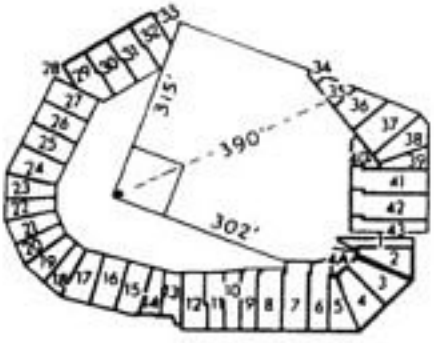
CHAPTER ONE

Oddest of the Odd

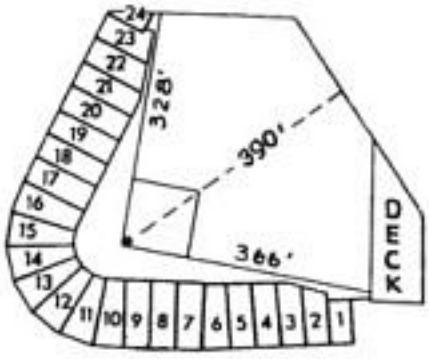
IN ANY SPORT BUT BASEBALL, IDENTIFYING A SPECIFIC STADIUM BY THE diagram of its playing area would be difficult, perhaps impossible. Standardization is a staple in stadiums and arenas for sports like football, hockey, and basketball. But baseball, from the beginning, has felt less confined in determining its outer reaches. In the days before enclosed stadiums, a river or copse of trees could intrude upon a playing area. When fences were erected, it was for the purpose of charging admission to the game, and no standards existed for their height, their distance from home plate, or the shape they imposed upon the outfield.

Through most of baseball's history, the contours of its playing fields have been distinctive. Often it has been a matter of necessity. Ballparks wedged into the confines of existing city blocks emerged with strange shapes. Quirks in street schemes produced otherwise inexplicable crannies. Where a building remained because team owners were unable to acquire and demolish it, the outfield simply took a detour around it. The result is that baseball fans can tell where they are, whether it's Fenway Park in Boston or Wrigley Field in Chicago, by the idiosyncracies of the stadium. Sometimes just a glance at a stadium diagram is sufficient.

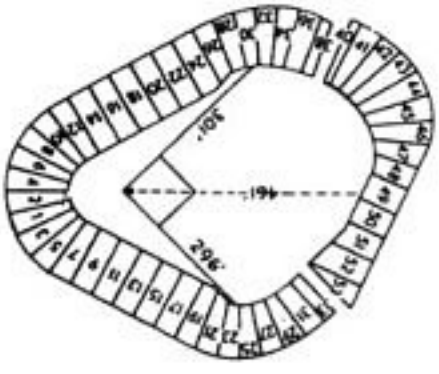
But even in a sport known for its curiously configured stadiums, one in particular stands out: the Polo Grounds, an odd name for an odd stadium, was home to several baseball teams, most notably the New York Giants until the team moved to San Francisco following the 1957 season. Its horseshoe-



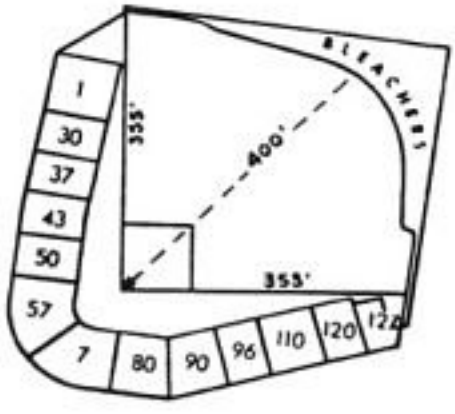
Fenway Park, Boston



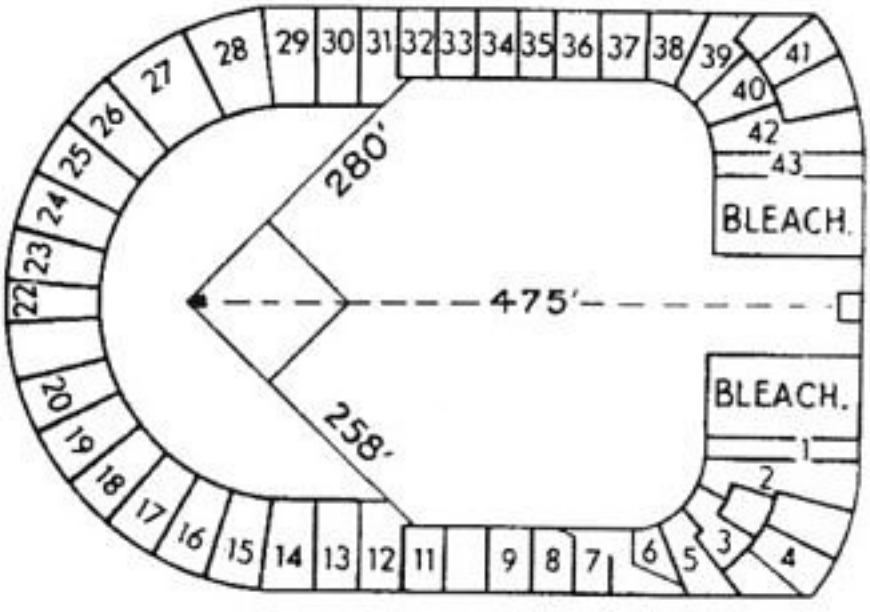
Crosley Field, Cincinnati



Yankee Stadium, New York



Wrigley Field, Chicago



Polo Grounds, New York

shaped grandstand and elongated playing area provided for ridiculously short distances down the foul lines and equally ridiculous long distances to the power alleys and center field.

