

this is thesauerbrunreport.com archive page covering the period 12-18-08 to 8-4-09:

As I've mentioned before, my television programming provider here in Queens is Time Warner Cable. My bill is big, but my menu of offerings is stacked to the max.

Even though Direct TV is not an option in my dwelling (as is the case for many who live in an urban setting), I credit the satellite TV outfit's aggressive campaign to woo cable customers for stoking a competitive fire that has forced Time Warner to improve its product.

Time Warner has never been able to match all of Direct TV's HD and sports options, but I must say my level of satisfaction with cable is extremely high. In the last couple of years, Time Warner pleasantly surprised me over and over again with exciting new channels on the high def tier. One can now surf from channel 651 all the way up to 796 and see nothing but HD. It's amazing.

I bring it up now because this wonderful relationship I have with my cable company soured a couple weeks ago. Time Warner remotely changed the software on my cable box with an unexpected, middle-of-the-night download outside my control. The cable company refers to the operating system on its cable boxes as "Navigator." It remains so, but it has gone from a program called "passport" to a new one referred to as "mystro."

Time-Warner says the new product will "enhance" the television experience. But I flat out don't like it and believe it's an inferior operating system.

My biggest beef – and this may seem minor to some – is that the program guide has been weakened considerably. The program guide is especially important these days given the number of channels and programs available.

Until this uninvited software change, I would begin all my TV-watching sessions studying the program guide for a look at all of that day's "live" sports programming. Given the number of channels on my system – and given the fact there are no other comprehensive sources offering such a precise list – it was a wonderful tool to determine what was at my disposal.

Unfortunately, the cable box's new software doesn't perform such a search. You can search by sport, but there is no differentiation between programming that is recorded – and that which is live. It probably doesn't seem like a big deal, but the list of programs inclusive of both live and recorded is a mile long and is so unwieldy, it can't be effectively used.

For example, a "live" sports search on a Saturday afternoon in September would help me figure out what college football games were available to me. Now, a search through "football" includes a myriad of taped programs that include discussion of football but aren't an actual live broadcast of a game.

Additionally, the new software fails to recognize horse racing as a searchable sport. Yeah, the old system lumped in thoroughbred horse racing as part of a broad "equestrian" category, but at least you could

isolate racing telecasts.

In promotional material, Time Warner says the “new Navigator platform allows the addition of many new channels, including more HD channels.” That’s cool, I guess, but I seriously miss my old program guide.

Whatever improved functionality the platform provides is far outweighed by the fact the program guide is no longer of much use to me.

8-4-09 0130

The great filly Rachel Alexandra again beat the boys, romping to a six-length victory in the Haskell Invitational Sunday at Monmouth Park. I watched coverage of the race on TVG.

For those who bet on Rachel to win, the return was fifty cents on the dollar. For those who are simply fans of horse racing, her easy and visually impressive victory again produced a rush – or a buzz – that few horses in recent history have inspired.

In a sport showcasing mostly fragile animals unable to string together long records of domination, we now have this very special three-year-old female horse toying with her opponents no matter the venue or the gender of those she runs against.

In 2009, Rachel has run nine times and won nine times. Included in her incredible campaign was the takedown of Derby winner Mine That Bird in the Preakness and a twenty-length win in the Kentucky Oaks.

Each time she enters a race track to run, she’s the most impressive looking horse on the course. She holds her head up high. Her ears stand distinctly erect prior to her entrance in the starting gate, which is the horse’s way of saying she’s eager to run. Because Rachel has now twice demonstrated the rare ability to out-run male horses, she’s gaining a huge following. The television images of fans at Monmouth showed lots of women and girls celebrating girl power. One young girl was shown holding up a homemade sign that said: “Yeah, I Run Like a Girl...Try to Keep Up!”

Yet, despite this amazing display of excellence by Rachel, it’s not enough for some who follow the sport.

Rather than fully celebrate Rachel’s victory and savor another thrilling run in a brilliant three-year-old campaign unlike any in recent memory, the TVG broadcast crew assembled at Monmouth used much of its post-race analysis air-time to obsessively push an agenda that’s already been ruled out by Rachel’s owner Jess Jackson.

In separate interviews, TVG reporter Michelle Yu goaded both the owner (Jess Jackson) and the trainer (Steve Asmussen) of Rachel Alexandra about the possibility of running the filly in the Breeder’s Cup at Santa Anita the first Saturday of November.

Asmussen politely sidestepped the issue. Jackson bluntly reminded Yu that he had already made it clear Rachel wouldn't run in the Cup. Santa Anita's artificial surface isn't conducive to Rachel's running style and Jackson has wisely deflected pressure to compete in the Breeder's Cup by declaring months in advance that Rachel wouldn't participate in it.

With that out of the way, Jackson can continue mapping out lucrative and prestigious races that keep Rachel's amazing run of dominance intact. Yu asked Jackson his short-term plans. "She'll tell us," said Jackson.

What Jackson likely means by that is that if Rachel appears healthy and happy in the next few days, she'll run in the Travers Stakes at historic Saratoga Racecourse in four weeks. It's the biggest race of the summer at the most important venue for racing in the country at this time of year. It is possible Rachel could face both Summer Bird and Mine That Bird in the Travers among others which would mean a potential matchup between the winners of each of this past spring's triple crown races.

Jackson also told Yu that he's more than willing to pit Rachel against the undefeated five-year-old champion filly Zenyatta but hinted he may wait until 2010 for that much-anticipated duel to occur. Jackson said Zenyatta's light, widely-spaced 2009 campaign would give her a distinct physical advantage if she were to meet Rachel during what's left of the current calendar year. My hunch is that Zenyatta and Rachel will appear in the same race at either Oaklawn or Churchill sometime in the first six months of 2010 (if both stay healthy and continue winning).

-The only real negative development on Haskell day was the weather. A drenching rain-storm passed west to east after mid-day which prompted a slew of scratches. Attendance was announced at just 37,090. Had it been a nice day, the house total likely would have been fifty-thousand plus.

-Former Met catcher Paul LoDuca was among the analysts on the TVG set at Monmouth Sunday.

8-3-09 0140

How in the world does a emotionally troubled, homeless guy have the power to cripple air traffic in the nation's biggest city for the better part of a summer day?

It's hard to understand, but that's what happened Saturday at LaGuardia Airport when a shit-faced 32-year-old man identified as Scott McGann of New York City launched his journey with a ticket on a United flight and a duffel bag containing wires, batteries and a power strip in addition to other personal effects.

We don't know yet based on news reports and conversations with airport personnel whether any words were exchanged between McGann and the police officers who initially sized up the threat or lack thereof. What we do know is that police said afterward that McCann appeared so mentally lost, he didn't utter a single word when he was arrested.

It was the airport operator at LaGuardia – The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey – which decided to order the evacuation of the entire Central Terminal Building soon after the discovery of McGann's bag of wires and batteries set out-of-proportion, irrational fear in motion. The Port's decision (made in conjunction with its own police department) sent thousands of air travelers scrambling for the exits. Passengers stood in the morning sun for two to three hours and many ended up occupying airport roadways which put a crimp in vehicular movement at a time when many customers were being dropped off for departing flights. If there was an evacuation "plan," it didn't appear to include guidance to avoid pedestrian use of roadways.

Even customers who passed through security checkpoints at different concourses distant from where the McGann folly took place (Concourse C) were ordered outside. I don't understand this at all. Passengers fully screened by the Transportation Security Administration in other concourses hundreds of yards from the suspect were somehow deemed to be in areas considered a security risk. This is quite a leap in judgment by the Port Authority. It seems to suggest the Port believed McGann had accomplices or had personally infiltrated other areas of the airport. How else do you explain the Port's decision? Since high-tech screening equipment at those concourses made them sterile and secure areas, why would you evacuate them?

"It's better to be safe, than sorry" is the line you often hear from those who make rash, irrational security decisions. In this case, however, you have a group of airlines who were desperately attempting to conduct business at the end of a week already put in ruins by horrendous weather-induced interruptions.

An airline's early-morning departures are considered the most important. They get the ball rolling. The airplanes are in position; they're loaded with passengers and bags and take off. The schedule is set in motion. On Saturday, the critical phase of the airline's day was sabotaged by an overreaction.

The people who ordered the evacuation didn't have to deal with the thousands of angry customers who saw their travel plans altered or destroyed by a guy who turned out to be harmless buffoon.

The focus in news accounts will likely be on McGann and his trick bag. But really, one should question whether a more careful assessment of potential threats is in order before taking drastic security precautions.

When the airport re-opened, the damage to airlines and their customers was evident. A couple dozen cancellations and delays of four hours or more amounted to chaos in the customer service areas where airline employees attempted to re-book those with foiled connections.

When I walked past the American Airlines ticket counter at about 1:30 PM (a full seven hours after the evacuation), there were an estimated 600 people waiting in line to hash out new itineraries with an American ticket counter employee. You could tell people were pissed.

Many of them probably didn't know their predicament was the result of a blown threat assessment.

-The annual Arch Fest hoops tourney in suburban Chicago was too much for the left Achilles tendon of my brother Tim. The 6-3 power forward ruptured the tendon during tourney action Saturday as he moonlighted as a member of the class of 1984 lineup. Surgery will be followed by a long recuperation and rehab period. Wish him the best if you see him.

8-2-09 0130

For the first time on the band's current national tour, Green Day covered the Who's "A Quick One, While He's Away" at the second of two shows at Madison Square Garden earlier this week.

The well-executed ten-minute plus performance of the classic medley from the Who's second record came about half-way through Green Day's 170-minute show.

The age-diverse sold-out crowd quieted down and appeared oblivious for the first time all night during Quick One, leading Green Day's front man Billy Joe Armstrong to pronounce the band would likely not play the selection the rest of the tour.

Armstrong insists on non-stop, full-out physical and vocal expression from concert attendees and clearly understood the tune fell flat.

Since Green Day has a library stocked with lovable anthems, the Quick One-created gap in crowd appreciation stood out.

It was my first ever Green Day show after a long appreciation of the band's influence. Green Day's most recent release clinched my decision to attend as did the reasonably-priced \$29.50 ticket.

I ended up being wowed as much or more by Armstrong's showmanship/stage theatrics than I was in the band's solid set-list.

When Green Day played "Know Your Enemy" (the excellent first single off the new record), Armstrong wandered stage left and entered the seating area. He walked up an aisle and got mobbed by thrilled fans. Armstrong kissed a man and several women along the way. One guy holding a full plastic cup of beer poured all of it into Armstrong's mouth before the singer made his way back to the stage.

Plenty of seasoned rock and roll fans sneer that Green Day has veered to the wrong side of a line separating tidy and accessible hit-making from compelling punk-influenced music of importance. "21 Guns" off the new record may serve as an exhibit for those who have given up on or ignore the band. I can understand that position I guess, but man, Armstrong had a crowd of young and old on their feet for nearly three hours of music that included plenty of rebellious and left of center themes. A large mosh pit was filled with young people who used the thick and occasionally rapid beats laid out by drummer Tre Cool and bassist Mike Dirnt to dance and throw well-intentioned shoulder blocks for much of the set.

A steady stream of fancy stage pyrotechnics and a slew of other machine-driven and manual visuals

worked well, I thought. I laughed hard when Armstrong deployed a device that shot out sheets of toilet paper into the crowd.

I sat up in section 402 with Montclair Mike. We weren't among the fans doing full arm-waves nor did we sing along with all the songs. But we had a great time. At about 9:50 PM, Mike climbed up the dark, steep aisle to get a couple of cold beers just before sales were cut off. What a clutch move that was.

We intentionally missed the show's opening act Kaiser Chiefs. Before the concert, we had dinner at Wolfgang's on Park Avenue which I would put right up there with any of the classic city steakhouses.

8-1-09 1110

All Mets GM Omar Minaya had to do was fire player development boss Tony Bernazard. It was easy. Bernazard had recently displayed unstable and unprofessional behavior in a series of separate incidents on the job and he was becoming a distracting embarrassment to the Mets organization.

But when Minaya held a news conference at Citi Field Monday afternoon to announce he had canned Bernazard, the GM strayed from the script likely written by the talented Met PR man Jay Horwitz. Minaya attacked Met beat writer Adam Rubin of the News (who was seated in the audience of media members). Minaya floated a bizarre conspiracy theory. He suggested Rubin's coverage of Bernazard's erratic behavior was motivated by Rubin's desire for Bernazard's job !

It's not unusual for an ink-stained wretch to jump to the dark side. Reporters sell out and work for the organizations they cover all the time. But to suggest it is somehow realistic for a young beat writer to suddenly become the top overseer of the Met minor league system seems far-fetched to say the least. Rubin will hopefully discuss Minaya's claim in the paper on Tuesday. To a News colleague Monday, Rubin compared his qualifications for Bernazard's position to the resume of George Costanza. Even if Rubin harbors desires to get a baseball job, it doesn't jive with Minaya's suggestion Rubin would have a prayer at landing a VP job like the one Bernazard had. For now, the bottom line is Rubin's coverage of Bernazard has been backed by extensive sourcing. None of his reporting has been proven to be untrue and the Mets have fired Bernazard for the very conduct Rubin's stories led the way on.

What Minaya has done here is dig his own grave a little deeper. Fans of a losing baseball team in disarray want a coherent executive standing on firm ground with a vision to win again. With his performance Monday, Minaya looked like very much like the unhinged man he fired.

-The announced attendance for Sunday's Gold Cup final between Mexico and the US at Giants Stadium was 79,156. Watching on television, I didn't see any empty seats even in the highest corners of the building. It's the largest crowd to ever watch a soccer game at Giants Stadium. Considering the two squads fielded B-level rosters, I'd say the crowd size is at least partly reflective of an increasing level of interest in the sport in this part of the country. It helped that the lowest priced ticket was \$30 and of

course it helped to have large numbers of Mexico supporters in the area, but this is a fickle sports market and the place was jammed.

-Wilco will play a big venue for its first two Chicago dates of the calendar year. Tickets have gone on sale for two shows at the UIC Pavilion in mid-October. Several ticket-sellers have reported the band will use the venue's "end-stage" configuration which will make capacity for the shows about ten-thousand. At \$39.50 per ticket, the per-gig haul for the band will be huge. It'll be interesting to see if Wilco can sell both shows out. For many years, there was no alcohol sold for any event – concert or otherwise – at the Pavilion. A banner on the Pavilion's web site now proudly promotes its newly-obtained license to serve alcohol.

-The new Hampton Inn that has been sprouting up across from LaGuardia Airport will begin accepting guests September 1. For the heck of it, I checked room rates during the hotel's first week in business and the cheapest I could find was \$279 a night. The US Open is going on that week in nearby Flushing Meadows. Once the tennis tournament wraps up, room rates drop down to \$179 per night which is about average for the half-dozen hotels of its quality near LaGuardia.

7-28-09 0145

When the weather radar appears red in color, it's bad. When it turns purple as it did Sunday, air traffic at LaGuardia shuts down.

There was lightning. There were pebble-sized hail stones. And there were wind gusts reaching 40 knots.

Sunday late afternoon into evening was one intense thunderstorm after another. The weather delayed some inbound flights more than six hours.

In fact, Continental Express flight 2142 out of Cleveland reached LaGuardia seven and a half hours late !!!

The "super cell" that passed over LaGuardia about 6:40 PM Sunday was as intense a thunderstorm as I've seen in a long time. The rain came down in buckets.

To the delight of onlookers, a beautiful rainbow not usually seen in these parts appeared in the sky to the northeast soon after that first storm passed.

The line of airplanes waiting to depart numbered at least 40 during the early evening.

When I finally walked out of work at 2 AM Monday, bleary-eyed inbound travelers were lined up by the hundreds waiting for taxi cabs. Those who failed to depart LaGuardia because of flight cancellations were figuring out ways to get horizontal and comfortable on terminal floors to wait for flights during the day Monday.

7-27-09 0330

It was Lynn Sweet of the Chicago Sun-Times who got picked to ask the tenth and final question of last week's prime-time Presidential news conference focusing on the proposed expansion of health care insurance. Rather than continue with a mundane dissection of the complex issue, Sweet chose a question about a hot-button news story that had been debated for the better part of the week.

She asked the President to comment on the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, perhaps the most esteemed black scholar in this country.

"What does that incident say to you?" Sweet asked President Obama. "And what does it say about race relations in America?"

By now you know what Obama's answer was. What he should have said is this:

"It is regrettable that a routine police investigation of a break-in at the residence of my friend Henry Gates escalated into a hostile encounter and an arrest. The incident should have been nothing more than a simple and innocent misunderstanding. Unfortunately it went way beyond that. Based on the facts as we know them, a witness called police to report a home invasion. Police responded to the call and the first officer on the scene says he faced resistance attempting to sort out the identity of the resident's owner. Obviously, the situation should not have ended with a law-abiding man in handcuffs but the police were called to the residence and greater cooperation from Mr. Gates likely would have produced a quick and peaceful end to the investigation. There is little doubt people of color are treated with greater suspicion by law enforcement in many jurisdictions in this country. It's unfair, it's illegal and it shouldn't be tolerated. But to Lynn Sweet's question about the connection between this incident and race relations in this country, I'd say there is no clear connection. Yes, the first police officer on the scene was white and the man observed barging through the door of his home was black. Sometimes biases wrongly cause people to see things that aren't there. In this case, it's not clear race clouded or enhanced the appearance of a man breaking into a home. Nobody seems to be questioning the decision-making of the witness who observed and reported the action. The police were called. Cooler heads should have prevailed. Professor Gates should not have been arrested nor should he have verbally inflamed what should have been a routine interaction with law enforcement."

The actual response by Obama was front-page news on Thursday and Friday. Law enforcement weighed in. So did the ACLU, civil rights leaders and co-workers of the arresting officer.

I would agree with those who argue the alleged conduct by Gates failed to meet the threshold for a disorderly conduct arrest. But man, he was popping off on the cop and immediately injected race into the equation. Gates seemed anxiously quick to link his situation to actual clear-cut cases of racial profiling and bias encountered by black men across this country. He acted like a baseball manager daring the umpire to eject him so he could send a message to his ball club.

