleepover at Busch Stadium

By DANIEL
DURCHHOLZ

"Sweet ... sweet!"

Tim Brinker smiled as he stood in the Cardinals clubhouse, an inner sanctum most fans will see only on television, and even then as a backdrop to a player feature or hurried postgame interview. Few members of the public are ever allowed to stroll unfettered through the area, observing the details of their favorite players' lockers – what kinds of bats they use, shoes they wear, and what brand of muscle balm, if any, they keep in their private space.

Brinker was one of about 350 adults and children granted special access to such otherwise off-limits areas of Busch Stadium for a single night. The Washington, Mo., native and his 10-year-old son, Ryan, were participants in the "Cardinals Campout" on Sept. 10-11, the first event of its kind in St. Louis.

The idea has become popular among major league teams. Previous campouts have been staged at SBC Park in San Francisco, Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City, Comerica Park in Detroit and

U.S. Cellular Field in Chicago.

The Cardinals Campout was a charity fund-raiser benefiting Cardinals Care, the team's community foundation for kids, and Camp Coca-Cola, a year-round program of camping, community service and education for children.

Besides having access to the clubhouse, campers were allowed to play catch in the bullpens, watch the Cardinals' road game against the Los Angeles Dodgers on the stadium's video board and, best of all, to sleep on the very surface their favorite team plays on.

Talk about your field of dreams.

It was the clubhouse, though, that drew the strongest reaction, especially among adults. "That's worth the price of admission right there," said Jeff Shelburne of O'Fallon, Mo., who brought his 9-year-old son, Greg, to the event. Shelburne was not alone in observing that the clubhouse is neither large nor particularly glamorous, but that the full weight of the Cardinals' hallowed



Campers got a rare peek inside the Cardinals clubhouse to see the team's everyday surroundings. Couches, a television, a sound system and plenty of clothes hangers make up the Redbirds' home.



Over-nighters left messages for the team on the Cardinals' dry-erase board. The board usually shows the Redbirds' schedule for workouts and travel departure.

history is almost palpable there. He was especially thrilled to see the glassed-in locker of Stan Musial, which is maintained on one side of the clubhouse, as if to remind current players just what is possible if they model their careers on that Cardinals great.

Other campers had their pictures taken in front of their favorite players' lockers, lounged on the clubhouse's two leather couches, and even checked out the selection of CDs left behind near the clubhouse sound system. (Apparently the team, or the clubhouse staff, has a preponderance of country music fans.)

A few of the dads in attendance wondered which Cardinals uniform might fit them if they were to suit up: Ray King's was a popular choice. Other campers left messages for the players on one of the clubhouse's dry-erase boards. Some wished the Cardinals well in the playoffs, but others left more personalized messages: "Hey Scotty - I stole your socks!" one joked, while several hopeful, young women giggled as they left various players their phone numbers. A boy in a Pujols jersey showed the typical spirit of Cardinals fans, politely leaving a "Welcome to St. Louis" message for Larry Walker.

More than a few fans spent a quiet moment in front of the late

An inflatable slide, jumping castle and obstacle course kept younger fans active and then ready for sleep following an evening of baseball on the giant screen.

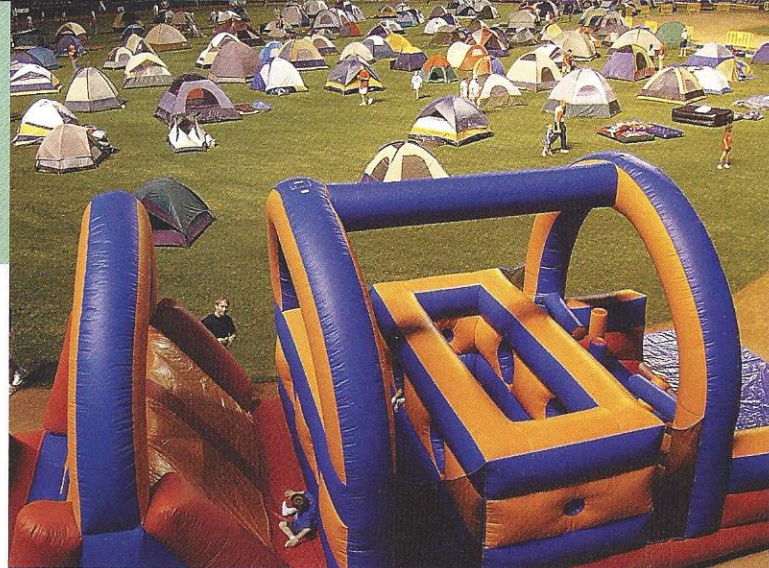
Darryl Kile's empty locker, most of them keeping their thoughts to themselves or saying a whispered word to their sons or daughters.