So short were its foul-line distances that inches were sometimes included in the measurements—279 feet, 8 inches, to left; 257 feet, 8 inches, to right. As for the distance to center, it was so long that the figure almost could have been rounded to the nearest hundred.

But there's much more to the Polo Grounds than its peculiar profile. Just as the New York American League team was identified with its home, Yankee Stadium, and the Dodgers in Brooklyn were known for Ebbets Field, the Giants were connected with the Polo Grounds. In some ways, it was easy to overlook the home of the Giants when compared to the grandeur of Yankee Stadium and the charm of Ebbets Field.

But in most other ways, the Polo Grounds was impossible to ignore—a massive edifice, tucked in between the Harlem River and an lofty outcropping of mica schist known as Coogan's Bluff. The vicinity of this escarpment in Upper Harlem (a portion of northern Manhattan) was originally part of a farm granted by the British Crown to John Gardiner in the early 1700s. It received its name after one of Gardiner's descendants, Harriet Gardiner Lynch, married James J. Coogan, a politician who would become Manhattan borough president in 1899.

When the New York Giants moved into Coogan's Hollow (the flat area below the bluff) in 1889, the area was considered the outskirts of town. Only in the past 30 years had the city even begun laying out streets on the eastern portion of Manhattan north of 155th Street, which was the southern boundary of the region. And it had also been barely 15 years since the area the Giants' stadium occupied was anything other than river-bottom wetlands that were more often than not covered with water. Landfill has been changing the size and shape of Manhattan ever since the Dutch arrived in the early seventeenth century,and the portion of land on which the Polo Grounds was built had evolved from the fill that had been dumped into the river.

But while its streets and, for that matter, its very turf, were relatively new, this part of town was served by public transit, providing a way for fans to get to the games. Elevated railroads first reached the area in the 1880s, followed by subways in the early twentieth century.

Fans had a choice in their approach to the Polo Grounds with regard to both direction and elevation. They could arrive outside the center-field area, exiting the subway station at 155th Street. Or they could approach the

stadium from atop the bluff, having to descend a walkway, actually going downhill, to get to seats in the upper deck.

Beyond its structure and setting, the Polo Grounds is distinguished by the fact that some of baseball's most historic moments occurred here. They include one of the most memorable events ever, Bobby Thomson's home run to win the 1951 pennant for the Giants, as well as one of its greatest controversies, Merkle's Boner in 1908.

The Polo Grounds evoked emotions in the fans; some loved the place, others hated it.

Robert Creamer, the baseball historian and biographer of the game's stars, provided fodder for those in the latter category. "The Polo Grounds is a terrible place to watch a ball game," he wrote in 1963, citing the distance of outfield seats from home plate and the posts that ruined the view even from those seats closer in. According to Cramer, "Watching a game there is like watching it through a picket fence, and the people who sit there sway back and forth continuously during a game, first one way to get a glimpse of the pitcher winding up—as the batter disappears behind a post—and then the other way, abruptly dismissing the pitcher, to watch the batter swing."

But Fred Stein, who grew up watching the Giants in the Polo Grounds and authored a book about the team, *Under Coogan's Bluff*, had a different opinion. "Despite the great distance from the bleachers to the plate and the fact that many seats were obstructed by pillars," he said, "the Polo Grounds was a great park in which to see a ball game."

Dr. Seth C. Hawkins is another man who spent much of his youth at the Polo Grounds. He's also an authority on what it's like to watch games in other places (having earned the nickname "Dr. Fan" because he has most likely attended major league games at more stadiums than any other fan) and continues to rate the Polo Grounds highly. One of the reasons for Hawkins's opinion is that the Giants had a policy of allowing fans with general admission tickets to sit in the last few rows of the lower grandstand behind home plate, rather than sending them to the far reaches of the outfield. "A broke kid could get there two hours before game time, when the gates opened," recalled Hawkins, "and if he could run pretty fast, he could get a seat behind home plate." Hawkins would enter at the outfield gate off Eighth Avenue and, once through the turnstiles, join the race with other young fans for the good seats. "It was a popular kids' pastime," Hawkins said of the dash from the area in right center field through the concourse to the sections behind home plate. "They recognized this was a deal they were not going to get at Ebbets Field and certainly not at Yankee Stadium."