This wasn't a "stop and frisk." It wasn't a leap of faith or jump to conclusion by the police officer to seek

and establish the identity of Gates.

Obama proved during the campaign he has great power to inspire and educate on the subject of race. But he blew his answer to Sweet, picking the wrong spot to shine light on racial profiling.

Obama's subsequent telephone call to the arresting officer to "recalibrate" his news conference statements – and his public expression of regret for "maligning" the police will hopefully restore credibility lost.

7-26-09 0145

I was flitting around to run errands in the city on the off day Thursday and missed the Buehrle gem. At about 5:45 PM, I ended up in O'Hanlon's on 14th and First. The TV in front of me was tuned to CNN. Wolf was quizzing a panel about Obama's response to the Gates arrest. Another TV was showing ESPN.

At the top of the hour, Sportscenter rolled with at least twenty minutes of in-depth Buehrle coverage and it got the full attention of the couple dozen people in the bar.

It wasn't 'til I got home Thursday night that I found out Ramon Castro caught the game for the White Sox.

Oh, to be one of those fans in the Cell on Thursday afternoon. They went expecting one of 162 and got something so much more.

7-23-09 2335

The big pack of writers covering baseball in New York all but ignored an "exclusive" report from Jon Heyman on the Roy Halladay sweepstakes.

Heyman, a Sports Illustrated baseball writer, reported Monday night that the Mets rejected a Toronto "offer" to acquire Halladay in exchange for Fernando Martinez, Bobby Parnell and two prospects.

Heyman is still sticking to his story, but it was interesting to watch those on the Met beat allow Heyman to dangle all alone with the sensational story.

On WFAN Monday night, Heyman recited his scoop to host Steve Somers. It prompted a flood of calls from angry Met who couldn't believe Omar Minaya would reject a chance to land the six-time all-star who would play his walk year in the pitcher-friendly Citi Field.

When I woke up Tuesday, none of the papers made mention of the news reported by Heyman. Everyone had time to sniff out a follow-up and nothing came, really.

Adam Rubin of the News pooh-poohed the Heyman report in his blog and Jack Curry of the Times cited the word of two baseball officials in reporting that the Mets and Blue Jays had not discussed specific

names. Curry's reporting on the Heyman claim appeared in the baseball blog on the Times web site. Curry noted the Mets have been pushing the idea they were not inclined to make a big deal. Curry also offered his opinion on the proposal set forth by Heyman. "It would seem like a dubious deal for the Jays," said Curry.

Halladay has full veto power over any trade and has said he wants to play in the post-season. His contract runs through the end of 2010. Hate to say it, but if Halladay has watched the team in Queens at all the last six weeks, it's quite possible he'd veto a deal to the Mets.

7-22-09 0145

After reading the lengthy and extremely well-researched Times piece in Sunday's paper about automobile drivers using cell phones, I couldn't help but feel a certain amount of concern about the safety of loved ones who routinely talk on the phone while behind the wheel.

The Times story written by Matt Richtel included compelling data. Since extensive study of the subject has been stunted or slow to develop – many of the story's sources were left to theorize or make observations based on experience.

Not only are drivers who talk on phones four times more likely to wreck than those who don't, there is a strong belief by experts on the matter that hands-free devices are no safer than holding the phone to one's ear.

Citing a conversation with Johns Hopkins University psychological/brain sciences professor Steve Yantis, Richtel reported that a cell phone conversation conjures images in the head of a driver. "There are limits to how much the brain can multitask. The brain has trouble assessing separate streams of information – even if one is visual and the other aural."

I have clear memories of family driving trips as a youngster when driving rain would hit – or my Dad was navigating a stretch of curvy two-lane road on a foggy night – and everybody in the car would turn quiet. To minimize distraction to the driver – to allow maximum concentration – everybody in the car quit talking and the car radio was turned off. Those in the car knew it was time for the driver to get serious.

With cell phones, the person on the other end can't see or feel what the driver is experiencing and may not grant the peace needed when a driver encounters a tough spot. Yeah, the driver ultimately controls whether a phone conversation continues but the act of punching a button or figuring out a professional way to end a business call is a distraction. Or perhaps a road hazard requiring quick-thinking emerges before there's time to terminate the call.

It seems unrealistic of course to expect lawmakers in this country to impose an outright ban on using a phone while driving anytime soon, but man, many drivers who read the Richtel story might consider letting their phone go to voicemail when it rings. Hands-free or not.

The loved ones I obliquely referenced in connection with this issue happen to be the safest, most skilled drivers I have ever sat in a car with. They use the cell phone while driving to squeeze in pressing business during windows of opportunity considered crucial and precious in a day otherwise lean on such windows.

I should be the last guy to preach about avoiding impairment while driving. But Richtel's piece really got me thinking. As great as it is to incorporate mobile voice communication in the automobile, the driver on a phone is sacrificing safety. It seems to me that will become indisputable as the depth of the research increases.

7-22-09 0100

-Citing the word of four unnamed NHL general managers, the Post's Larry Brooks reported Sunday that the reason Blackhawks GM Dale Tallon was so abruptly canned was because he tried to make a trade deemed bad by his boss late last year.

Brooks says Tallon was fired last week because of festering organizational frustration over Tallon's efforts to trade Hawks goalie Nikolai Khabibulin to Washington for Michael Nylander.

Brooks' sources say Tallon had agreed to the one-for-one deal with the Caps about one-third of the way into last season but was blocked from consummating the trade by Hawks president John McDonough. At that point Brooks said Tallon's fate was sealed and McDonough was simply waiting for a spot to lower the ax.

When Tallon messed up a few weeks ago on the tardy mailing of paperwork necessary to retain key Hawks free agents, Brooks said McDonough had the perfect excuse. Out went Tallon and in goes the 36-year-old son of Scotty Bowman.

Despite Tallon's amazing job of franchise-building – turning a dead team into a Stanley Cup contender – McDonough picked a Monday in July to cruelly fire Tallon and kick him to an out-of-the-way job in the organization.

While it's easy with hindsight to say Tallon's effort to trade Khabby for Nylander would have turned out bad for the Hawks, I'd like to know who's responsible for putting together such an exciting young team built for the long haul.

It sure isn't John McDonough.

Assuming the Brooks information is accurate, McDonough appears to have a Bill Parcells-type sphere of influence with the Hawks. I thought McDonough was a marketing guy. He justifiably deserves credit for putting fans back in the seats and for reaching out to the ex-Hawk greats who were forgotten during the Bill Wirtz reign. But should the organizational flow chart put McDonough in a spot that allows him to decide whether the GM goes or stays? I understand McDonough has the title of team president but it

seems off to me that a guy best known for creating the concept of the Cub fan convention has more say on personnel matters than a hockey lifer.

I guess we can now better understand why and how the popular Denis Savard got axed as head coach four games into the 08-09 season. At the time, it didn't add up that Tallon would be behind such a move.

7-20-09 0200

One would think a rainy June followed by a sunny July would be a boon to the region's tomato farmers. That's not the case, unfortunately. A contagious plant disease called "late blight" is threatening to wipe out significant portions of the tomato crop in New York and New Jersey. It's not yet clear whether small organic growers of insanely tasty heirloom varieties will be more or less impacted than the larger farms mass producing the basic beefsteak. While organic farmers don't use chemicals to fight pests and disease, they use higher quality seed products and are more attentive to their plants. I've not been to the Union Square Greenmarket recently to hear farmer feedback about whether the consumer can expect reduced supply/higher cost for the flavorful multi-colored heirlooms later this summer, but a plant pathologist told the Times that the current outbreak of late blight is more widespread than he's ever seen it.

-A woman named Lucy Wollin is posting regular observations about what's new and good at the year-round gathering of farmers, fish-sellers and flower-growers at the Union Square Greenmarket just below 17th Street. Her valuable reporting can be found at:

<http://www.echonyc.com/~lwollin/greenmarket.html>

-Episode six of the great new television drama Nurse Jackie concluded with a stirring scene heightened by the song that accompanied it. After Jackie enables a terminally-ill patient to die with dignity, she walks to what looks like the Queens apartment building of the deceased to prepare the removal of her belongings. As Edie Falco (who plays the role of Jackie) trudges up the stairs to inspect the dwelling, the Patty Griffin tune "When It Don't Come Easy" fits the scene perfectly.

-A reader of this web site recently observed that TSR has been off the travel trail for months and wondered why. Well, I've been working many of my off days to replenish the travel and entertainment budget and will continue picking up extra shifts through about mid-August. I've also been spending a decent amount of free time in the shop of my prosthetist. We're collaborating on a new wheel and there has been a lot of trial and error. The good thing is that my long-time prosthetist now works out of mid-town Manhattan after more than a decade on Long Island. It's so much easier getting to his new location. It's just a twenty-minute subway ride. Plus, his office sits just a few buildings down from a joint that has a daily egg-and-cheese-on-a-roll special. For a buck and a half, coffee and a breakfast sandwich starts the day.

The best part of my otherwise dreary long run on the night shift is when I get home. If I catch the midnight bus and the Dodgers are playing at home, I'm able to see the last few innings of Vin Scully's call made available on the Extra Innings package. What a great way to end the long day into night.

7-19-09 0059

If they can jam 'em all in, expect fifty-five thousand plus racing fans at Monmouth Park two weeks from Sunday. The connections of Rachel Alexandra say the super-filly will run against the boys in the Haskell on August 2nd. The decision by owner Jess Jackson to send Rachel to the Haskell suggests she may pursue a regimen of racing against males in big-money races during what's left of her current three-year-old campaign. Why not? The purse for the Haskell is a million bucks and she's clearly faster than any three-year-old male in training right now. As long as she stays on dirt tracks – and gets sensible month-long breaks – Jackson should map out a schedule for Rachel that includes the most prestigious races paying the most cash. Boys or girls.

If let's say Rachel wins easy in the Haskell, I'd run her four weeks later in the Shadwell Travers (another million dollar race - known as the mid-summer derby). Her presence in the Travers at Saratoga would probably break the track's attendance record and generate triple-crown type excitement.

First things first, however. Rachel must win on the Jersey Shore. Shortly after it was announced she would run in the Haskell, one of the race's probable entrants was scared off. Big Drama was withdrawn from consideration for the Haskell and will run in the West Virginia Derby instead.

-Speaking of New Jersey, that state has an interesting odd-year gubernatorial campaign going right now. A poll released Tuesday showed incumbent governor Jon Corzine trailing challenger Chris Christie by double digits. More than fifteen hundred likely New Jersey voters were asked their preference in the Quinnipiac University survey. Christie garnered 53 percent support to Corzine's 41 percent. The fact Corzine is losing to a politically inexperienced former prosecutor in a state that went for Obama by more than fifteen points says a lot about the sitting governor's deep unpopularity. President Obama will try to give Corzine's campaign a jolt when he rallies and raises cash for Corzine at an outdoor music shed in Holmdel, NJ this afternoon. Jon Bon Jovi did an acoustic gig for Corzine that raised more than \$2 million last month. Both candidates will spend a ton of money and it's likely both candidates will have no problem going into bottom-of-the-barrel negative attack mode.

7-16-09 0130

If you were watching the telecast of the All-Star game Tuesday night, you missed a full live view of President Obama's ceremonial first pitch. After much hype, the fan watching at home saw the President wind up and deliver left-handed. But somehow the Fox camera operator on the field failed to follow the path of the baseball. The crew producing the telecast had a wider shot at their disposal but didn't punch it up. The TV viewer was left wondering if the soft toss from Obama landed in the mitt of Albert Pujols.

It wasn't until the bottom of the second inning that Fox showed what happened. The pitch did indeed make it to Pujols on the fly. Barely. By the time the tardy replay rolled, Obama was up in the Fox booth with Tim McCarver and Joe Buck to narrate.

The funniest moment of Obama's half-inning stint in the broadcast booth came when it was pointed out that Mark Buehrle was warming up in the bullpen. "It's about time," said Obama.

Even though Buck and McCarver did little with their lengthy half-inning opportunity to quiz the Prez, Buck went to break at the end of two innings by asking Obama to stick around for another half-frame. The request was quickly nixed by a White House staffer who likely was aware the interview had run its course.

When the third inning started, the booth tossed to dugout reporter Chris Rose standing next to Doc Holliday. The audio went dead almost as soon as the interview started.

It sounded to me like there was at least a smattering of boos when Obama stepped toward the mound for the first pitch. That's as you'd expect, I suppose.

I watched the game from the job. With Tim Lincecum on the mound to start the game, I was interested in his velocity. Unfortunately, there was only sporadic speed gun numbers on the screen. The pitch speed graphic did appear consistently, however, later in the telecast.

-There was yet another display of odd behavior from Senate Judiciary Committee chairman Pat Leahy on day two of the Sotomayor hearings. During breaks in testimony, Leahy snapped photos with what appeared to be a personal digital SLR camera. Leahy would then examine the pictures that appeared on the little screen on the back of his camera. He smiled while he stared at his work. While his committee colleagues conversed and Sotomayor fidgeted, Leahy was wrapped up in his camera. Leahy's antics aren't befitting of a committee chairman considering the qualifications of a judge for the highest court in the land. If he wants photos capturing the historic confirmation of Sotomayor, he should probably leave the picture-taking to staffers.

-Sotomayor made it clear under questioning from Herb Kohl that she'll support television cameras in the US Supreme Court once she puts on the black robe. She went a step further by suggesting she'll work as an advocate of sorts for televising Supreme Court proceedings should her colleagues ask her opinion on the matter.

7-15-09 0130

The funniest aspect of the first day of the Sonia Sotomayor confirmation hearings Monday was the over-the-top reaction of Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Pat Leahy every time an anti-abortion plant in the audience started whooping it up.

Rather than simply call for a pause in testimony to allow law enforcement to remove the person responsible for the disruption, Leahy in each instance lost his temper and issued desperate pleas for good behavior.

Leahy's red-faced frustration and heated admonishments only serve to showcase the interruptions for

those watching on television. If Leahy would just keep his cool, the viewer at home would barely know what's happening. By exploding in anger, Leahy is enabling the faction that wants to destabilize the decorum of Sotomayor's week-long effort to pass committee muster.

Also funny was when Leahy justifiably felt the need to abruptly halt the meandering speech of New York's junior senator Kirsten Gillibrand. As is the custom, the nominee's home state senators make flowery introductions and Gillibrand's speech came off like a bad retirement party toast. It went on and on and on. Leahy eventually got pissed and used his gavel to jar Gillibrand to attention. "We're gonna have to put your full statement in the record," said Leahy.

It was like Gillibrand was on the Gong Show and got removed when the audience couldn't take it anymore. Leahy gonged her.

If it weren't for the fact he's been in the senate for thirty years, Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley's opening statement at the hearing should have gotten gonged, too. Grassley obviously didn't pre-read his nine-minute speech in advance. Heck, he probably didn't even write the remarks. He struggled with both diction and pronunciation as he attempted to read single sheets of paper telling him why empathy is bad and judicial restraint is good.

The best speech of the day came from Russ Feingold. The Wisconsin senator did a beautiful job explaining the hypocrisy advanced by his republican colleagues when complaining about "judicial activism" in connection with Sotomayor. "That term really has lost all usefulness, particularly since so many rulings of the conservative majority on the Supreme Court can fairly be described as 'activist' in their disregard for precedent and their willingness to ignore or override the intent of Congress. At this point, perhaps we should all accept that the best definition of a 'judicial activist' is a judge who decides a case in a way you don't like," said Feingold.

Direct examination of the nominee starts Tuesday and runs through Thursday. Expect Lindsey Graham to be the most effective adversarial senator. He's very smart and quick on his feet. Leahy's reluctance to recognize Graham during a couple of discussions on Monday suggests he fears Graham's ability to take the hearings to places that may be uncomfortable for the nominee.

-It wasn't a mechanical problem that prevented the big red apple in center field from rising after Sunday's seventh inning home run by Fernando Tatis. A Mets spokesman said after the game that the home run apple at Citi Field requires a full two and a half minutes to reset before it can again rise from its storage tank. The Tatis blast came just a minute or so after Brian Schneider went deep. The apple worked just fine after the Schneider homer, but Met fans booed when the apple failed to rise after the Tatis long ball. The fans chanted "We want the apple" in loud repetition. The chants could be heard clearly on the radio broadcast. Eventually, the apple came up at the end of the seventh inning to recognize the Tatis homer. Fans could be heard responding with wildly loud cheers.

The Mets fandom has been screaming for a trade for the last month and got one Friday night when Omar Minaya shipped Ryan Church to the Braves for Jeff Francoeur.

I like the deal, although I fear the Braves are convinced and possibly correct in believing Francoeur's inability to lay off bad pitches is a terminal condition.

Frenchie (as he's called) has a career on-base percentage of .308 which is worse than any corner outfielder in history with over 2500 plate appearances.

What makes the deal intriguing is that Francoeur is a gold glove outfielder with a cannon for a throwing arm. He's the kind of defender required to navigate the tricky and quirky right field territory at the new Met ballpark.

You also have to think there's a chance the change in scenery and new batting coach will prompt Francoeur to regain the power stroke he owned for a good stretch after his 2007 big league call-up.

In his first at-bat as a Met Saturday night, Francoeur got a pretty loud ovation from the home fans. He wore uniform number 12.

In the papers that morning, reaction was mixed to the deal.

In the Post, Jay Greenberg said the trade "made sense" given the fact Francoeur is five years younger than Church. Greenberg said Francoeur has "bigger upside."

David Lennon in Newsday noted the Braves rarely trade away players before their usefulness has been exhausted but said Omar made the move simply to shake things up. "What Minaya wanted to do was send the message that the front office is not going to sit idly by as the Mets – and the second-half attendance at Citi Field –fade into oblivion."

In the News, Mets beat writer Peter Botte called the move a "lateral trade." And News baseball columnist John Harper said it was change for the sake of change. "It's not a bad trade. Maybe the Mets even get lucky, something clicks with Francoeur, and the home runs come faster than the strikeouts. The way their season is going, however, don't count on it."