Back outside, the atmosphere was more festive. Tents covered the outfield grass as campers jockeyed for position, wanting to get as close as possible to the place their favorite players stand in the field. A few tents were specially decorated for the occasion, and at least one had a decidedly South St. Louis flavor – it featured two pink flamingos on top.

Some campers didn't have tents at all. They slept under the stars, with just a blanket, sleeping bag or air mattress between them and the field.

But it would be hours before any of them got to sleep. After check-in at 7:30 p.m., some folks headed straight for the bullpens. Protective tarps covered the mound and plate areas, but that didn't stop those playing catch from pretending they were warming up and waiting for the call to be brought into an important game.

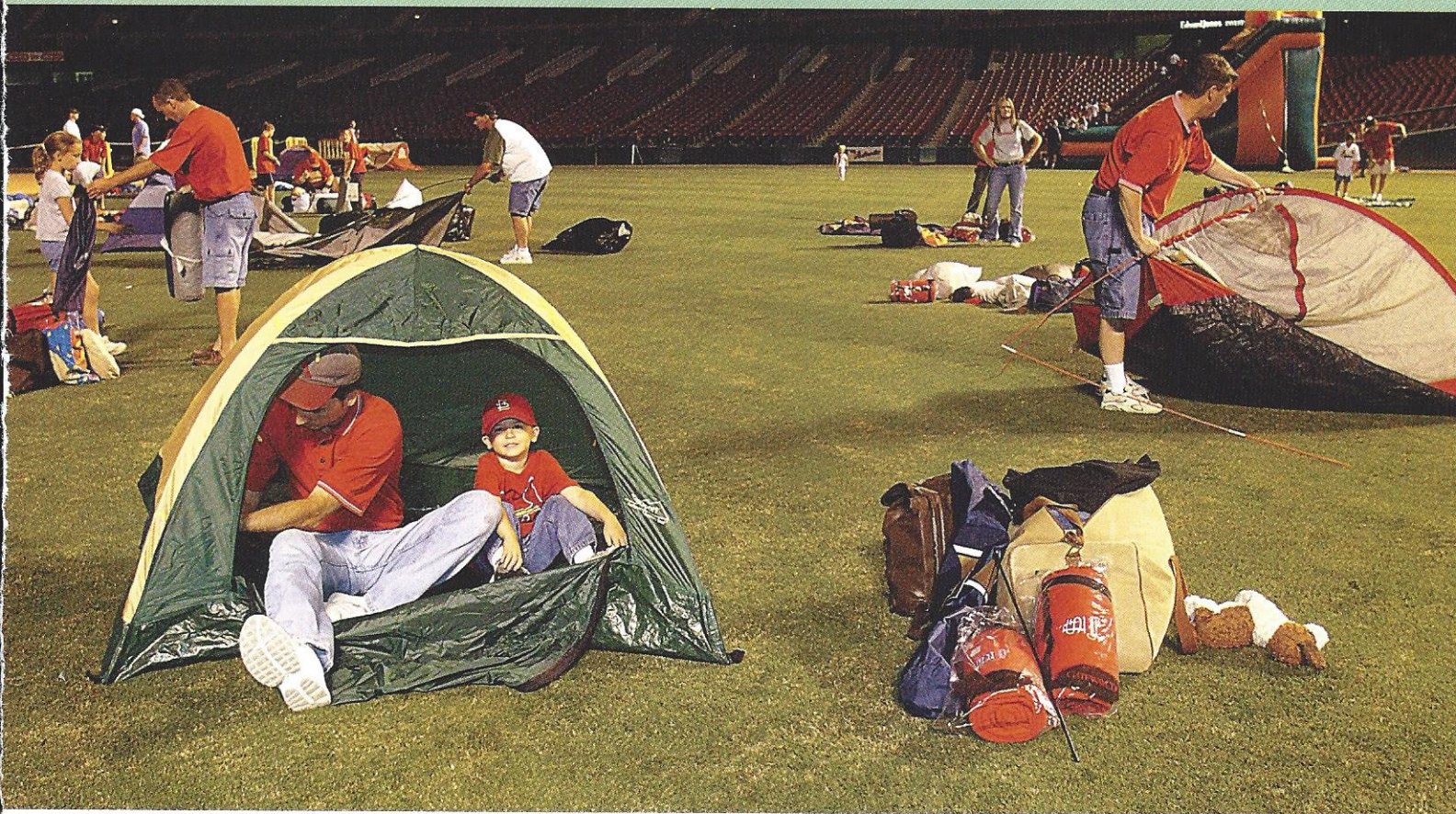
There were activities for smaller children, as well (kids 4 years



old and younger attended for free). An inflatable slide, jumping castle and obstacle course were placed on the warning track. At least one baby was seen having a diaper changed in left field – surely a story that will be told in that family for years, and something that might give Reggie Sanders pause the next time he dives for a line drive.

