

Ballpark blends history with modern conveniences



Braves fans learn at an early age to “chop on.” Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

ATLANTA — Baseball may be a simple game — hit, catch, throw — but the history, the competition, the nuances of the game, the pageantry are what make it magical.

Unlike football and basketball where the dimensions of the field and court never change, the same is not true for baseball parks. Sure, the distance from the pitcher’s mound to home plate and between all the bases are a constant, but outfield configurations are all different. This makes each park unique.



Ronald Acuna Jr. is one of the Braves hot young players.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

SunTrust Park, now in its second season, is the newest ballpark in Major League Baseball. The Braves are an exciting team to watch this season with a slew of young players; some aren't even old enough to drink.

Left fielder Ronald Acuna Jr., 20, is one of those players. He's also one of the major draws to the ballpark. For his home debut on May 4 it was a sell-out and an attendance record of 41,807 for this park that opened in 2017.



Giants third baseman Pablo Sandoval signs autographs. Photo/Kathryn Reed

As a Giants fan – thus the reason to be there for three games earlier this month – I thought the crowd size might have had something to do with who the visiting team was. The Giants cooled off the sizzling Braves, sweeping them in three games.

While the game is the main draw, this ballpark has so much to offer that even a casual fan of the sport is bound to find plenty to enjoy. I think of AT&T Park in San Francisco as still being new even though it opened in 2000. After being in Atlanta, I can tell my home park is a bit dated.



More than 50 Braves players and managers have been inducted into the Hall of Fame. Photo/Kathryn Reed

I was especially impressed by the tribute to the Braves' history, with a nod to baseball lore in general, that is showcased on the lower level. It is appropriately named Monument Garden.

It tells the story of the Braves journey from Boston starting in 1871, which makes this the oldest franchise in Major League Baseball, to Milwaukee and then to Atlanta in 1966. Names like Babe Ruth and Hank Aaron are tied to the Braves.

Greg Maddux's 1995 Cy Young award is there for all to see.



Even traditional ballpark food is better in the Delta Club.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

The hardware the Braves have collected through the years is impressive.

It so happened that some of that history was on the field during batting practice on May 4. Legendary outfielder Andruw Jones was seen talking to John Schuerholz, who was general manager of the Braves from 1990-2007 and then the Braves president from 2007-16. He entered the Hall of Fame in 2017.

Another piece of history the Braves are holding onto is the tomahawk chop. The phrase now being touted by the marketing folks is "chop on." It's supposed to be less offensive. It really is something to see nearly 40,000 people either wave foam tomahawks or raise their arm in a chopping motion.



The area outside SunTrust Park is full of eateries, shops and condos. Photo/Kathryn Reed

As with most of the modern parks, an area has been dedicated to the younger set. A zipline and other kids' activities are behind the outfield.

I had the privilege of being at the park with a season ticket holder who has seats in row 11 behind home plate. Wow! It had been a while since I'd seen a game from that perspective. These were the most luxurious seats I've ever sat in for a sporting event – they had cushioning – not just hard plastic.



Giants catcher Buster Posey is ready for batting practice.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

These are part of the Delta Club section. Much like at AT&T, there is a special eating area for these ticket holders where the masses are not allowed. A big difference though is all the food and drink are included with the ticket price at SunTrust.

And it's not just traditional ballpark food that is available. The chefs acknowledge each visiting team with specialties from their home city. For San Francisco, it was grilled oysters on the half shell and ahi tacos.

The food was outstanding – grilled vegetables, portabella sliders, a corn concoction that was worth having more than one day, pizza with soft dough, nachos with a slightly spicy white cheese, salads that tasted like the veggies were just picked.



SunTrust Park is beautiful day and night. Photo/Kathryn Reed

And with Sharla's tickets come the opportunity for four "memories" she can participate in. She cashed one in while I was there – the opportunity to be on the field for batting practice. What a treat.

Sure it was fun to see some of my favorite players – Buster Posey, Brandon Crawford – up close, but it was more impressive watching the players interact with the fans. (It's also possible to pay for this experience.) These players on both teams were warming up for a job they were about to do, but some still took the time to sign autographs – no matter who the fan was rooting for. This was classy – just like the park.