-Less than two weeks after initiating service at LaGuardia, Southwest Airlines seriously damaged one of their Boeing 737's in a ground accident at the busy, tightly-spaced airport. The accident occurred as the plane was moving to its overnight parking spot. No passengers were on the airplane when it rolled into deicing equipment at the US Airways terminal. Maintenance workers could be seen patching up a gash on the left wing on Friday and Saturday. A source said the airplane was flown without passengers to Southwest's Dallas hub Saturday evening for more extensive repair work.

7-12-09 0115

With the Mets losing 6-1 in the second inning Thursday night, the TV tandem on SNY revealed deep contempt for both the Blackberry device and the social networking web site Twitter.

Gary Cohen: "I was talking to somebody today and they had their Blackberry out. I asked him what they were doing and this person said 'I'm reading my Twitter.' And I said: 'Oh are you tweeting?' And he said 'No, I'm reading it.' And I said 'Why?' And he said 'Well, just so I know what's going on.' Why? If I really need to know, I'll call them. Or they'll call me. I've had people say they'd e-mail me on my Blackberry. I don't have a Blackberry. I have no interest in having a Blackberry."

Ron Darling: "I don't have one either. And I've left lunch with a friend of mine once because he was texting during lunch. I just got up and left. It's ridiculous.

Cohen: "Everybody on the planet is gonna have carpal tunnel syndrome with their thumbs within the next ten years."

7-9-09 2045

The most exciting national political event of the summer unfolds Monday when Sonia Sotomayor faces the Senate Judiciary Committee for what's expected to be a week-long test of her nomination to the highest court in the land.

It's assumed Sotomayor will be well-prepared the likes of Jeff Sessions and Jon Kyl. The two conservative senators on the committee are likely formulating a strategy that will attempt to make the judge squirm on the issues of empathy and objectivity.

In the end, both the judiciary committee (12 to 7) and the full senate (a filibuster-proof sixty) are stacked with members wearing the same party stripe as the President. It would take a severe misstep or the sudden release of a previously unknown flaw for Sotomayor to fail in her bid to gain the supreme bench seat.

So while the outcome may not be in doubt, there's still great intrigue sure to surface when the hearings start.

People will certainly measure the composure and temperament of the nominee but there will also be a great deal of attention on the new junior senator from Minnesota. How surreal will it be to see Al Franken take his seat on the judiciary committee opposite Sotomayor? Just a week into his senate career, Franken is party to committee hearings some senators are left out of over decades of service.

Will Franken be a thoughtful, well-studied lawmaker who cuts through the fog of special interest influence clearly dominating votes and policy discussions? Will he incorporate his great and sometimes edgy wit into floor debates and committee hearings? We know Franken was narrowly elected on an agenda well left of center. How can a liberal from Minnesota fit in with a majority led by the likes of Reid/Byrd/Durbin/Schumer? This obviously won't reveal itself at the Sotomayor hearings, but at least

you'll get an idea of what kind of approach Franken will take when he gets those first allocations of time on Monday and Tuesday.

The other interesting subject sure to arise next week is the issue of cameras in the courtroom. Sotomayor is replacing David Souter who is the staunchest opponent of televising US Supreme Court arguments.

Pennsylvania senator Arlen Specter has written a letter to Sotomayor informing her of his intention of probing the matter in the confirmation hearings. If Sotomayor hints she is open to the idea of cameras in the High Court, it could provide the impetus for the important change. Said Specter in the letter posted on the Judiciary Committee web site: "The keen public interest is obvious since the Supreme Court decides the cutting-edge issues of the day such as: who will become president; congressional power; executive power; defendants rights – habeas corpus – Guantanamo; civil rights – voting rights – affirmative action; abortion."

With Souter out – and a thumbs-up from Sotomayor – a C-Span style-production of Supreme Court arguments could be near. Those who thirst for greater openness and understanding of the judiciary can only hope the Specter-Sotomayor conversation on the matter will set the stage for full court consideration of gavel-to-gavel TV coverage of its business.

7-9-09 1915

The crowd assembled in Flushing Tuesday night saw the skidding and punchless Mets put together another goose egg to extend their consecutive scoreless innings streak to 22.

The only real joy the folks at Citi Field seemed to have was intense jeering of Mannywood's plate appearances, but even that was taken away when number 99 threw his elbow guard in the direction of home plate ump John Hirschbeck in the fifth.

That display by Manny after a called third strike – plus a similar tantrum in the first – prompted Hirschbeck to toss Ramirez in his fourth game back from the fifty-game juicing suspension.

I bought a \$23 dollar seat at the day-of-game window at about 5 PM, although when I first arrived at the ballpark fifteen minutes earlier the woman selling tickets said the cheapest seat available was \$48.

I knew she was feeding me hogwash because the Mets web site had scores of \$23 seats available for sale before I left for the game. I was trying to avoid the processing and handling charges by buying in person – and I was befuddled by the ticket seller's claim. I walked around in circles for about fifteen minutes – went to another window – and sure enough – a \$23 seat was magically produced.

I found a pocket of empty field box seats down the first base line and sat in a good spot for the first half of the game. Not that I'll make a habit of it, but I got the \$17 lobster roll from Pasternack's joint and it rocked my world. Still hungry, I later enjoyed the three taco sampler from the Mexican place in center-field and it was eccellente.

You could spend money all night at Citi – and on this night I did. I put a dent in the roll of twenties in my pocket by slurping on Czechvars and watched the last half of the game from the first deck of seats that sit over left field.

There was no BP because of a threatening weather forecast. The rain never materialized and a beautiful breeze made for a comfortable night.

The Mets lost 8-0. Attendance was announced at 39,636.

I'm gonna go on the record here and say the Dodgers are your NL pennant winner. That lineup is killer. With Manny back, the batting order is potent from top to bottom. Matt Kemp is batting eighth in the order! Casey Blake is such a gamer. They've got serious middle men in Troncoso and Belisario. A legit closer in Broxton. I wouldn't be surprised if they add a starter at the deadline. I'm not sure who's beating them in NL.

The 7 train got me home in fifteen minutes. With Beltran and Reyes still making iffy progress with their nagging leg injuries and D-Wright starting to get exposed as a lone wolf in the Met lineup, it's quite possible Citi Field could be free and clear of relevant September baseball.

7-08-09 0100

Is there a commercial airport in the world that's had as much drama in the last year or so as the one in Tegucigalpa, Honduras?

Last year, Toncontin International (TGU) was shut down for more than a month after a TACA flight from San Salvador overshot the runway in rainy conditions, killing five and injuring dozens of others. The Airbus A320 was destroyed in the crash.

The pilots who fly for the carrier I work at say Tegucigalpa is by far the most challenging place to land an airplane of any on the route map. The airport's single landing strip is short, sloped and surrounded by mountains. Getting a plane down at TGU has been equated by some airmen to landing on an aircraft carrier.

Over this past weekend, the airport added another dramatic chapter to its history of crashes and safety concerns when troops from the Honduran military positioned themselves and equipment down the center of the runway with an arriving aircraft set to land. On board that airplane was Honduran president Manuel Zelaya who got tossed from the country in a coup a week ago. The forces that orchestrated Zelaya's overthrow don't want the President back in the country and the presence of human blockades at Toncontin forced Zelaya's airplane to divert to Managua.

In an appearance on Monday night's Newshour program on PBS, reporter Marc Lacey of the Times said a significant military presence remains at the airport in case Zelaya attempts another return via plane.

In the meantime, airlines in this country cancelled flights into Tegucigalpa on both Monday and Tuesday. Continental managed to get a flight in and out of the airport Sunday before the blockade was formed but the airline cited “civil unrest” for its Monday cancellations. By late Monday, it cancelled its round-trip Houston/Tegucigalpa trip for Tuesday, blaming it on “security/facilities.”

Various news agencies have reported that the airport is “closed.” Lacey described some tension in the city but otherwise said the Honduran citizenry is going about business as usual.

Continental is giving customers from cancelled Tegucigalpa flights the option of going to San Pedro Sula, Honduras which is about 110 miles north.

7-7-09 0119

Just a week ago, Pete Sampras told Karen Crouse of the Times he wasn't sure if he'd fly to London if Roger Federer made the Wimbledon men's final.

Pete won fourteen majors in his great career, an all-time men's tennis record. Federer tied that number with his French Open title four weeks ago.

Tradition in sport has it that those known for accomplishing important achievements attend the event in which his/her record is broken. Pass the torch. Honor the athlete who surpassed you.

Fair or not, the title of “greatest men's tennis player ever” is linked with the man with the most major titles, so everybody was looking to Pete for an on-the-spot transfer of power.

Well, sure enough. Pete was there sitting at Centre Court for Roddick/Federer to see his record go down. Pete told Crouse he's a happy West Coast homebody these days and doesn't get out much. But in this instance, Pete probably thought Federer was such a lock, the long trans-Atlantic trip wouldn't go for naught.

Turns out the sight of Sampras in the stands pumped up a well-conditioned Roddick who gave Federer a huge fight. What a match. How do you not get blisters on your hand hitting 130 mph serves four hours into a battle like that?

Said Ted Robinson on NBC during the 22nd game of the fifth set: “This is like a heavyweight championship fight that's now in about the 20th round.”

It was play until you drop.

In the 30th game of the fifth set, Roddick dropped. He didn't drop physically, but he lost his stroke and sprayed a couple shots on his service game. It was sad to see a guy play so well and lose. But man, what great drama Roddick provided against an opponent nobody thought he'd seriously challenge.

7-6-09 0115

The scoreboard graphic in the upper left-hand corner of the TV screen for Saturday's Wimbledon final listed just first names: "Venus" and "Serena." The two sisters were going to head-to-head for the eighth time in a grand slam title match. It's not usually the most compelling tennis when these two get together. Some have even suggested the sisters dislike playing each other so much the outcomes of their head-to-head meetings are pre-determined.

I don't buy that. I just think the two know either other's tendencies and weaknesses so well, the output on the tennis court is bound to look awkward.

The first set on Saturday was an intense battle that included two break point opportunities for Venus. Had she converted on just one of them, Venus would have likely defended her title.

But Serena's blistering serve was too hot to handle. The little sis lost just eight points on serve the whole match and ended up cruising in the second set to finish off big sis.

-I know this gripe surfaces every year, but 2009 television coverage of Wimbledon in this country again had some brutal gaps – especially for fans of Andy Roddick. ESPN and NBC divvied up action for the US audience. The more lucrative quarter-final and semi-final matches are typically reserved and left whole for NBC's mid-day slots regardless of when Wimbledon schedules them. This year, it meant the big Roddick/Murray semi was shown by NBC on a 90-minute tape delay. Two days before, Roddick's highly anticipated final eight match with Lleyton Hewitt started during NBC's slot but the Peacock gave us a taped Federer blowout instead. ESPN2 came on with its second window of coverage at 1 PM that day and picked up Roddick/Hewitt live about halfway through the match. Fans missed a dramatic tiebreak. Worse, there was no graphical guidance on either channel – or on the web – about what the heck was going on with the broadcast plan. This kind of logic-defying, anti-fan scheduling happens every year it seems, with NBC's Dick Ebersol issuing an annual claim that NBC's contract gives them the right to "protect" matches. The bottom line is that critical matches during the quarter and semi-final rounds get lost in the contractual tug-of-war despite day-long windows of live television coverage. Too much important tennis fails to make the airwaves as it's happening – every year. If NBC can't fully commit to the concept of real-time coverage with cooperation from ESPN, it shouldn't be allowed to continue as the rights-holder to the biggest tennis tournament in the world.

-Joey Chestnut won his third straight hot dog eating contest at Coney Island Saturday. I watched the live broadcast on ESPN. Chestnut stuffed 68 hot dogs down his esophagus in ten minutes to win the ridiculous annual competition outside Nathan's. The funniest moment of the broadcast came in the post-contest interview with the winner. The ESPN reporter asked Chestnut what he would do for dinner that evening. Chestnut said with a straight face that he'd have a "cobb salad with ranch dressing."

-The winner of Monmouth Park's biggest turf race of the summer shattered a course record Saturday and did it in dazzling fashion. The six-year-old gelding Presious (sic) Passion sprinted out of the gate at full

throttle for the Grade One United Nations despite the fact the race distance was a mile and three-eighths. That's a long haul for a horse. Presious Passion was up by 20 lengths for a good portion of the race. What was shocking was that he was timed on the lead going 45 and one-fifth, 1:09 and four, 1:34 and three and 1:59 flat for four furlongs, six furlongs, a mile and a mile and a quarter respectively. Going that fast early in such a long race almost always spells doom for even the best racehorses. But somehow Presious Passion held on courageously and won the race by two lengths over the German horse Lauro. The finishing time was 2:10.97 which beat the mile and three-eighths turf course record at Monmouth by almost two seconds. As I watched the race on TVG Saturday, I laughed at Passion's jockey Elvis Trujillo for allowing the horse to go so fast in the first mile. He's cooked, I said. Instead, Passion just kept going.

7-5-09 0115

My television is on all the time but it's been two years since I was compelled to watch a regular broadcast drama. The Sopranos went dark in June 2007 and I just assumed the void would be immediately filled by something creative somewhere along the big channel grid. I've always had a show - something regular outside all the sports and news dominating my viewing schedule. But for two years, despite an effort to find a show, I've never gotten beyond an episode or two of any new program.

Things were really good during the five years when Six Feet Under ran concurrently with Tony and Carmela. In a long period before that, it was an event for me to sit down and watch NYPD Blue, Seinfeld and Hill Street Blues.

But the last two years, I failed to get pulled into a drama despite giving the DVR a workout to make an honest crack at it.

So, it's with some excitement now that Nurse Jackie has come along on the cable channel Showtime. Just four episodes in, I'm ready to declare that I'm hooked. I finally have that feeling of looking forward to the next episode of a TV drama without letting it just sit there on my archived list of recorded programs. Nurse Jackie is only 30 minutes a week, and Showtime has bolstered my commitment by buying up a second season.

Edie Falco is great playing a veteran nurse in a NYC emergency room. She's surrounded by compelling characters still developing and each show includes plenty of familiar city landscapes. I nearly fell out of my chair at the end of episode three when Jackie walked into a deli on the way home from work to buy chicken soup. The deli is none other than the one run by my pal Steve in Astoria that I've been going to regularly since I moved out here more than a decade ago.

Episode four was directed by Steve Buscemi and his thoughtful fingerprints were all over it.

-TSR Radio returns Thursday, 7-2 at 8 PM for a special presentation of Work Tape Vol. 1. An old cassette tape with recordings going back fifteen years captures the early days of what would become my permanent entry into the blue collar workforce. Work Tape is a basic look at the plight of the low-paid worker. Phone calls are welcome at the end of the program. To tune in live – or to catch the archived

version after it airs – just click on the TSR Radio tab at the top of the page to get pointed in the right direction.

7-1-09 2255

The Mets have the look of a sinking ship right now. Met manager Jerry Manuel keeps talking about “taking games off the board” and has made statements clearly aimed at encouraging his GM to add a guy who can hit.

On the radio Tuesday afternoon, Francesa asked Manuel if he was frustrated about filling out a lineup card for weeks on end that doesn’t include Jose Reyes, Carlos Beltran and Carlos Delgado. “Do you get up every morning waiting to see if the cavalry is going to arrive with the canteens? You must be out there like the guy in the desert waiting for the canteens to show up,” said Francesa. “You hope they don’t shoot holes in the canteens before you get to drink the water.”

Manuel just laughed at the question but he’s made it clear (on the bench with his body language and in the media room with his statements) that the current Met cast should be expected to do little more than tread water until the All-Star break.

It’s after the break that Beltran and Reyes possibly return. Nick Johnson of the Nats may end up a Met about that time. With the Phillies struggling at home, perhaps the Mets can chase when the canteens arrive.

But for now the Met lineup is parched. Even more than the past weekend’s hapless subway series sweep, the thing that convinced me that this Met team is way short on punch was when I flipped on Monday night’s game at Milwaukee to see Argenis Reyes batting leadoff.

Tuesday night’s game was a Santana start, which at this point is the only time through the rotation that you feel like three or four runs will win it. That fourth inning was about as wacky as you get with F Mart slipping in centerfield, the pitching coach getting tossed and a crazy comedy act of a play highlighted by a wild Santana throwing error.

-I’m not sure I’ve ever seen an active player throw out the ceremonial first pitch, but that’s what Mariano Rivera did Tuesday night at Yankee Stadium. It was a way to pay tribute to the 500th career save Mo recorded two nights before in Queens.

-The Rangers traded away one of their expensive star players Tuesday. The deal to ship Scott Gomez to Montreal takes a big salary off the books and sets the stage for Rangers GM Glen “Slat” Sather to acquire an expensive replacement in the form of Marian Gaborik or Dany Heatley. Gomez had a bad ‘08/’09 season. He’s making seven-plus mil annual and had little impact offensively for long stretches of the most recent campaign. Gomez was one of a trio of extreme Ranger underperformers in a season that included the unfair firing of Tom Renney. Wade Redden and Chris Drury also stunk, but neither of them are moveable commodities because of their high salaries. As long as I’m mentioning hockey here on the

first day of July, I should mention that more than ten thousand Islanders fans showed up at the Coliseum last Friday night to watch television monitors showing Garth Snow pick John Taveres with the first selection in the NHL Draft. There are many nights at the Coliseum when the Islanders can't get ten grand to show up to watch an actual hockey game.

-My Derby roommate Chris H. put together a nice write-up reacting to the death of Michael Jackson. It can be found at:

<http://www.popnarcotic.com/>

6-30-09 2200

Southwest Airlines initiated service from LaGuardia Airport Sunday. The popular low-fare air carrier is operating eight flights a day out of a single gate on the B concourse of the Central Terminal Building. Five of the departures go to Chicago/Midway and the other three go to Baltimore.

Southwest has been in business for 38 years and up until the last few years, it has deliberately avoided flying out of airports like LaGuardia. The Southwest business plan has thrived through utilization of airports with comparatively low landing fees and cheap rents.

The airline also has successfully pursued an obsessive strategy of rapid deplaning and boarding of customers to keep its tightly-scheduled point-to-point routes on time. By staying away from the popular big-city airports where air traffic control delays and taxiway congestion are the norm, Southwest has stood apart from the rest of the industry in its efficiency.