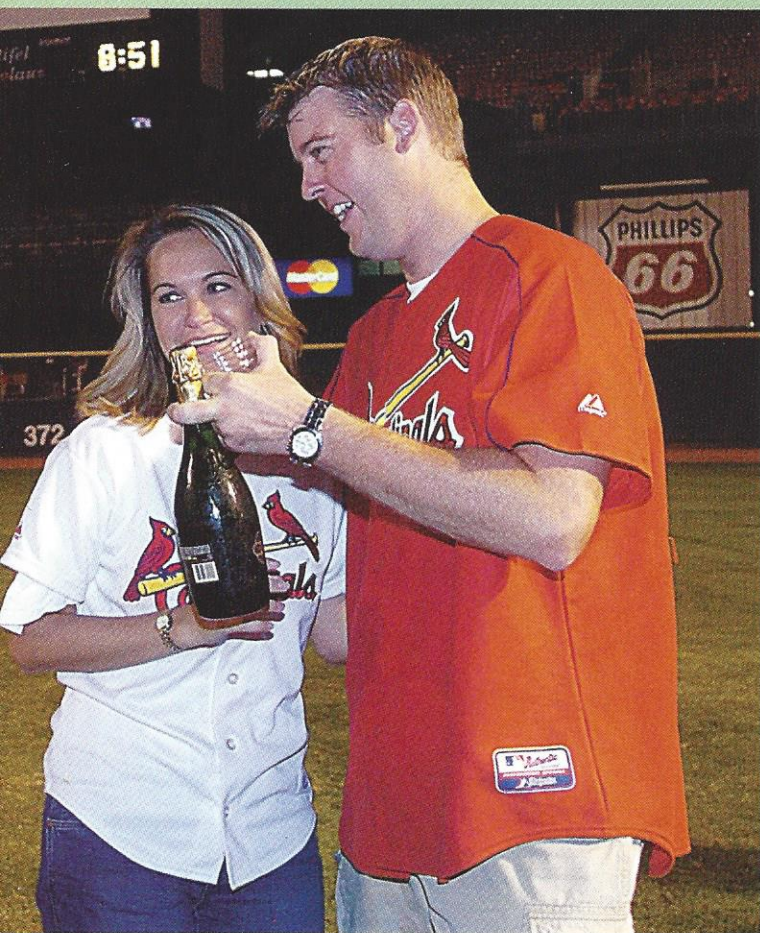
Between 8 and 10 p.m., campers gravitated toward the Homer's Landing picnic area for dinner. The food, prepared by

Baseball teams usually need pitching help, but campers tend to fend for themselves when pitching tents. The crowd enjoyed clear skies and comfortable temperatures for the sleepover.





With the help of Fredbird and emcee Todd Thomas (above), a suitor popped the question to his prize prospect. The love birds then popped a bottle of cheer (below) after agreeing to become lifetime batterymates.



SportService, the Cardinals' general concessionaire, was decidedly a cut above the normal fare served around a campfire. Steaks, barbecue chicken, chicken strips, salads, baked potatoes and, of course, hot dogs were the main bill of fare, while dessert consisted of brownies, cookies and chocolate-covered strawberries. Campers wet their whistles with Coca-Cola products and the occasional cold, frosty, adult beverage.

At 9:10, the right-field scoreboard's video screen came alive with the Cards-Dodgers game. Campers sprawled on the field, watched from Homer's Landing, or even took to the stands for a spell. A cheer went up in the bottom of the first inning when the Cards executed a perfect strike-'em-out, throw-'em-out double play, and when Scott Rolen led off the second with a homer. The Dodgers eventually got the upper hand and won the game, 7-6, but that didn't kill the fun at Busch.

Todd Thomas, a.k.a. "That One Guy" who roams the stadium, microphone in hand during games, kept things light, performing a live version of the "cap dance" with a real baseball and three hard hats. He also handed out prizes in the familiar "Family of the Game" feature.

At one point, Thomas and Fredbird called for a game of "Fredbird Says," with this episode featuring a surprise ending. After

pulling aside a couple, Thomas interpreted for the team mascot, who never utters a sound that can be heard by the average person: "Fredbird says, 'Where's your girlfriend?'" Thomas began.

"Fredbird says, 'Get down on one knee.'" Eventually, a ring was proffered and the man and woman became engaged to be married.

