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The Bronx? No Thonx! But What About Soccer?

A few early-summer thoughts...

Most of the lucky young men who play baseball for a living in the Bronx reside in New Jersey. Almost half the fans who watch the young men live in the northern suburbs. The Yankees' principal owner, George Steinbrenner, lives in Tampa, Fla. And the visiting teams stay in Manhattan when they play a series with the Yankees.

Is there anyone who can explain what the Yankees do for the Bronx, except provide seasonal jobs for vendors, car jockeys and trinket hawkers? Anybody familiar with Yankee Stadium knows that fans don't tend to take strolls through the neighborhood before or after games. That's not a reflection on the neighborhood itself: it's just that the fans don't live there. They're in a hurry to get home. Maintaining the tradition of Yankee Stadium is a worthy goal, but why are Bronx politicians so amenable to renovating a building that is used an average of fewer than two days a week?

Consider the Bronx: More than 40 percent of the borough's adults over age 25 do not have a high school diploma, and 43 percent of the borough's children live in poverty. The Bronx has the city's highest unemployment rate. Clearly, housing, schools, job training and small businesses will do more to help Bronx residents than a baseball stadium surrounded by parking lots. Why don't Bronx politicians leverage their support for a renovated stadium with new public funds that might actually make a difference for their constituents?

And then there's the question of how much baseball really means, especially to the immigrants of the Bronx. Granted, many hail from Latin America, where baseball is popular. But America's national pastime pales in comparison to the immigrants' passion for soccer.

With the World Cup under way in France, it's worth remembering that soccer, not baseball, is the great global sport, and, in fact, it's vital to the city's continued role as the self-proclaimed capital of the world. Billions of people are caught up in the tournament in France, including the mosaic of immigrant groups that have revitalized neighborhoods in all five boroughs. And yet the city plans to build new minor-league baseball stadiums on Staten Island and in Brooklyn, instead of looking to the future and building soccer fields for the city's new immigrant population. Any evaluation of the recreational needs of New York in the 21st century has to take soccer into account. If City Hall had the vision, it could foster soccer as the new urban pastime, perhaps fostering competitive rivalries between boroughs or neighborhoods similar to rivalries in Europe and South America.

Manhattan-based politicians may not realize it, but the city's soccer fields are filled to capacity and in desperate need of expansion. Ironically enough, around the country politicians recognize the increasing importance of soccer even in middle-class suburbs - that's where all those so-called

"soccer moms" supposedly live. And yet here in multicultural New York, politicians still consider soccer to be a foreign game.

Let Him Spend It!

Eliot Spitzer, the 39-year-old lawyer seeking the Democratic Party's nomination for Attorney General, is being unfairly criticized for spending his own money in his quest for elective office. What's wrong with spending family money on a political campaign? The voters are fully capable of choosing candidates regardless of personal wealth - just look at the recent gubernatorial primaries in California, where millionaire Democrats Jane Harman and Al Checchi lost despite spending millions of their own money.

Actually, there is something endearing about a politician who doesn't have to beg for money or worry about offending would-be donors. There are not enough wealthy people like Mr. Spitzer who are willing to subject themselves to the day-to-day grind of a political campaign, who want to do more with their lives than blow the family fortunes on trophy spouses, beachfront estates or drugs.

Self-righteous political prudes resent the wealthy in politics. But New York voters know better. That's why we've had such governors as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Averell Hamman and Nelson Rockefeller.

Mr. Spitzer should be free to spend his inheritance as he sees fit. It shouldn't be an issue in the campaign.

Food for Thought

Food vendors thrive in midtown Manhattan because they are the only dining option for working people who don't have expense accounts. The absence of alternatives (except for the fast-food chains) isn't hard to explain: Ever since the City Planning Commission began giving financial incentives for construction of massive outdoor plazas, there has been a shortage of street-level retail space in Manhattan.

No wonder there are few affordable restaurants in Manhattan. And with rents rising, even the upscale eateries are wondering how they can afford to stay in their current locations. The solution to the vendor-congestion problem is not Giuliani-style prohibitions, but more street-level retail space so that all kinds of shops, and not just Disney stores and Hard Rock Cafes, can thrive in Manhattan.