But as big city airports have lost bankrupt or financially-troubled tenants in the years after 9/11, Southwest seemed to slowly abandon its strategy by adding Denver, LAX, Philly and Frisco to its route map. It will launch service out of Boston's Logan later this summer.

Off all the new airports added by Southwest, its decision to operate out of LaGuardia is the most surprising. Government-imposed air traffic control delays can reach four hours plus at LaGuardia when the weather is bad and it's not unusual for a departing plane to wait in line for an hour to take off.

Add to that the fact Southwest is using gate B4 at LaGuardia. It's a gate difficult to access given the volume of activity on adjacent gates and those across the taxi line at neighboring concourse A.

For the very reasons Southwest had until now limited its New York presence to the quiet airstrip in Islip, Long Island, the airline will quickly find out that it won't be able to execute its brand at LaGuardia.

What makes flying Southwest special are the low fares and the airline's unapologetic and reliable herding of hordes onto colorful airplanes staffed by casual, cool and happy workers.

LaGuardia will crush Southwest's ability to consistently deliver this concept.

-Of all the coverage I read about the life, death and career of Michael Jackson, the most ridiculous statement by a serious journalist came from Richard Roeper of the Chicago Sun-Times. Said Roeper in a piece published Friday: "It's the most shocking death of an entertainment superstar since John Lennon in 1980." To me, there was nothing shocking about Jackson's death. If you want to say Jackson was the most famous or most important entertainer to die since Lennon, that's a worthy point of debate. But it has been apparent for years that Jackson had become increasingly frail and unhealthy. His death was not a "shock."

6-29-09 0101

The six-year-old Prairie Boy tossed his rider and finished last in Friday's seventh race at Belmont. It extended his winless streak to 47 races.

Prairie Boy (pictured above – before the race) has an intriguing history of consistent participation in claiming races at Aqueduct and Belmont, but he's only been a winner one time in 54 tries.

In those 54 races, Prairie Boy has run for a claiming price all but once. He's nicely bred (sired by Forestry and his maternal grandfather is Seeking the Gold) and when I saw him Friday he looked like a legitimate race horse. He started his career in a maiden claiming race at Aqueduct in November 2005 and got his first and only win in a grass race at Belmont in July 2006. Soon after, Prairie Boy was claimed from Bruce Levine and has been stuck in a long rut of mediocrity ever since.

What's impressive despite the long losing streak is Prairie Boy's staying power. Many horses are sent away to places unknown if they don't win over a long stretch. Most Prairie Boys of the horse racing world don't get to lose 47 races in a row and keep showing up at the race track. Sometimes, they're sent to racing's minor leagues to attempt victory against lesser competition. Prairie Boy has stayed in the big city on the big circuit every step of his racing career (including two trips upstate to Saratoga). Prairie Boy probably has a New York accent by now.

Credit must be given here to Prairie Boy's owner Bill O'Toole who undoubtedly is losing money by keeping the horse in training in New York without seeing much in the way of earnings. In ten races this year, Prairie Boy has won a total of less than eight-thousand dollars. The cost of housing, feeding and training the horse is probably at least double that during that stretch.

On Friday, Prairie Boy entered the starting gate with odds of 34-1. He sprinted to the lead and looked like he might have a shot. Entering the final turn, his running path was intruded upon by Alabama Man. The brief collision prompted Prairie Boy to eject his jockey Amanda Casey. Fans on hand let out a big gasp.

Luckily, Casey walked away from her ugly spill without injuries but it goes in the books as a last-place finish for Prairie Boy.

Attendance was 4535. I'd estimate about half that total was assembled either in Belmont's backyard area

or on the outdoor apron near the finish line. I went with a crew of five co-workers. We sat at a picnic table in the backyard. We brought beer and sandwiches and chipped in on a pick four play.

The backyard area at Belmont draws the young, casual fan, especially on Fridays when the first race of the day starts at 3 PM. Fans in the backyard have no view of the race track and watch the live racing action on television monitors.

Dark clouds approaching from the north rolled in just after the eighth race was completed. The track accelerated the pace of the program by shortening time between races in hopes it could beat the rain storm. Unfortunately, the timing was just a bit off. A heavy downpour began about fifteen minutes before post time for the ninth and final race (a seven-furlong event carded for the grass).

The rain was torrential and the skies were dark as night. The track's operator – NYRA – chose to cancel the ninth race and announced the decision about a quarter before 7 PM.

Bettors with live multi-race wagers contingent on the result of the ninth race were all paid off equally. In the case of the pick four, everybody with a live \$1 ticket got 82 bucks per selection in the final leg of the bet. It brought a big grumble from the guys in my group since we had a shot at more than \$1500 if the six-year-old gelding Munition won the race.

I took the position that the rain was so heavy, it likely made the turf course unsafe. I suppose NYRA could have switched the race to the sealed main dirt track, but one could argue that doing so on such short notice is unfair to multi-race wager player who punched tickets with the idea the race would be run on grass.

The rain ended about twenty minutes after the race's cancellation. Fans using the Long Island Rail Road for the trip back to the city were met by a completely flooded accessway between Belmont's grandstand and the train platform. There was no train, either.

On a normal day, the LIRR train sits waiting for riders and departs about thirty minutes after the last race. On Friday, there was no train waiting after the last race. Perhaps the quickened pace of the program caused the delay. One wouldn't know because there were no representatives of the railroad on the flooded passageway to the platform. Frustrated train riders muttered. Rather than wait on the unknown, I darted in the direction of the Belmont Park bus stop to catch the Q110. It took me to the Parsons Blvd. F-train stop.

When I came to the surface in my neighborhood, the setting sun was starting to pierce the post-storm skies. The colors and images generated hit a ten on the scale of trippiness.

6-28-09 0105

I'll consider any first-round selection by the Knicks in Thursday night's NBA draft a disappointment if it's not Stephen Curry. Two months ago, the Knicks seemed a lock to get Curry. At the time, there was

scouting consensus and little doubt the wildly talented but skinny point guard from Davidson would be there when Donnie Walsh selects in the eight slot. Rather than create smokescreens, Walsh allowed the flirtation between the Knicks and Curry to reach a fever pitch. Curry dazzled in the pre-draft activities and now the concern is he may go anywhere from two to six. The thing that really complicates this situation is that Curry wants the Knicks as bad as the Knicks want Curry. Teams picking ahead of Donnie know they can trade down and extract a premium without losing out on a player with the same potential as Curry. It'll be unfortunate if Walsh and the Knicks get seriously played as they trade up, but they have to get Curry. He's made for the Garden and it's no secret he could play a significant role in LeBron's big 2010 decision.

-Spain didn't look like the world's top-ranked soccer team Wednesday at the Confederations Cup semi, but that doesn't matter to the up-and-down United States squad. Regardless of what happens Sunday in the Confed Cup final, the exciting 2-0 US win over Spain (snapping a 35-match Spanish team unbeaten streak) gives soccer fans in this country a little hope the Red, White and Blue can make some hay at next year's World Cup.

6-24-09 1700

The windshield wipers are getting a serious workout in the big city this month.

Through Tuesday, there have only been four days in June without recorded rainfall.

The National Weather Service has measured 8.35 inches of June rainfall at Central Park through the end of the day Monday.

The all-time record for the month of June is 10.27 inches (2003).

With a week to go, the forecast makes it unlikely although not impossible that we'll break the record.

My pal Marc has taken the position that it would be frustrating to come short of the record given the annoyance level brought by all the bleak, grey wetness. If we're gonna suffer, the thinking goes that it should certifiably go beyond anything every experienced in history.

For those interested in following NYC's pursuit of the June rainfall record as the final week of the month winds down, you can check this web site and cheer us on.

<http://www.weather.gov/climate/index.php?wfo=okx>

6-23-09 2000

LaGuardia was landing airplanes on runway 31 Monday night, putting inbound flights on a path that curled around Citi Field. Plane after plane descended in a left turn beyond and above the Citi Field

scoreboard.

When Cardinals first baseman Albert Pujols came to bat in the first inning, the slugger requested timeout to allow an arriving airplane to pass.

Speaking of Pujols, how 'bout this stat referenced by Howie on the radio broadcast Monday night:

Pujols has stepped to the plate four times this year with the bases loaded. In those situations, he's four for four with three grand slams!

That led Howie to speculate whether the Mets may walk Pujols intentionally if he were to come up with the bases loaded. Interestingly, only two major league batters in the last sixty-five years have been given a free pass with the bases juiced. Barry Bonds ('98) and Josh Hamilton ('08).

-Just about all my golf fan friends are properly cynical – even dismissive – about Phil Mickelson's legitimacy as a perennial major championship contender. I totally understand that. But no matter how many heartbreaking near-misses or choke jobs I see from Lefty, I continue to get mesmerized by the flashes of magic he creates. When Phil made the eagle putt on thirteen Monday, I yelled at the TV and pronounced him the likely winner. I should know better. After Phil nearly ran into a notepad-toting Mike Lupica on the walking path between thirteen and fourteen, Dan Hicks asked the question. "Is it finally Phil's turn?" NBC rolled a prepared piece documenting Phil's torturous runner-up Open finishes. All four of them. Johnny Miller seemed to be rooting for Phil but qualified his confidence in a Mickelson victory with a prediction. "I think if Phil can get a par on fifteen, he's going to win the United States Open," said Miller. Phil was in position for a par, but three-putted the hole for bogey and then missed a three-footer on seventeen for another bogey. It was his fifth second place finish in a US Open.

-It appeared on TV there was plenty of breathing room for fans at Bethpage on Monday. The USGA announced attendance at 23,985 which is about half of what it was the previous three days. If you were there on Monday, I'd imagine you had about as good a time as one could have at a major golf tournament given the open space and freedom of movement.

6-23-09 0130

Hope all the Dads had a good day Sunday. The new ones. The old ones. The really old ones.

There were three generations of Dads in Huntley, IL when I dialed up Pops midday and it sounded like everybody was having a good time.

-Monday could be a wild sports day here in New York. That leaderboard at Bethpage has the makings of a classic final round. Ricky Barnes will crumple, Lucas Glover will sweat and the roars that final pairing will hear ahead of them will be the charge of major champions making big moves. I disagree with those who argue this championship has lost rhythm and excitement from weather-induced delays. Each round has drifted a day late but the drama is still very much there. The grueling length of each day's

competition and the uncertainty of what the skies will bring negates whatever ease the moisture has brought to the putting surfaces. Whoever hoists the trophy either this afternoon, tonight or perhaps even Tuesday will have won what will be forever remembered as the Mudball Major.

-Albert Pujols doesn't have a tee time at Bethpage Monday, but he'll swing that big club of his for the first time at the new ballpark in Queens tonight. Let's hope Jerry Manuel realizes going in that even Citi Field can't hold what the Redbirds slugger is launching. The intentional pass should be used early and often.

6-22-09 0155

I was a little surprised at the depth and volume of the public outcry over the initial announcement there would be no rain checks or refunds for those who attended day one of the US Open golf tournament. Heavy precip flooded Bethpage Black on Thursday, forcing postponement of the first round after just three hours and sixteen minutes of play. Single round tickets cost a hundred bucks and a lot of fans flipped when the USGA said Thursday ticket-holders had no refund option or right of return because of the shortened round. The New York media (led in part by a Francesa-led whine-fest during Thursday's afternoon drive) crucified the USGA. The story dominated coverage in Friday morning's tabloids. When the media tent opened at Bethpage Friday, the USGA's David Fay tried to calm the mob of critics by saying fans with Thursday tickets could come for free on Monday. But even that wasn't enough for New York's hot-shot Attorney General Andy Cuomo who loves to put on the superman cape. Cuomo pushed the refund angle and pressured the USGA to amend its policy for a second time on Friday. In the end, Fay said the USGA would kick back half the cost of Thursday's tickets if the tournament finished on Sunday.

Fay admitted the USGA policy wasn't clear to begin with. That's true. It's also true that Fay probably should have laid out the Monday option immediately after Thursday's postponement.

But the collective media/public freakout about the USGA's less than deft handling of a tricky predicament will ultimately make the US Open's return to this area a tough sell anytime soon. It's a golf tournament. The fan should have no iron-clad expectation they're gonna get a full day's worth of golf. New Yorkers (enabled and encouraged by the media) yelled, stomped and made a lot of noise about a weather-induced complication.

Inclement weather is a risk I've considered as my brother and I toy around with the idea of making a once-in-a-lifetime investment in a ticket to The Masters. It's not a baseball game where you can use your rain stub for a September game against the Mariners or Indians. You hope for good weather. You hope to get a glimpse of your favorite players. You drink a few beers. You leave your cell phone at home. And you don't whine all over the place when the golf course gets swallowed up in a monsoon.

-As bad and out of place Chris Berman is on ESPN's golf coverage, Scott Van Pelt is on the opposite end of the performance scale. Van Pelt weaves history and relevant real-time observations into his duties as the primary on-site host without the clownish stuff you get from Boomer. Aside from Nantz and maybe

Tirico, there's no better emcee of important golf television right now than Van Pelt.

-Construction on a new air traffic control tower at LaGuardia Airport looks like it's almost done, but a controller said Friday that it won't become functional and occupied until the fall of 2010.

-I watched a rebroadcast of Joe Buck's first program for HBO and it appeared he was genuinely disturbed and angry about the conduct of guest Artie Lange. What I don't understand is how Buck could have expected anything different than the way it turned out.

6-21-09 0115

The steady plume of smoke rising from the Boog's BBQ stand in center field not only smells good, it creates an interesting visual effect as you look at the long warehouse behind right and center field at Camden Yards.

It's a great ballpark with a tenant that has played sub-.500 baseball eleven consecutive seasons.

Hard to believe Camden dates back to '92. When it first opened, the ballpark was widely admired by baseball fans because it transported them back in time. Camden started the whole "retro" design craze. Now that it's seventeen years old, it remains as good as or better than the ballparks it inspired.

The Orioles are one of MLB's have-nots on the spending spectrum but at least they have a ballpark worth visiting. And with young stars like Nick Markakis, Adam Jones, Luke Scott and Matt Wieters, the O's seem to have developed a foundation of winning position players.

On Wednesday night, Wieters hit his first career home run. The 23-year-old switch-hitting catcher is six-foot-five. He has drawn comparisons to Joe Mauer. The scoreboard said the Wieters home run traveled a distance of 366 feet. Orioles ushers quickly descended on the fan who gained possession of the Wieters home run baseball and recovered it. I was surprised that the fan turned it over without much of a fuss. You'd hope the Orioles will make significant concessions to the fan considering the importance of the memento.

It rained all day before the game and at times during it. But it never came down in buckets once the game started. There was no batting practice, but many of the Mets were on the field two hours before the game playing catch.

Attendance was 31,906. That's a big jump from the night before when just 20-thousand showed up. Wednesday night's Adam Jones bobble-head giveaway likely produced the spike.

Not only was Wednesday night's crowd bigger, it was far more vocal and supportive of the home team compared to the night before.

The bobble-head gift is a quality item but I was confused over a policy that limited distribution only to

fans age 15 and older. A family of four Mets fans entered in front of me – and the family’s two children were disappointed when a worker for the Orioles told them they weren’t eligible for the bobble-head. Who better to give a bobble-head to than a kid?

Pedro Feliciano gave up a two-run shot to Aubrey Huff in the seventh and the Mets lost 6-4. Feliciano has been great all year, so it’s hard to be too upset.

George Sherrill closed the game for the O’s. He has saved thirteen of fifteen opportunities. I asked the O’s fan sitting in front of us if Sherrill is reliable and the fan said yes. “But he’ll make you nervous,” he said.

After both the Tuesday and Wednesday games, we walked back to our lodging spot about a mile due south of the ballpark. Foot traffic was heavy, so there was no concern about safety.

As one circulates in this city however, it can be jarring to see so many dwellings and businesses shuttered or abandoned. It appears to be a city fighting a losing battle against poverty, crime and suffering.

Baltimore’s homicide rate is through the roof. Of cities with populations of a half-million or more, Baltimore had the highest murder rate in 2008.

My room at the Holiday Inn Express on South Russell was \$143 per night. There was nothing but gas stations in the immediate vicinity, so I ate the free breakfast buffet on the hotel’s first floor. The view from my room (pictured above) included a nice look at both the football and baseball stadiums. Noisy work crews at a large demolition site across the street woke me up early Wednesday.

The best meal of the trip came Wednesday afternoon at Faidley’s inside the Lexington Market. Thanks to Jeff D for the tip on this place. The jumbo lump crab cake at Faidley’s is the top of its kind anywhere. Eat a Faidley’s lump cake and you’ll be crabby the rest of the day.

We killed time before the game Wednesday staking out what we believed was the Mets hotel (The Renaissance Harborplace on Pratt). There were no player sightings but we said hello to Howie Rose in the shopping mall adjoining the hotel. We also passed by WFAN’s Evan Roberts.

Transportation to and from Baltimore was a tale of two distinctly different experiences. On the way down, I took a Chinatown bus operated by Eastern Travel. I bought an \$11 round-trip ticket a few weeks in advance, thinking the bus would be more reliable than flying – and more affordable than Amtrak.

The bus departed from an address in Chinatown doubling as a massage shop. When the bus pulled up promptly at 10 AM Tuesday, a herd of people tossed their bags in the cargo hold and hurried on to the bus to get a good seat. It was a chaotic and disorganized boarding process. The driver (looked like late-era Jerry Garcia with a pony-tail) barely examined the printout of my online reservation and grumbled when I tried to confirm the bus stopped in Baltimore.

The bus filled to capacity at a second NYC stop at Penn Station. A large-framed young man carrying a cooler and a large economics textbook sat next to me and slept the whole ride. At about 11:15 AM, traffic came to a standstill in the Lincoln Tunnel. The bus was halfway through the tunnel and went nowhere for at least thirty minutes. A driver switch at Cheesequake cost us another ten minutes but a rapid pace from that point got me to Cherry Hill Road in Baltimore by 2:20 PM. From there I took light rail to the Hamburg stop. Total time on the bus was almost four and a half hours. It wasn't really a pleasant experience.