That, as much as anything, underlined the deep relationship the Cardinals enjoy with their fans – a connection that also was on the mind of camper Tim Huelsing of Evansville, Ind., who brought his 8-year-old son, Noah, to the event.

"When I heard they were going to do this, I thought about my relationship with my dad," Huelsing said. "One of the few things we had in common was Cardinals baseball. I knew this would be a great experience for me to have with my son – something we both would remember."

Indeed, fans came from far and wide for the campout. Besides Missouri and Illinois, there were registrants from Kansas, Indiana, Georgia, Kentucky and Tennessee.

After the game, campers continued playing catch, or took in the pitching, batting and video games on the center-field concourse, by Homer's Landing. A midnight snack of pizza, pretzels, chicken wings, deep-fried cannelloni and more brownies was served and, to make the camping experience complete, there was even a scary bedtime story. The disembodied head of Woody Williams appeared on the video screen. Lit from below by a flashlight, he spun a tale of a mysterious "gatekeeper" who haunted the stadium, wreaking havoc. The story had a humorous end, however, as the "gatekeeper"



Cardinals fans took a break from their own games to watch the Redbirds play the Los Angeles Dodgers in a late-night game from the West Coast.

turned out to be none other than Fredbird.

In the morning, reveille was played at 7 a.m. and campers packed up their tents and headed for breakfast – another sumptuous spread. Along with the food, autographs were offered by a few former Cardinals players, including Bob Forsch, Greg Mathews and John Costello.

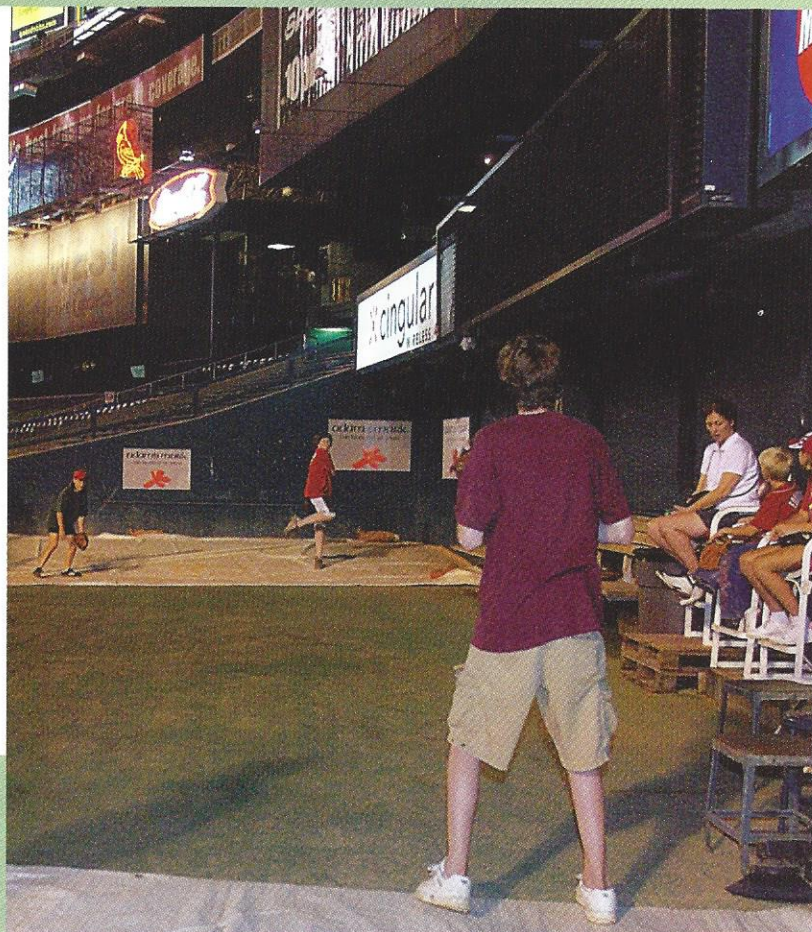
Noah Huelsing said the autographs were his favorite part of the campout. “Now I have proof I spent the night at Busch Stadium!” he said.

Greg Shelburne’s favorite activity was finding out how fast he could throw a baseball by way of the radar gun at the event.

Ryan Brinker enjoyed camping close to first base, where his favorite Cardinal, Albert Pujols, plays. Ryan’s dad, Tim, had a moment relating to the current season that he would cherish as well.

“The most gratifying thing for me was being in the locker room and seeing Rick Ankiel’s uniform back in there,” he said. “That was so cool. Everyone is pulling for him.”

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Dreams with eyes open, like those with eyes closed, came easily on this night. Well before thoughts of sleep, campers played catch in the bullpen, just like their heroes.