With that in mind, I discarded my return bus ticket and made an Amtrak reservation for the trip home. I caught a 5:30 AM Thursday train from the Baltimore airport stop and pulled into New York/Penn at 8:15 AM. The train trimmed more than ninety minutes off the journey and it's so much more comfortable than the bus. The only negative is the train fare. 64 bucks one-way. Not horrible - but you wish it were a bit cheaper.

6-18-09 1515

I took a bus down to Baltimore Tuesday morning to catch the first two of three Mets/Orioles games at Camden Yards.

I'm not particularly fond of Baltimore as a destination. I came here several years in a row earlier this decade for the Preakness Stakes before my work shift changed. It's a decaying city that seems to be fighting a losing battle to revitalize. The public transit system is iffy and cheap hotels are hard to find.

But Camden is a great ballpark and the distance from New York makes it reachable for a 48-hour visit.

My friend Jackie scored some primo seats behind the plate for Tuesday night's affair. Roberts and Huff had huge errors for the Orioles. The two miscues paved the way for all six Met runs.

K-Rod (pictured above) entered the game in the ninth after Parnell gave up two singles with the Mets up 6-2.

Adam Jones faced the Met closer and could have won it for the O's with a homer but K-Rod struck out Jones to end the game. 6-4, the final. On Wednesday night, fans attending the game will get an Adam Jones bobble-head doll. I hope to arrive in time to receive the gift.

Last week, Yankee reliever Brian Bruney criticized K-Rod's theatrics after closing games so I was interested to see if Rodriguez would tone it down Tuesday night. Indeed, he did. He was downright calm after the game ended.

Attendance was announced at just 20,626. I'd say nearly half the crowd backed the Mets.

I had a crab cake sandwich from the concession stand. It was \$13 and well worth it.

-All I'll say on the Sosa news flash is that Bud Selig's subsequent reaction was about as weak as it gets.

6-16-09 2355

The new internet search engine "Bing" is pretty cool. But after a week's worth of Binging, I must bang the drum for the big daddy of cyber-exploration. I must reaffirm dedication to Google.

I use Google a lot. Every day. In addition to the places it takes me via its main search engine page, it does so much more. It plucks news stories in a pretty precise manner from a world's worth of journalism. It does it fast and it finds fresh stuff. It's amazing.

It also culls images of people, places and things in a way that can be very helpful to the curious.

Bing has come along with the idea it can do much the same or more than the almighty Google. As far as I can tell, the only noticeable improvement or twist you get from Bing is the open space down the right hand side of the page that serves as a blank slate for pop-up info describing each search result in detail greater than what you get from Google.

Rather than clicking on the link to the web site produced by the search, Bing believes you can better make decisions about relevance of individual search results through a dozen lines of text that flashes down the right-side margin.

To me, the supplemental info from Bing isn't enough to pull me away from the familiarity and trust I've built with Google. The Bing twist is not helpful enough to switch.

Additionally, I noticed Bing's image search seems to exclude the tremendous body of work collected via Picasa, a Google-owned software and storage depot that accumulates pictures from amateur photogs all over the world. It's not clear whether it's Bing – or Google – doing the excluding of Picasa shots from Bing's image search, but it's a glaring deficiency.

One inconsequential difference I'll mention between the two search engines that may evolve over time: When you enter the word "Sauerbrun," Google consistently lists this web site in the second slot, just below the football player's Wikipedia entry. Bing requires both the word "Sauerbrun" and "Report" in the same query to lead one here.

Most of the readers of this site - outside the hearty regulars who bookmark the URL - end up here thanks to Google. Based on the data collected by this site's host, not a single visitor has landed here via Bing as of yet.

6-14-09 0115

The first session of the New York state senate since a sudden and unexpected overthrow of the democratic majority was broadcast on cable TV Thursday.

I watched it on the New York State Legislative Proceedings Channel (Time Warner-NYC channel 159). It was on about a one-hour tape delay.

Of special interest to me during the 19-minute floor session was a speech by my state senator Hiram Monserrate.

It was Monserrate's Monday defection (along with Bronx senator Pedro Espada Jr.) from a 32-30 democratic majority that tipped the balance in favor of republicans and their leader Dean Skelos.

Two days of upheaval followed, including a sour-grapes lawsuit by democrats over the validity of the coup.

There was also much scrutiny on the motives and shady backgrounds of Monserrate and Espada.

As a constituent embarrassed by Monserrate's woeful conduct since he gained the senate seat, I was curious to hear what he'd say about his participation in the coup.

Monserrate had at least 72 hours to prepare for the speech of his life.

What his constituents got was a load of nonsense (to hear the three-minute floor speech – click the arrow below).

I don't really understand what Monserrate is saying or doing here. He seemed to re-state his allegiance to the new majority through renunciation of the old. But he also insists on labeling himself a member of the democratic party. Monserrate threatened to vote "no" on any legislation brought up by the new majority – and he rudely walked out of Thursday's session (attended only by republicans plus Espada/Monserrate) before it ended. Monserrate says his defection is motivated by reform but in the floor speech of his life offers no specifics on what he means by that.

You'd think a guy facing felony charges of cutting up his girlfriend's face would walk softly in the halls of the state capitol. Collect the big paycheck, vote your conscience, stay out of trouble. Instead, Monserrate has inserted himself and has become the star stooge in the biggest state government story in years. The coup and ensuing shenanigans have been on the front pages of all the newspapers every day this week since it went down.

Until Monserrate truly explains what the heck he's doing, you can only assume he's selling his twist-in-the-wind nonsense to the highest bidder.

If it was the big stage Monserrate was seeking, he got it briefly on Thursday. But after garbling through remarks confirming he's a mindless and spineless buffoon, both sides in the fight for a senate majority should quit worrying which camp Monserrate's tent is pitched in. Monserrate and his wavering vote are not worth all the attention.

6-11-09 2100

While the Yankees will likely take steps at season's end to make their new stadium less of a launching pad, I'm concerned the Mets may go the other direction at Citi Field to soften it up a bit for the batter.

Francesca has said on a couple of occasions in the last two weeks that he wouldn't be surprised if the Mets move the fences in to start of the 2010 season.

Add to that comments made on the Sirius XM radio show "Ripken Baseball" by Chipper Jones.

Said Jones: "I actually feel sorry for some of the guys (Mets) out there because their power numbers are really going to take a hit; guys like David Wright, Beltran, Delgado. The days of them hitting 35, 40 homers – they're over."

"It is the biggest park that I have ever played in in my life...I juiced the ball just right of center field, as hard as The Good Lord can let me hit a ball, and it hit midways up the center-field wall for a double."

"Every time there was a long fly-out or a double that hit off the wall or something, David Wright would run by me and go, 'Nice park.'"

There were seven home runs in Tuesday night's Mets/Phils game at Citi Field, but there's no doubt the ballpark is playing big. Through Tuesday, Citi is yielding 1.67 home runs per game. Only five of the other fifteen NL yards are giving up fewer round-trippers per game (SF 1.0, PITT 1.19, ATL 1.28, LA 1.55, SD 1.57).

For comparison's sake, Yankee Stadium is yielding 3.62 homers per game.

Personally, I like the way Citi Field is playing. The brand of baseball necessary for success at the new Met home is way more interesting than reliance on the home run. Speed, defense, adept baserunner advancement and attacks on the gaps will win games. The Mets already have a lock-down closer which is big.

If Wright doesn't like the place because it hurts his home run totals, maybe he can try hitting a few more on the road. I'm guessing he was just having friendly conversation with Chipper – if the second-hand account of his remarks is accurate. Wright can adapt. Remember, he's at his best offensively when he's driving the ball hard to the opposite field. Most of those power shots at Citi will stay in the yard, but plenty of them will find gaps.

Even though the current Met lineup isn't tailor-made for Citi, you see signs of adaptation. In comments to the Times a couple weeks ago, Met TV analyst Keith Hernandez took the position that Citi's big field promotes a more interesting brand of baseball. "I think the Mets would be out of their minds to bring in the fences or change the dimensions. Unbeknownst to management, they did something really good by

building such a big park. It's forced the Mets to reconsider how they play and, to me, it's been much more enjoyable to watch than a team reliant on the long ball."

6-10-09 2130

All the newspapers here are calling it a "coup." More accurately it should be referred to as yet another shady and stinky backroom deal in New York's legislature guaranteeing more dysfunction, distrust and government gridlock from our state lawmakers.

The alignment of New York's State Senate changed Monday afternoon from a 32-30 democratic majority to a 32-30 republican-led majority. The membership remained the same, but republicans convinced two democratic turncoats to cross the aisle, enabling the sudden and chaotic overthrow of Senate majority leader Malcolm Smith.

To call the two senators who changed allegiances "renegades" or to say their switch was motivated by "reform" as they claim – well – that's pure bullshit. The two senators who enabled this dramatic shakeup in Albany are big-time scumbags trying to pump up marginalized political careers punctuated by corrupt and criminal behavior. The two are Pedro Espada Jr. of the Bronx and Hiram Monserrate of Queens.

I've talked plenty here about Monserrate. He's my senator. He lives a few blocks from me. Monserrate faces felony assault charges for slicing open his girlfriend's face with a broken glass in a fit of rage after a Christmas party last year. Even though his girlfriend has recanted her original account of the attack, the case against Monserrate appears trial-bound. The police say there's surveillance footage from a camera in Monserrate's apartment building showing the senator dragging the victim away from the door of a neighbor as the victim pleaded for help. There are also pending claims of a sham "social services" organization Monserrate used to funnel city council funds through. If Monserrate doesn't end up in the clink for the assault, the Queens D-A may take him down on the now-defunct bogus shell outfit called "Libre."

On top of those transgressions and a legendary short fuse of a temper, Monserrate is out of step with the will of his constituency. He helped scuttle the bridge-toll component of the Ravitch plan to revitalize public transit and he refuses to publicly back the same-sex marriage bill.

Now, Monserrate has cast a vote in support of Nassau County republican Dean Skelos to enable a tumultuous overthrow near the end of a legislative session with plenty of critical issues left on the docket. Why'd he do it? Monserrate's web site issued a statement Tuesday saying Skelos and the republican leadership can better deliver a "reform agenda." Monserrate says he's not changing party affiliation, yet he's backing the leader of the other party. Huh?

Nothing is getting reformed when two evenly-numbered warring sides are wasting all their time plotting coups, seeking majority power so they can better control the pot of discretionary funds that members channel into home districts - often without regard for merit.

Espada Jr. (the other turncoat) is famous for blowing off campaign finance reporting requirements and sticking his hand out for discretionary funds on behalf of organizations he's created or personally connected to. You wonder if Espada was enticed to abandon the democratic majority thanks to a back-room promise by Skelos to give Espada a better shot at nailing down slush fund requests.

Nobody associated with this coup comes out of it without egg on face. Skelos has latched on to two shady characters to elevate himself. We may never know what he offered them, but it wasn't for-the-people principle that motivated Espada and Monserrate to change uniforms. Malcolm Smith looks bad because he couldn't hold the 32 Dems together – and treated the minority party like a doormat. Even Governor David Patterson looks foolish. He has refused to acknowledge the change in leadership, despite clear-cut math established during the coup.

I'd like to say that all of this is interesting – historical – or compelling political theatre. But really, given the players creating the drama – and the impact the coup will have on the state legislature's productivity – the whole thing is a disgusting display of selfishness.

6-9-09 2100

I could hear a big commotion down the block as I readied for work Sunday. There was music – and loud amplified voices.

Turns out it was the annual Queens Gay Pride Parade going down 37th Avenue.

I walked along the route for a few blocks to catch my bus to the job and stopped along a police barricade to watch for a few minutes.

There were floats, marchers and of course, politicians.

Congressman Anthony Weiner (pictured above) waved a flag and spoke through a megaphone. "Let's hear it for marriage equality in New York!" Weiner said. "Let's hear it for marriage equality in the United States!"

It's just a matter of time before the state of New York legalizes gay marriage. The State Assembly passed a same-sex marriage bill three weeks ago and the governor has vowed to sign it. As is the case with most issues of import, the state senate is dragging its feet on the matter. The state senate has a narrow democratic majority, but there are indications that Senate Majority Leader Malcolm Smith may allow the bill to die without a vote by his membership.

The very powerful and diverse coalition backing marriage equality has ramped up pressure on state senator George Onorato, a democrat from the Queens neighborhood of Astoria. Onorato is opposed to gay marriage and is considered a key swing vote.

If Onorato continues to be among those in the senate's democratic majority who block passage of gay

marriage, you can bet voters in Astoria will send him packing.

Here and now in New York City, an elected official unwilling to support marriage equality is not going to survive politically.

Heck, the state of New York is surrounded by states that have already legally cleared the way for same-sex marriage (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire).

Young people especially (much younger than me) seem to be driving momentum on this issue. Polling data shows the most support for same-sex marriage among those under age 30. Overall, it's still very much a divisive 50-50 kind of split in a lot of places, but you sense that tolerance and understanding is coming down the pike.

One thing I know for sure: the notion that same-sex marriage somehow cheapens the certificate obtained by traditional man/woman couples is absurd. Love is love. I understand religion can get in the way of one's view – or sometimes it's upbringing. But love is love. Or as one of the signs carried by a marcher in Sunday's parade said: "A kiss is a kiss."

6-8-09 0145

Yet another New York City public school sports championship will be decided in a venue closed to the general public.

On Tuesday, New York City's two public high school baseball divisions will play their title games at Yankee Stadium (B Division at 4 PM and A Division at 7 PM). I was planning to go to the A Division championship, but got word Friday that both games would be played with strict limits on who could attend.

The entity that runs high school sports in this city is the PSAL. It is not publicizing its draconian ban on regular fans for the title games on its web site, but the PSAL admitted to both the Post and Daily News that only fans with a ticket can get in. Here's how the PSAL says tickets will be distributed:

- 800 tickets to each of the four participating schools
- 200 tickets for NYC Department of Education employees
- 1100 tickets to be distributed by the PSAL with unspecified criteria on who gets 'em

That's a total of 4500 tickets for the two title games. Yankee Stadium has a capacity of 52,000. DOE spokeswoman Margie Feinberg told the Post that ticket distribution is being capped for security reasons. "We understand it's a brand new stadium and everyone wants to come, but we have to be concerned about crowd control," she said.

In years past, entry into the PSAL title games at either Yankee Stadium or Shea required no ticket, just a valid ID.

What really sucks about the attendance limitation this year is that two of the participating schools are located in the Bronx (James Monroe and Taft Educational Campus). The other two are Manhattan schools (Norman Thomas and HS Health Profession/Human Svcs.).

Monroe's coach Mike Turo blasted the PSAL policy closing the door on regular fans. He told the News that the number of people who want to attend the game connected with his school far exceeds their allotment. "I feel this is really a travesty. They're making it look like the kids are bad but this is something positive for the school," said Turo.

For each of the last two NYC high school basketball championships at Madison Square Garden, the PSAL has barred the public from attending. It's outrageous. The athletics governing body of publicly-funded high schools is shutting out the very people who support these schools – both financially and spiritually. In my case, I simply have a fondness for the grace and beauty of a high school athletic event. I have a strong belief that high school athletics can go a long way in shaping a young person's outlook and determination. Part of that equation is fans in the stands. Communities can be strengthened when there is linkage between citizens and their high schools. The PSAL doesn't seem to get that. Instead, the folks who run high school sports in this city get all paranoid about intrusions from disruptive types.

I sent an e-mail message to the PSAL's baseball commissioner Robert H. Pertsas on Friday. I asked him about the attendance ban. I inquired if I could get one of the 1100 tickets controlled for discretionary use by the PSAL. I told him I was a big fan of high school sports.

But just like my repeated e-mails sent to PSAL basketball commissioner Mel Goldstein over the last two years, I have received no response.

-Most good jockeys have stopwatch-like instincts to mark the pace of the race they're riding in. When horses go too fast, too early, they run out of gas before the finish line. That's what happened to Dunkirk on Saturday at The Belmont. Dunkirk's rider John Velasquez allowed his horse to exert too much, too soon. The small grey colt ran the first quarter mile in 23 and two-fifths seconds and the first half in 47 seconds flat. Yeah, the track was producing fast times favorable to front-runners but a more relaxed effort was called for in a mile and a half race. When Chocolate Candy appeared to stumble out of the starting gate, it left the rail wide open for Dunkirk. Velasquez did the right thing in hugging the inner part of the track throughout, but it was plain to see the jockey was overanxious to be the leader in the early one-third of the race. When it came time to finish off the final quarter-mile of the race, Dunkirk showed great heart to come back after being passed by Mine That Bird, but didn't have the energy to fend off Summer Bird. Had the stopwatch in the head of Velasquez been synchronized to the real world of such a grueling race distance, Dunkirk might have repelled the winner. As it is, another son of Birdstone won another big triple crown race. Birdstone retired 2004 and works the breeding shed at Gainesway Farm in Lexington, KY. The farm charges a \$10-thousand fee for each live horse Birdstone produces. You'd think that fee will rise dramatically after two sons from Birdstone's first crop took down both the Kentucky Derby and The Belmont.

-Tired of losing its annual football game with Mizzou, the Illinois football team is raising the white flag. After 2010, Illinois will replace Mizzou on its schedule with a cream puff pastry so it can devour its new, yet-to-be named opponent at home. Too bad. It was fun while it lasted. Mizzou won all four of the border-state clashes in St. Lou starting in 2002.

6-7-09 0135

Many of the horse racing handicappers with thinking caps on seem to believe Charitable Man will win Saturday's running of The Belmont (grade one) in Elmont, NY. The thinking goes that Charitable Man will be unhurried on the front end of the long, mile and a half journey and will discourage his nine competitors with a lasting kick down the long stretch run.

Derby winner Mine That Bird will be way behind for the first mile before his jockey Calvin Borel asks the undersized gelding to display the stunning late burst exhibited in his previous two triple crown efforts.

Even though no triple crown is on the line, the weather will be great and there is much intrigue about whether Mine That Bird will again flash that explosive rally.

I'm picking Dunkirk who spun his wheels in the Derby and will have odds of about four to one. The way I picture it, either Miner's Escape and/or Luv Gov will loom close enough to Charitable Man in the early stages to prevent a runaway. The endurance wall will stop all but Dunkirk, Mine That Bird and Summer Bird - making it a three horse race coming into the final turn.

The toll of a tough crown campaign will weaken Mine That Bird's stride when it's needed most – and Summer Bird will succumb to the realization that the small, grey Dunkirk is operating on the equine equivalent of cruise control.

I'm predicting a crowd of 48-thousand. It's the 141st running of The Belmont. When Rachel Alexandra withdrew from the race, it had a negative attendance impact of I'm guessing 15-thousand.

On a normal Saturday at Belmont Park, the crowd is usually a little less than ten-thousand.

I gotta work – but I'll watch the ESPN/ABC broadcast from the job – and I'll punch a few betting slips before I go in. All my bets will revolve around a Dunkirk victory.

6-4-09 1800

A couple of things puzzled me when I heard the first day of news reports on the failure of Air France flight 447 to complete its Monday journey from Rio to Paris.

First: How is it possible that a modern jetliner flying a route between two major international cities could simply disappear without an immediate understanding of where and when it went down?

I simply assumed that a GPS tracking device or some other technology allowed both airlines and aviation authorities to keep tabs on every commercial flight in the air – worldwide – no matter where it was. A publicly-available web site called Flight Aware (with an assist from FAA computers) does this with a six-minute delay on all commercial flights operating in this country. Why not worldwide?

There have been widespread reports that flight 447 lost electrics. I can't possibly speculate on the cause, and I'd lean against weather, but it boggles the mind that it took 24 hours to pinpoint wreckage and confirm a crash.

Additionally, I saw a grim-faced French aviation official speaking pessimistically about finding both the flight data recorder and the cockpit voice recorder. Those two so-called black boxes will solve this mystery, yet there's doubt about whether they'll be recovered. That's insane. Satellite technology can track the most basic movements and data used to gather government intelligence, yet it's not being used to transmit the data on those boxes in real-time to a land-based device? The money spent searching for those boxes would be made up and then some by technology that captures that data in the home base of either the air carrier or aviation overseer. It's hard to place monetary value on ascertaining what happened here quickly. It's critical.

The investigation into this horrible disaster should at minimum produce mandates that big airliners have black box technology that eliminates the need to find hardware contained within or separated from the doomed airliner. The technology exists. In the meantime, you've got Airbus A330's flying all over the world with nagging doubt and questions about what the heck happened. Those doubts would perhaps be erased if somebody in Paris could simply pull tapes from a big computer linked via satellite to the airplanes Air France operates. Needle in a haystack is where the search for that data is right now, instead.

6-2-09 2255

There have been several quickly-reported pieces of news to emerge subsequent to the murder of Dr. George Tiller in a Wichita, KS place of worship.

The sidebar story that has been especially unsettling is a chronology of the persistent four-year smear campaign of Tiller by Fox News show host Bill O'Reilly.

Gabriel Winant wrote a piece for Salon.com that documents many of the 29 episodes of O'Reilly's national cable show "The Factor" in which Tiller is typically described as "Tiller the Baby Killer." I'd mention some of the outrageous claims and statements O'Reilly has made on the air about Tiller, but they're so beyond reasonable I'll simply just provide [the link](#).

The public will learn more about the man suspected of murdering Tiller as he faces justice. He may or may not have been a fan of "The Factor." Early indications are that the suspect was troubled and fixed on a mission that didn't need a talk show for motivation. Linkage between O'Reilly and the suspect could very well be a stretch. But O'Reilly's rhetoric about Tiller was way over the top and appears at minimum

to be defamatory and inflammatory.

Opponents of abortion as allowed by law (it's legislated differently state-by-state) are certainly entitled to vociferous expression of their feelings. Effective grass-roots and political maneuvering on both sides of the divisive issue can influence policy. But elements (including O'Reilly) of the anti-abortion movement can dangerously stoke and provoke an even more un-hinged fringe when they equate the regulated procedure of ending a pregnancy with murder. Or as O'Reilly has done – with the extermination of Jewish people in the Nazi death camps.

Monday's Tiller story in the Times said Kansas state law allows abortions at 22 weeks and beyond only if the fetus is considered not viable or the woman faces "substantial and irreversible impairment of a major bodily function." The most egregious of all the O'Reilly smears on Tiller is a claim by the Fox bully that the doctor performed late-term abortions without meeting the justifications required by law. O'Reilly pushed the notion that Tiller was a ruthless practitioner of enabling abortions of convenience at late stages of pregnancy.

For more than thirty years, Tiller performed abortions. Yes. Anti-choice forces cite the numbers of abortions he performed over a long career without amplification of the agonizing associated factors and choices made inside and outside Tiller's facility by women before those procedures were done. Tiller dodged bombs and got shot up before his assassination. He wouldn't have continued his practice for so long in a conservative community without adherence to a strong belief in a woman's right to choose – and a doctor's duty to make that choice accessible.

O'Reilly sat in that studio and made careless and inaccurate representations targeting a brave man. On Monday night, he condemned Tiller's murder. Hopefully, O'Reilly will frame future commentaries on abortion with greater attention to accuracy, less on hostile direct attacks on medical professionals doing a job protected by law.

6-2-09 0155

Costco stubbornly resisted for as long as it could, but rising outside pressure from policy-makers and social welfare advocates has forced the company to announce it will accept food stamps at its New York City locations. The big-box retailer sells family-sized grocery items at good prices but has never accepted food stamps.

In New York, food stamps are redeemed through use of what's called an "electronic benefits transfer" card. Each month, government funds are deposited into the eligible cardholder's account. At all of my neighborhood grocers or markets, no matter how big or small, customers with EBT cards simply swipe it through a machine at check-out and enter a PIN. It's quick and easy and merchants typically don't bat an eye.

But Costco has expressed concern that purchases made through use of an EBT card may be cumbersome or potentially damaging to its business. That's ridiculous. Aside from the occasional confusion about

which items can be bought with stamps, the process differs little from the customer who buys groceries with a regular credit or debit card.

In a statement that amounted to whimpering by a cold and insensitive corporate giant, Costco CEO Jim Sinegal seemed to acknowledge that his company was getting heat for its position. "In the past, we have not been convinced that there was sufficient demand among our membership to justify the expense and possible inefficiencies associated with accepting food stamps. However, we are mindful that many of our fellow citizens are facing unprecedented economic challenges at this time, and it seemed to us that it was worth reconsidering our position in that light."

I believe what really happened here is that Costco doesn't want to blow its incursion into a city that doesn't take these matters lightly. Costco is planning to open a location on 116th Street in East Harlem at the end of the year. The development of the project was aided by millions of dollars in tax-free bonds. Costco already operates big retail warehouses in Queens and Brooklyn. Charlie Rangel, Bill Thompson, Eric Gioia and Andrew Cuomo are among the political heavyweights who have turned the screws on Costco so it would discard their discriminatory policy. No doubt Rangel and Cuomo could have complicated the process of opening the East Harlem store.

It doesn't hurt that city pension funds and investment pools hold a ton of Costco stock. Nothing like the threat of divestiture to wake up the sleepy.

New York City's public advocate Betsy Gotbaum says that as of January 2009, there were 32.2 million food stamp recipients nationally. In New York City, that number is 1.3 million (roughly one in seven New Yorkers). You have to be income deficient to gain eligibility and the average benefit is roughly \$100 a month.

Whatever its motives, Costco should quit kicking and screaming about food stamps. Make acceptance of them a national corporate policy. Food stamps are as good as cash. Nobody's asking Costco to waive membership fees. Nobody is asking Costco for free stuff. Forget the notion that people with food stamps are a whole lot different than shoppers with cash, credit or debit. Just let customers slide the card and run the business like it would run otherwise. Costco is the perfect place for a shopper on a shoestring. Why not let everybody get a shot at their deals?

5-31-09 0130

I said last week that I'd mention what's become known as the Yankee Stadium Moat. It's a deep and distinct concrete divide that protects those who pay a thousand bucks to sit in the Legends seats from the rest of the fandom.

There is no water or hungry alligators in the moat. But the moat is effective in protecting the privileged few inside it from those on the outside, nonetheless.

To enter the moat, one must have a Legends seat ticket. After entering through a "private" ballpark

entrance and using a “private” ballpark elevator, the Legend as we’ll call them (or inside-the-moater) passes through a steel gate monitored by Yankees security. Once in the moat, the Legends seat holder is protected and safe from the enemy behind it and can feel extra secure as he/she sinks into his/her padded seat. The Yankees stress when selling the Legends seat that even the concourse is “private.” The moat assures that.

A Legends seat for this Tuesday night’s game with the Rangers is priced at \$900 before additional charges. Few people are shelling out at that number. Of the 1800 cushioned “suite-style” seats protected by the moat, there’s only about half that number sitting in them on most nights.

Some of that might be because those with a Legends seat have access to the Legends Suite Club and two Legends Suite “dugout lounges.” I mean, why watch the game from your thousand-dollar seat a few rows off the field when you can be watching it on television in the lounge. Heck, the food is “all-inclusive.” Beers aren’t but that’s ok because if you plunked down a grand for a ballgame you probably have a few bucks left over for brewskis.

During batting practice, there’s no hope of penetrating the moat by those with seats outside it. Youngsters seeking a signature from their favorite pinstriper are relegated to a cluster of seats near the foul pole. Of course, the few people who paid a month’s rent to gain moat access aren’t there for BP (as documented in the picture above – photo caption inserted without the expressed written consent of the Yankees baseball club).

On television, the protected side of the moat looks lonely and desolate. The imagery isn’t at all TV friendly. Yeah, it’s great when Kate Hudson shows up – and the moat really serves its purpose when she’s in the house – but her interest in A-Rod will likely soon wane and she’ll stop going to games. Plus, the Lakers will be playing into August which will split her time.

5-28-09 1630

Soon after President Obama announced his Supreme Court pick Tuesday, Tom Robbins of the Voice dug up and wrote about a 1983 Times mag profile of Sonia Sotomayor during her days as a prosecutor in the Manhattan D-A’s office headed by Bob Morgenthau. In it, Sotomayor discusses conflicting feelings about sending criminals to jail. To those who will try to sink Sotomayor’s nomination, her quotes will likely be parsed and used against her. But really, she’s describing the kind of empathy Obama was seeking (“you have to be able to stand in somebody else’s shoes”) as he reviewed potential nominees to replace David Souter.

Said Sotomayor twenty-five years ago: “No matter how liberal I am, I’m still outraged by crimes of violence. Regardless of whether I can sympathize with the causes that lead these individuals to do these crimes, the effects are outrageous. It pains me...when I meet particularly bright defendants – and I’ve met quite a few of them – people who, if they had the right guidance, the right education, the right breaks, could have been contributing members of our society. When they get convicted, there’s a satisfaction, because they’re doing things that are dangerous. But there are also nights when I sit back and say, ‘My

God, what a waste!”

Conservatives will stress in the coming weeks that judges should set aside their own passions and beliefs and simply apply and uphold the law. They will stir fear that Sotomayor will impose her own values as she decides what the law means. They'll mock her 2001 statement at the UC Berkeley law school in which Sotomayor said her heritage and upbringing may give her an advantage in applying the law over white men because of the “richness of her experiences.” (Glenn Beck on Fox News ridiculously called the remarks “racist”)

Well, to the charge empathy has no place in the search for and nomination of a Supreme Court nominee, I'd simply refer you to the recent Jeffrey Toobin profile of Chief Justice John Roberts. Toobin lays out numerous on-the-record actions that make it clear Roberts consistently carries the conservative torch. It's empathy of a different sort. “In every major case since he became the nation's seventeenth Chief Justice, Roberts has sided with the prosecution over the defendant, the state over the condemned, the executive branch over the legislative, and the corporate defendant over the individual plaintiff...Roberts has served the interests, and reflected the values, of the contemporary Republican Party,” writes Toobin.

And to the right's claim that Sotomayor will be a liberal judicial activist, I say fine, if that's how it turns out. She's replacing a justice already in the liberal minority on most issues. The split will remain 5-4. It'll stay that way if and until Obama or a democratic successor outlasts Sam Alito or Anthony Kennedy.

The two Bushes stacked the deck. Obama deservedly gets a chance to shuffle it. Assuming the leaky vetting that plagued some of the new President's early executive branch picks has been corrected, this choice should be accepted.

-Numerous news organizations have reported that Sotomayor grew up in the “shadows of” or “near” Yankee Stadium. That's not true, really. Sotomayor grew up in the Bronxdale Houses at Watson and Rosedale Avenues near the St. Lawrence Ave. stop on the 6 train. It's a world away from the ballpark. To say she grew up in the shadows of Yankee Stadium is to say I live in the shadows of the Empire State Building.

5-26-09 2130

The simple but straightforward block letter signage adorning the big parking garage in front of LaGuardia Airport's central terminal building has long been a signature identifier of the busy travel hub.

In capital printed letters, it simply says “LA GUARDIA AIRPORT.” A large American flag hangs below it. The presentation is not spectacular in its beauty but it has always seemed to be a just welcome to an outdated but well-functioning air transportation facility.

Those using the Grand Central Parkway in either direction get a clear idea they've come upon the airport. The signage is tasteful and seems to blend well with its surroundings.

Unfortunately, that changed this week when the airport's operator sullied the identifying signage with tacky advertising banners promoting the upstart air carrier JetBlue. Two massively-sized vinyl banners have been attached to the garage on both sides of the LaGuardia sign. The banners carry the typical cutesy and wordy JetBlue message long consistent with their advertising campaign.

Aside from the fact that those traveling at highway speed on the Grand Central will have no chance to digest the message on the large banners, the ads obscure and destroy the dignity of the simple beacon that welcomed visitors to the airport.

To the uninitiated, the advertising makes it appear that JetBlue is a major player at LaGuardia. It's JetBlue airport, right? Well no. JetBlue operates just nine departures a day at LaGuardia. It's at JFK that JetBlue runs most of their operation.

The airport operator is the Port Authority of NY/NJ and you'd hope the agency is getting ridiculous money in exchange for the prime ad space. Reduced air traffic likely forced the revenue hand. It's too bad, because it looks horrible.

-Phil Jackson's post-game news conferences have always been thoughtful and entertaining, but this post-season the Zen-Master seems more cantankerous than ever as he fields questions – especially after a loss. ESPN News has become go-to for me after a Lakers loss these last few weeks. I enjoy watching Phil try to out-wit those who frame questions based on the expectation that the Lakers should never lose. As it stands now, I think you're looking at two game sevens with the dream matchup about even-money to become a reality.

5-26-09 0120

For more than two years now, I've been relegated to a work shift that has me on the job until at least midnight on both Saturday and Sunday nights. It eliminates any shot of experiencing regular weekends with the rest of the citizenry and it occasionally torments me to hear about fun get-togethers enjoyed by others on a Saturday or Sunday. Football season is especially rough. And I'll be bouncing off the walls a week from Saturday when all my pals are at Belmont Park to watch the running of the final leg of the triple crown.

With the exception of about a five-year period that included Saturday's off, I've had pretty lousy work schedules for most of my working life. But at least I've got a job, I tell myself. I manage to sneak in plenty of fun on my days off in the middle of the week and I'm allotted generous periods of vacation time.

I bring all this up because there's an odd collection of characters that are called to duty at my workplace on the weekends. They are folks typically with the least amount of seniority and/or the least amount of seriousness about the task at hand. It's a rag-tag bunch. The third-stringers.

One guy on this weekend crew I describe who stood out as notably different was a guy named Peng Zhang (pronounced Pang Zang). Peng worked the weekend shift not because he was forced to. His

eighteen years with the company could have put him in a much more desirable work slot. He worked the airstrip on weekends because he had a job in the financial sector during the week. Up until last year when Peng's financial services gig vanished with the banking bust, he juggled two full-time jobs. One white-collar, one blue-collar.

The immigrant from China burned it on both ends to help raise kids in the big city. Peng never really complained about what must have been an exhausting routine of maintaining two full-time jobs. He simply showed up and did the work. When he lost the financial job, he revealed little frustration and said he hoped an economic bounce-back would bring back his white-collar gig. He continued to work with me on the weekends at the airstrip and he did so with great enthusiasm and competence.

Our conversations usually centered on sports, the stock market or politics. Peng was especially adept at forecasting market trends and many of his co-workers took cues from him as they managed their 401-K accounts. When inbound airplanes parked for the night, Peng would often collect the left-over, unused food and drink from the aircraft galleys and distribute it to whoever was near.

As I recounted here last summer, Peng would sit with me during broadcasts of the 2008 Summer Olympics from Beijing. He would provide interesting supplementary commentary on the sights shown on TV. He was clearly proud of the organizational effort made by his native country but didn't gloss over the problematic human rights issues that swirled over the gathering of the world's top athletes.

Best of all from the perspective of my work post, Peng was serious about the job and always seemed to be where he was assigned to be at the time prescribed. He kept my workplace sane with his seriousness. He never ducked the physical demands of throwing heavy and cumbersome pieces of luggage regardless of the weather. When it was cold, he wouldn't wear a hat. He laughed at guys who ordered Chinese take-out food for dinner. He had a strong, sturdy frame and he outworked guys half his age.

Peng was 52. He more than deserved to retire in a few years after a long working career. He should have been able to enjoy life without punching a time clock or answering an alarm buzzer. But it didn't go down that way. He worked his regular night shift a week ago Friday. He punched out about 12:30 AM Saturday and was due back at the airstrip the next day. Instead, his sister called the job Saturday morning to say Peng was dead. Here one day, gone the next. The family says it was a heart attack. It probably didn't help that he smoked like a chimney. But if you saw the way he threw around luggage, it appeared his blood was pumping pretty good despite the smokes.

This past Thursday, Peng's family, friends and co-workers gathered at a Manhattan funeral home on Mulberry Street to pay respects. Peng's mother was stricken with uncontrollable grief. She pounded her cane on the ground as she entered the Chinatown funeral parlor and wailed "no, no, no, no." It was about as sad a sight as you'll ever see.

The funeral and burial was Friday.

All the while, workers at the airstrip carried on without him. But it sure isn't the same. For me, he

brightened the bleakness of working on the weekends. He will be remembered by me forever for his reliability, toughness and great companionship.

5-25-09 0144

The sample size is apparently sufficient now for baseball writer Tyler Kepner of the Times to make a blunt declaration about the new ballpark in the Bronx. In the lead paragraph of his Yankee game story in Saturday's paper, he used a tag you never would have expected when this season started.

Said Kepner: "For \$1.5 billion, the Yankees built a bandbox on 161st Street."

A bandbox.

Kepner's right. It's a bandbox. And the paper of record has now officially dubbed it as such.

Through the first 22 regular season games at the new Yankee Stadium (included Saturday's 5-4 Yankee win), there have been 86 home runs. If the current pace continues (and why wouldn't it), there will be 317 homers hit over the course of the 81-game home sked. For comparison's sake, Kepner points out that just 160 home runs were hit at the old Yankee Stadium in all of 2008.

Both Joe Girardi and Brian Cashman have tried to minimize concern over the ease of going deep in their new home ballpark. But there's no way this will be allowed to continue beyond season's end. A bandbox might be fine in Philly – or the South side of Chicago – but it won't be tolerated by the Yankees.

Re-sizing the outfield dimensions seems difficult, so don't be surprised if MLB adds its second humidior. The one used in Denver was fantastically effective in reducing the long ball. It was added in 2002 after a total of 268 home runs were hit at Coors Field in 2001 (303 were hit there in 1999). Now, the ballpark is consistently yielding fewer than 200 homers per season. Last year, there were a tolerable 174 home runs hit at Coors.

I understand that New York's average relative humidity during the baseball season is well above what it is in Denver, and may reduce the effectiveness of the humidior. But if you pack enough moisture into the ball, it's not gonna sail like it would otherwise.

I am going to go a step further than Kepner with a bold declaration of my own. I'll say right now that 2010 will bring custom manipulation to the baseballs used at Yankee Stadium. The dimensions will stay the same. The baseballs will not.

5-24-09 0119

The two baseball teams in this town will only get to build a new stadium once or twice each century. It's just coincidence that both the Yanks and Mets opened a new building in the same year, but it provides the baseball fan the chance to compare them.

In my opinion, the Yanks did a better job with their twice-a-century opportunity.

With one visit to see a ballgame at each new ballpark now under my belt, I can say that the baseball cathedral at 161st and River absolutely takes your breath away while the comparatively modest ballpark in Flushing leaves you short of that same feeling. The difference in quality certainly isn't enough to switch baseball loyalty, but it always seems to be the Yankees that have a clear edge in execution on matters such as these.

Whereas the transition from Shea to Citi dished the Met fan a jarring (albeit mostly positive) change in the baseball experience, the new Yankee home gives its loyalists a massive upgrade in amenities without sacrificing the profound and important feeling that you're surrounded by the ghosts of Ruth, Mantle and Jackson.

When I left the game down an escalator from the main level to the exits leading from the Great Hall to Babe Ruth Plaza, a bank of lights shined on massive banner depictions of Yankee greats.

The white, wooden fence façade on the upper edge of the building matches the look of the old stadium as do the blue seats. They took what worked and made it all better. They took out the steepness of the climbs in the upper reaches and went crazy with the concourse widths. The 360-degree access regardless of ticket type is true – although one must pass through a tunnel (without a view of the playing surface) in left field to reach the bleachers.

You look at the place from the outside and it's a palace. It looks especially good at night. Yeah, I'm aware of the broken promises to the community as it relates to restoration of public park land, but that will likely get corrected. The interaction of urban landscape – the hustle and bustle – the bars – a commuter rail line with a new station – two major express subway lines – well, it really works.

I bought a bleacher seat on Stub Hub for nine bucks a few hours before the game. With side charges, it was about twenty bucks to get in. I started in the bleachers and proceeded to roam in search of different vantage points before settling into a "main" level seat in section 224. It was just above the third base bag. There were pockets of empty seats waiting to be poached and the ushers don't seem too vigilant about checking stubs.

The food hasn't been hyped as much as the offerings at Citi, but there are plenty of great options. I got a \$12 chicken parm hero from Mike's Deli in the food court. What's really cool about the food court is a display of Yankee greats showing pictures of them eating. (the picture of George above made me laugh). The most popular food item appears to be the sliced steak sandwich (\$15) served on the field level along the third base side.

Beer is pricey and it took me a while to understand where the value was. They sell sixteen-ounce plastic bottles of domestic beer for nine bucks. But they also have plenty of stands selling 24-ounce "souvenir" cups of suds for \$10. That same cup can be filled with a Heineken or Peroni for \$11. When I got home

from the game, I measured the volume of the cup to verify that it was indeed 24-ounces and it was. If you're going to the game, you gotta get the plastic cup.

Unlike the old Stadium, you can drink beer in the bleachers. For me, that's the place I'll end up when I go to Yankee games. The view is much better than it was at the old Stadium and it's a fun, young crowd (mixed with the older creature crowd in right.) If you're pressed up against the ill-conceived Mohegan Sun sports bar, you're forced to rely on monitors to cover the blind spots but it's not a huge deal.

The view of the 4 train isn't the same as it was in the old place but you can still get a glimpse of it through an opening in right field.

I tried to get a handle on the "wind-tunnel" theory people are using to explain all the home runs to right and I'm not sure it makes sense. The height of the structure is such that it would seem to blunt wind impact when it's blowing out to right. On Tuesday night, the wind was blowing right to left but could barely be felt in the bleachers.

The main high-def video board in center field is the biggest and nicest I've ever seen.

The bathrooms were fine. I never had to wait more than a minute. The urinals are too widely-spaced and the faucets produce nothing but cold water, but it's still a major upgrade from the bathrooms across the street.

The most glaring mistake in the place is what's being called "the moat." I'll talk about the mote at length in another post here in a few days.

Attendance was announced at 42,838 Tuesday night, about ten-thousand shy of capacity. It felt nearly full to me but the way the place is built, another ten grand would fit in just fine without causing a feeling of being cramped.

The MTA had D trains lined up to whisk the crowd away after it was over. I got home in about forty minutes.

5-20-09 1515

It was a ridiculously nice day in New York Tuesday. I had the day off with little on the docket so I decided to make my first trip to the new ballpark in the Bronx.

I'll write more tomorrow, but for now I'll say that the new Yankee home is decisively better than the one the Mets have opened in Flushing.

I sat with the creatures and did the roll call. What a great experience that was. I gave the place a couple of laps and feel like I only covered half there is to see. It's amazing. A-Rod hit an A-Bomb and Tex sent a text message. The Yanks won their seventh in a row.

5-20-09 0030

The prestigious restaurant review slot in the New York Times Dining and Wine section is changing hands. It was announced last week that Frank Bruni is leaving his beat sometime this year. Bruni has written the main weekly restaurant review in the Times for the last five years. No replacement was named.

Bruni has been must-read during his run and he's helped uphold a tradition of Times food section excellence. During my time here in New York, I've had the pleasure of reading many great Times food writers including Eric Asimov, Peter Meehan, Ruth Reichl, Johnny Apple, Amanda Hesser and William Grimes.

My pal Bill is a high-level staffer at a Manhattan restaurant group and a former chef at a popular, well-regarded restaurant. I asked him for his reaction to Bruni's departure. His response appears below.

I think he has been good. Better than Grimes, not as good as Ruth. I like how he has championed casual dining while giving props to fine dining places that deserve it. I think he wrote more deserved takedowns than others in recent memory.

Honestly, the impact of this position is not what it was when Ruth held it. The combination of internet, foodblogs, Chowhound, Yelp, etc etc have diluted the impact. But Frank was a good fit for his era.

Now the question is: Who replaces Bruni? One of the intriguing possibilities being floated on food blogs is Jonathan Gold, who writes really great reviews for LA Weekly. Gold won a Pulitzer in 2005 and has a nose for the underappreciated, off-the-avenue type places.

5-19-09 0145

A new policy banning patrons from bringing coolers full of beer into the infield produced a shocking drop in attendance at this year's Preakness Stakes in Baltimore.

For the better part of the last decade, attendance at Pimlico for the second leg of the triple crown was solid six figures. Last year, 112,222 filed in for undefeated Big Brown's five length win. With arguably the same racing intrigue on tap this year, just 77,580 showed up on a day that was warm and mostly rain-free.

What gives?

Most of the drop-off has to be explained by the new, no carry-in policy enacted to reduce extreme drunkenness in the infield. It's become tradition for many of the region's cooler-toting college kids to make a day of it in the Preakness infield. Track officials adhered to an anything-goes approach and consistently got an infield packed with young people.

This year, patrons who wanted to drink beer in the infield had to buy it inside. Overhead television shots

of the facility showed large pockets of empty space in the grassy infield. Clearly, the kids took the party elsewhere. Whether the racing establishment misses them is unclear.

I believe racing ought to get people through the gates first – and then worry about whether they gamble or not. Get ‘em to the track and the gambling side of it often takes care of itself.

In this case, you’re dealing with the complicated side issue of binge drinking. The Preakness took a stand – and perhaps was motivated by capturing a larger slice of revenue from beer sales – but got a pretty big boycott in return.

As for the race itself, what can you say? The filly met high expectations with a wire-to-wire win that started with a wide trip around the first turn. She was forced to dig deep in the final yards to fend off the Derby winner. It was a dramatic and memorable minute and fifty-five.

Now, the only way it would make sense for Rachel Alexandra to run in the Belmont Stakes would be if she was running for a triple crown. She’s not, so she ought to take a break. I’d expect her new connections will announce as much in the next few days.

For Rachel to be asked to run the grueling mile and a half Belmont Stakes distance after two big wins in five weeks – well – that’s asking a lot. If she was running for the triple crown, you’d have to give her a shot, but the horse has demonstrated enough brilliance for now.

Yes, her legacy would be elevated with a Belmont win, but now is the time to protect her so she can continue performing in big races later this year and beyond.

Rachel’s new owner Jess Jackson proved his point. He bought the filly after her beautiful 20-length Oaks Day win knowing she was better than the boys. Jackson did what Rachel’s previous owner refused to do. He let her run against the boys – and he let her demonstrate that she’s the best three-year-old in America (boy or girl).

If Jackson wants Rachel to continue competing against the best male horses in this country, he should wait until August when some of the best three-year-old colts compete at Saratoga. Don’t push the envelope with such a special animal.

True racing fans will completely understand if Rachel takes a break. They’ll look forward to a fresh Rachel romping in big races this fall. Maybe we’ll get a head-to-head matchup between Rachel and the great, undefeated five-year-old mare Zenyatta. It’s not clear where or when that might be happen, but Jackson is the kind of owner who recognizes the logical showcase spots on the racing calendar.

I guess the only disappointment in all of this Rachel excitement is that she didn’t run in the Derby. With a clean trip, she likely would have beaten Mine That Bird on the first Saturday in May. Had she run in the Derby, we might be looking at a legitimate and fully embraceable triple crown shot. We’ll never know.

5-18-09 0145

I'm now getting three mailings per week on average from the re-election campaign of New York City mayor Mike Bloomberg. The semi-glossy brochures remind the recipient of the "tough economic times" and of Mayor Mike's "strong, independent leadership."

The mayor's television commercials are on constantly – especially during Met and Yankee broadcasts.

Campaign finance records show that Bloomberg's campaign spent \$15.7 million during the two month period ending May 11. That's a ton of money in a short amount of time for a guy who has already all but sewn up a third-term. But hey, to Bloomberg the two-month sum is just a small sliver of his massive personal fortune. Bloomberg isn't waiting for the run-up to the November election to blast the airwaves. He's doing it now. Bloomberg has chosen a shock and awe strategy that likely demoralizes his potential democratic opponents Bill Thompson and Anthony Weiner.

Bloomberg mentions no political affiliation on his brochures or commercials. He officially changed his registration from republican to independent in June 2007. He was elected mayor as a republican in 2001 but was registered as a democrat before that. Based on his body of work as mayor of this city, Mayor Mike's current political affiliation is probably most appropriate. He's an independent. His extreme wealth (net worth estimated to be \$16 billion) makes it easy for him to be politically pragmatic and free of some of the burdens of political affiliation. Most of his non-fiscal decisions are shaped by the majority view of city residents.

Mayor Mike bought his way into the job. He's buying the retention of it. Yet, all his dough (and his "independence") actually allows him to avoid at least the perception of conflict that bedevils many politicians in these parts. Yeah, it helps that he's deft at avoiding controversy and rides the subway to work. He seems to have sharper department heads than Giuliani and keeps an even keel publicly. I'm ok with the guy. I'd prefer a true liberal democrat with strong ties to one of the outerboroughs – and I've never voted for Mayor Mike – but I'll take his last eight years.

What I don't like is that Bloomberg torpedoed a city law limiting NYC mayors to two terms. Bloomberg thinks he's such a special mayor that he had the law changed to extend his career by four more years. The term limit law he got overturned (with the help of the city council) was twice approved by NYC voters.

On that fact alone, I'll vote against Bloomberg again this time around. It won't matter. Mayor Mike is coming back and city voters are getting plenty of reminders of that in their mailboxes.

5-18-09 0055

When the controversial author James Frey was introduced at a Wednesday night reading in Manhattan to promote the paperback release of his excellent novel *Bright Shiny Morning*, he took the stage and punched the live public address microphone with the back of his hand.

It was a sound check. It produced a loud boom. And it's the kind of thing I guess you'd expect from an author who likes to create loud booms.

Frey's next book is halfway done and there will probably be a boom when it comes out. Frey says he's writing "the third book of the Bible" starring a tolerant Messiah living in New York City. He hopes it will be "a cool book that will get me in a lot of trouble" and one that "hasn't been written before."

I loved Bright Shiny Morning and look forward to Frey's next effort. On the fourth floor of a chain book store off Union Square, Frey read a passage added to the Bright Shiny paperback. About 150 people were there to see Frey. The new section of the book includes a third-person depiction of a 2006 Oprah Winfrey appearance in which Frey was scolded by the talk show host for revelations that Frey fabricated parts of his memoir A Million Little Pieces. The passage seems to suggest that the real-life Frey is sitting on audio recordings of Oprah later disclosing serious personal mistakes of her own during an "apology" call to Frey.

Frey was skewered as a fraud for his truth-stretching memoir. Oprah hammered him especially hard because she loved the book and made it one of her book club picks.

A Gawker reporter at the reading Wednesday night asked Frey about the existence of tapes. Frey wouldn't confirm or deny holding tapes, but said Oprah did indeed call him to apologize. Reuters is reporting that a rep for Oprah confirmed the call and apology.

Frey said a couple of times that he would answer any and all questions no matter how long it took. But a bookstore employee controlling the event rushed to limit inquiries so that Frey could sit down and sign copies of the book.

Prior to Frey's appearance, the former rock and roller Tony O'Neill (one-time touring keyboard player in Kenickie and a stint in the band Southpaw) read from his book Down and Out on Murder Mile. It's a novel, but it's based on O'Neill's struggles to kick a wicked heroin addiction in a rough neighborhood in London. O'Neill slurped a large vodka/orange juice drink from a plastic cup and captivated the audience as he recited a passage about a man's attempt to gain a counter job at a porn shop. After he was done reading, a member of the audience asked O'Neill about how he gained "recovery" from the needle. He scoffed at use of the word "recovery" as it's advanced by Dr. Drew and the twelve-step crowd. O'Neill credited the use of marijuana and ecstasy to transition away from the harder, injected substances that pushed him to the brink of uselessness. O'Neill appeared healthy and happy and there's no doubt his earlier life as a musician gives him the flair to perform on the stage he had Wednesday night.

After the reading, I went over to Heather's Bar in the East Village to see the great Deadheat DJ duo blend a soundtrack fit for the tipping of cold beer. Deadheat does regular performances in the city and told me they have again been invited back to do their thing at the big Siren Festival on Coney Island in July.

5-14-09 1910

The three-day NTSB hearing on the Colgan Air flight that went down outside Buffalo in February started Tuesday and included release of a detailed transcript of the cockpit voice recorder.

The transcript is one of dozens of pieces of evidence being examined and discussed as part of the investigation into why Continental Connection flight 3407 suddenly nose-dived into a home below the approach path, killing all 49 people on board plus one in the house.

Before Tuesday's start of the NTSB hearings, there had been plenty of speculation and leaks (much of it funneled through reports in the Wall Street Journal) on why the crash occurred. The leading theory from information gathered by NTSB investigators is that the flight's captain Marvin Renslow improperly attempted to raise the plane's nose after a mechanism in the cockpit warned of a "stall" or an aerodynamic condition that inhibits the plane's ability to fly. Rather than point the nose up, aviation experts say pilots should react to an impending stall or actual stall by pointing the nose down to gain greater airspeed and a quick resumption of "lift." In fairness, Renslow isn't here to explain his actions. But the NTSB probe to date suggests a recovery from the stall was very much possible had Renslow reacted properly to the problem.

That raises the issue of training and pilot competence – and the NTSB hearing agenda includes hours and hours devoted to those subjects. The Journal reported Monday that Renslow had flunked multiple "check rides" or flights in which he was monitored by an experienced training pilot.

From the perspective of the victim's families, I'd expect deep anger and outrage if they choose to read the 63-page transcript of the conversation between Renslow and first officer Rebecca Shaw during the flight. Entered into the NTSB hearing's public record as Exhibit 12-A (and available for review in PDF form on the Journal's web site), the document puts into written word the entire (excluding expletives) conversation in the cockpit from takeoff clearance to a few moments before the plane was engulfed in flames.

It reveals not a professional and business-like approach to the serious nature of commercial flight in difficult weather conditions. Rather, it paints a picture that makes one think the pilots believed the plane was basically flying itself. Renslow and Shaw carried on as if the cockpit was a place to pass time by getting to know each other – and commiserate about career trials and tribulations.

Of course, the tone and substance of conversations like the one between Renslow and Shaw in this instance likely happens in commercial airline cockpits every day. Transcripts never see the light of day because the voice recorder is never pulled and the tape starts anew when the next flight begins. But that is of no comfort to those impacted by this crash. They will read this transcript and likely will be unhappy with several sequences that reflect a lack of full concentration on the task at hand.

After the plane takes off at 9:18 PM on Feb. 12, Renslow spends much of the first twenty minutes telling Shaw about prior maintenance issues he's had on earlier flights including one in which he was getting a false smoke alarm indication while en route to Alexandria, LA. Renslow was flying the Saab 340 at the time and he told Shaw he was directed by a Colgan dispatcher to continue flying to Alexandria where the smoke detector would be fixed overnight. "Of course, after that day we all went to the steakhouse. We

ate steak, baked potato and drank a messload of beer,” said Renslow.

Shaw subsequently laughed when she recounted flying with newer pilots who manipulated the rudder to “fling the plane back and forth” such that it would “knock the flight attendants down in the back.”

At 9:45 PM, the conversation turned to each of the pilot’s career paths. Renslow (age 47) told Shaw he had previously taken a (buyout) “package” from Verizon and was unsure if he wanted to move on to one of the major airlines if given the opportunity. “I don’t have to make \$200-thousand a year or \$150-thousand a year, whatever. I can certainly be comfortable on \$100-thousand,” said Renslow. At about this time, an air traffic controller at Cleveland Center came on the frequency being monitored by Renslow and Shaw. The controller cleared Southwest flight 615 “direct” to Buffalo’s airport.

Shaw: “That us?”

Renslow: “Nope.”

Shaw: “I didn’t think so. (laughs) I just heard direct Buffalo.”

Shortly thereafter, Shaw resumes the discussion about career path. “I have goals but I have such a wide range of goals I don’t know exactly what I want.”

At this point, the flight was down to its final fifteen minutes and Renslow went back to reminiscing about a time earlier in his relatively short flying career when much of his flying was in the south. “Down in Houston, you’re more spread out. The flying is a whole lot nicer down there. The controllers are a whole lot nicer.”

At 10:10 PM, Shaw observes ice on the windshield. Renslow says it’s the most ice he’s seen in a long time and Shaw responds by saying she has little experience in such conditions. Amazingly, the cockpit conversation again turns back to promotions and career aspirations before Shaw makes a disconcerting remark about icing. “I’ve never seen icing conditions. I’ve never deiced. I’ve never experienced any of that. I don’t want to experience that...I’d have freaked out...and thought oh my gosh we were going to crash.” Shaw mixes verb tenses so it’s unclear if she means that her trepidation is in the present tense – or came earlier. She later says she’d like to fly as a first officer for a full winter’s season to gain experience in inclement weather before advancing to captain.

At 10:16 PM, the stall warning comes and in less than thirty seconds the plane is on the ground. Just before it hits, Renslow says: “We’re down.”

Obviously, the two pilots had no idea their conversation would ever be heard. Their decision to mix personal with business may not be an aberration from standard conduct. But it has to hurt those who lost loved ones to know that those occupying the cockpit lacked total focus on the task at hand. The weather was horrible that day in the New York area and less than ideal in Buffalo. It should have prompted a heightened seriousness. Ultimately, if it’s decided by the NTSB that Renslow blew his response to the

stall, the light will shine most bright on training. But it seems likely that the NTSB may ask the FAA to toughen its rules and/or enforcement on cockpit chit-chat. Pilots vehemently oppose monitoring of inside cockpit conversations by outside sources – and I can understand why. But the Renslow/Shaw transcript may prompt a change.

Much to my surprise, there was no continuous television coverage of Tuesday's hearing. I can understand that the cable news networks are more interested in the Trump/Miss California news conference and items of the like, but I expected one of C-Span's three channels to carry the event. Since C-Span failed on that count, I relied on the NTSB's webcast which provided decent video/audio once one was able to access their web site (likely burdened by heavy traffic).

-The Post's horse racing columnist Ray Kerrison added another ridiculous [piece](#) to his scrapbook of lousy columns Tuesday, arguing that Calvin Borel is a "sellout" for choosing to ride Rachel Alexandra rather than Derby winner Mine That Bird in the Preakness Saturday. "Opportunism won the day. Borel has effectively devalued the horse that won him the Kentucky Derby, leaving a bad taste in the mouth," said Kerrison. Wrong. Borel knows Rachel is the better horse. He had a difficult decision but must do what's best for him. He's had his rib cage crushed riding horses and knows a jockey's career could end at anytime. Nobody should call a jockey a "sellout" for choosing the horse he believes has a better chance of winning.

-Another great [picture](#) has turned up at Joseph Holmes' photo blog. This one perfectly captures the artistry of Brooklyn pizza maker Dom DeMarco.

-Montclair Mike made his first visit to Citi Field Monday for the Santana/Lowe matchup. He wrote an excellent review of the ballpark and TSR thanks him for allowing it to be re-printed. It appears below.

I love ballparks. As a kid I had not one but three books detailing all the big league ballparks and I wore out all three with dozens of readings. For me, going to a new ballpark for the first time is more exciting than the game itself, so I approached my first visit to Citi Field with real excitement. I was not disappointed.

If you take the 7 train to Citi, the approach to the ballpark is a treat. The staircase from the tracks to the street level is covered by an awning, so as you descend you can't see the park. Then when you hit the sidewalk it's as if a curtain has been pulled back and you suddenly have a perfect view of the rotunda. The staircase has obviously been situated to maximize this effect and it really works. It's a great introduction.

The "Fan Walk" outside the rotunda is inspired. As you may know, thousands of fans have bought personalized bricks with their own brief inscriptions.

The Fan Walk is like a more formal (and monetized) version of the inscriptions that fans write on the finish line at NASCAR races. Yes, it's a way for the team to squeeze even more money out of its fans, but collectively the inscriptions create a strong feeling that there's a lively community of Mets fans that you're about to join just by walking onto the grounds. Really, every team should just steal this idea.

The Jackie Robinson rotunda may be the feature of Citi Field that has attracted the most notice, but it was one of the few elements of the ballpark that left me disappointed. The huge empty archways make it feel unfinished and it has a museum-like quality that's almost sterile. It would really benefit from some music; just a simple brass band or a live organ would make it much more welcoming. All that said, I appreciated the effort to honor Robinson, and when you think of the millions of kids who will read Robinson's quote - "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives" - as they enter and exit the park, well, you can't be too critical.

The concourses throughout the park are exceptionally roomy, which is welcome anywhere but especially in claustrophobic New York. After a typical day in Midtown just walking around Citi Field is soothing. The centerfield plaza has quickly become very popular and it's easy to see why. It's as good a communal space as exists anywhere in baseball. The significance of the replica bridge between the right field corner and the centerfield plaza is unclear to me. It looks like the Kosciuszko Bridge, which hardly qualifies as an NYC landmark. Nonetheless, when you walk across the bridge into the centerfield plaza you definitely get a feeling that you're entering something, and the whole area seems to already have a fun and unique character.

The much-discussed food and drink selections live up to their considerable hype. In my opinion, the concessions at Citi Field don't quite measure up to San Francisco's AT&T Park - the gold standard with their incredible selection of Napa wines by the glass - but they're better than any other park I've been to. The centerfield beer stand with its amazing selection of 27 bottled beers is enough to make a guy like me downright giddy. I don't think it's slighting Queens at all to say that Citi Field may be one of the 50 best places to eat in Queens (compared to, say, Madison Square Garden, which is clearly not one of the 1000 best places to eat in Manhattan).

I was already a fan of Citi Field by the time I made my way up to the upper levels, but the 300 level - or Excelsior level - really delivered the knockout blow. Most of the sections on this level are part of the "Caesars Club" and for most games they carry a price tag of over \$100, which is admittedly steep for regular season baseball. If you can afford the seats it's a tremendous area. The concourse ceilings are lined with bare light bulbs, like you would see at a church fair. The standing room views are excellent and if you stand there's a little shelf behind the last row of seats for your food and drink.

There's a horseshoe bar in the concourse on each baseline. I sat at the bar on the third base side, ordered a Knob on the rocks and enjoyed the view of the game to my right and a panorama of the setting sun behind midtown in the distance to the left. Fantastic. Behind home plate there is an enormous bar and lounge area with leather chairs and couches and plenty of flat-screen TVs. I'm not sure if this area really works. It feels like something you'd find in a casino, and although it's comfortable it doesn't really say ballpark and it doesn't really say luxury either. Still, considering Citi Field is just as breezy as Shea was, it's a decent place to duck out of the cold for a half-inning. Overall, the 300 level at Citi is the best non-field level seating I've ever seen. They've taken a whole ring of good-not-great seats and turned them into something pretty special.

The collapse of Citigroup may actually be a small blessing for Mets fans, as the Citi signage is not as obnoxious as it might otherwise have been. I had mixed feelings about the advertising at Citi. The outfield walls are garish with advertising and just looking out there is an assault on the eyes. From foul pole to foul pole, however, Citi Field is remarkably clean and when your attention is on the infield - which it usually is - there is hardly any advertising intrusion at all.

As far as how the park affects the game itself, I didn't learn anything from this one game that you couldn't have already learned from watching the Mets on TV. Personally I like that the park plays big. It's a pitcher's park but a fair one, sort of like Dodger Stadium. I like the contrast between Citi Field and the bandbox Citizens Bank Park in Philly. It sets up the possibility of a rivalry with a sharp contrast in roster make-up for many years to come. The way the outfield wall slants toward the poles is not as distracting in person as it is on TV, but I still don't really care for it. It's excessively gimmicky in a park that already has plenty of distinguishing elements.

Citi Field is not without its issues, but for the most part they're fixable. The rotunda can be improved. I can see where longtime Mets fans might feel that there's not enough in the park that makes you feel like this is the home of the New York Mets. That's an easy fix. You can always add memorabilia cases or add more orange and blue. They got the big things right.

More problematic is the pricing. The Mets have been lucky to get something of a free pass on pricing in the papers because the Yankees new pricing has been so shocking, but the fact remains that there are a lot of empty seats around home plate at Citi (and this on a pleasant night with Santana pitching and the team riding a seven game win streak). JT complained about the divide between the haves and have-nots and I agree to a point. For the most part Citi Field is a welcoming place and I got the (completely unscientific) feeling that fans were more excited by what they had access to than they were bummed out by what they didn't. The overall fan vibe was very positive - never a given when talking about Mets fans - so they must be getting a lot of things right. Still, those empty, high-priced seats are impossible to ignore, and it may not be until next year when those seats are re-valued that Citi Field can reach its full potential.

Leaving the park it seemed to me that the exterior looked even better at night. The red brick façade, darkened arches, and clean sightlines down the baselines make the building look dramatic. It made me think ahead to autumn and the days getting shorter. It's going to look amazing in October.

5-12-09 2145

A welcome edict recently issued by the New York City police department reminds officers on the beat that taking pictures in public places is well within the law.

Since 9-11, there have been numerous interactions between amateur photographers and NYPD – and instances that included on-the-spot police review and destruction of images.

Picture-taking in the subway system gained clear and wide support five years back when the MTA proposed a rule banning photography. Citing terror concerns, the MTA proposal was backed by NYPD.

The proposal was met by heavy public resistance and the MTA eventually backed off and acknowledged that the train and bus system is open to the shutterbug. A combination of the power of the First Amendment and common sense prevailed.

Despite the MTA declaration, there has been occasional subsequent misapplication of law and policy by police including the recent issuance of a summons to an off-duty MTA worker snapping photos of subway cars.

It brings us to the new NYPD operations order which states in part: "Photography and the videotaping of public places, buildings and structures are common activities within New York City...and is rarely unlawful." The directive also explicitly prohibits police officers from demanding to see a person's camera images – or from directing them to be deleted.

My only personal experience with this came on the 7 train platform at Queensboro Plaza a few years back. The setting sun was generating amazing colors on the urban landscape and I whipped out my small digital camera and started snapping. Almost immediately, a stocky, uniformed police officer approached me and asked me to stop. He cited 9-11 and I put the camera in my backpack.

I've been careful ever since to watch where I snap. Even though the law is on my side, I've heard and read enough stories to know that the amateur photog may draw unwanted attention from law enforcement.

The issuance of a firm internal police advisory offering protection to the picture-taker is comforting and encouraging. To celebrate, I took a late-night shot from the 61st. St./Woodside platform. It appears above.

5-12-09 0139

As I walked through the neighborhood Sunday afternoon to catch my bus to work, it seemed like everybody was clutching fresh flowers. This city has flower-power on a regular day, but on Mom's Day it's really poppin'.

The women who typically sell cut fruit, flavored ice or hot dogs on the street corners during the week turn to the sale of flowers on Mother's Day. That's in addition to the many bodegas that double as legitimate florists.

On 35th Avenue near 83rd, a small woman stood over a large plastic bucket on the sidewalk. It was filled with bouquets of daisies. They were small, tightly-wrapped presentations and several people were huddled around her to make a purchase.

I spoke to my Mom on the telephone for a few minutes before I left for work. It sounded like she had a fun Mother's Day in store. Her afternoon included visits with her 100-year-old father, two-year-old grandson and 41-year-old son in suburban Chicago.

I'm assuming many of those ladies selling flowers here in my neighborhood are mothers. Hopefully, they were able to get some appreciation or family fun time after they sold their stashes.

5-11-09 0045

The buildup for Saturday's Preakness Stakes in Baltimore should be interesting now that super-filly Rachel Alexandra is slated to run in the race. On his radio show Friday, Mike Francesa said this year's running will be the "the biggest Preakness in a long time."

Certainly, there's some drama involving the main participants. You've got Mine That Bird coming off a visually impressive Derby win that returned \$50.60 on the dollar. It has become almost automatic now (barring injury) for the Derby winner to run in the Preakness regardless of whether it's wise to run grueling race distances with just two weeks rest in between. There's great pressure and expectations on the connections of the Derby winner to run in Baltimore and at least give hope to the triple crown dream, realistic or not.

Many handicappers will work under the theory that Mine That Bird's Derby win was a fluke and he'll revert to off-the-board mediocrity in the Preakness. But let's say Bird wins the Preakness. He'll go to a jam-packed Belmont three weeks later where his father Birdstone won the final leg of the triple crown in 2004. It'll be Mine That Bird madness. And it's a triple crown I can easily root for.

Standing in the way of Bird's improbable crown effort is Rachel Alexandra. She won the Kentucky Oaks (the day before the Derby) by an amazing twenty lengths and she did it with apparent ease. Many believe she's the fastest three-year-old horse (boy or girl) in training and it's quite possible she would have won the Derby had she run in it.

Assuming she draws into what's expected to be a full field in the Preakness, Rachel Alexandra will be favored to win the race.

It's too bad she didn't run in the Derby, because a dominating win in the Preakness will make you wonder what if – and what could have been.

Jockey Calvin Borel rode both Rachel and Bird on Derby weekend and is faced with the enviable quandary of choosing between the two. His stated preference is Rachel which tells you who he thinks is the better horse. He's dumping the Derby winner! Imagine how Borel will feel if Bird wins the Preakness and he's watching a potential triple crown winner from the saddle of another horse.

Another six Derby runners will be among the fourteen that run in the Preakness including Pioneerof the Nile, who finished second.

-Francesa expects Rachel Alexandra's run in the Preakness to generate "an incredible (TV) rating." Francesa believes the filly's participation in a race with triple crown implications will pull in lots of female viewers. The Derby's TV rating was the highest it's been in 17 years. My pal Montclair Mike thinks much of the Derby ratings spike can be explained by a flood of viewers who flipped to the Derby

after watching the conclusion of CBS golf coverage that included a contending Tiger at Quail Hollow.

-Horse racing fans here in New York will no longer benefit from the often-informative pre-race reports of paddock reporter Jan Rushton. After more than a decade as the pre-race voice of racing telecasts from the paddocks of New York's three thoroughbred tracks, Rushton is quitting. She told NYRA she needs to devote full-time attention to care for a brother diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease. The observations of the paddock reporter can be of tremendous help to the viewer of horse racing telecasts. At times, Rushton shared information about first-time runners mined from conversations she'd have with trainers. She often wore lovely hats and dresses, especially during the Saratoga meet. I'll miss her, for sure.

-I failed to provide much detail of my Derby week doings, but I should belatedly mention an excellent Louisville dining spot that really hit the spot. My pal Marc did some advanced research and found a place called Jimbo's Barbeque just west of the airport. We had the full group there on Derby Eve and really enjoyed Jimbo's chicken, ribs and pulled pork. Dinner was served in a good-vibe dining room that occupied the front of what looks a family home. It was solid and outside the scope of the out-of-town contingent that mobs the usual Louisville dining joints.

5-10-09 0130

As glad as I am that New York state lawmakers approved a new revenue package (worth an estimated \$2 billion in additional funding annually) to save the region's public transit system, I'm disgusted at how it was done.

I sat here in the apartment Wednesday night and watched feeds of the floor debates in both chambers and I need to detail the ridiculous partisan process used to jam through a monumental piece of legislation in such a short time span.

For the last five months, support had coalesced around a plan created by a bi-partisan commission headed by former MTA chairman Dick Ravitch. The proposal was simple. It would impose tolls on all the free city bridges and add a payroll tax of 33 cents on every \$100 paid by employers in the 12-county region served by the MTA.

The measure got immediate thumbs-up from all the major players. Republicans in both chambers were solidly against it largely to adhere to anti-tax platforms, but Democrats control both the Assembly and the Senate.

Unfortunately, the whole thing got held up when four democratic state senators from New York City (Espada, Diaz, Kruger and Monserrate) expressed opposition to the Ravitch measure because of the bridge tolls. Even though the four have large numbers of public transit users in their district, the block of holdout democrats left the Senate three votes shy of being able to pass the Ravitch bill.

Time slipped away and the MTA moved forward with a doomsday plan.

The four holdouts wouldn't budge on tolls, so after weeks of legislative inaction and the MTA doomsday plan nearing implementation, the no-toll four were appeased with the measure we got. The toll component of the plan was replaced by increased fees on driver's licenses, vehicle registrations, taxi rides and car rentals in the 12-county MTA region. That compromise produced two new democratic holdouts from Long Island who were pro-toll. They eventually were turned around by a provision in the bill that reimburses public school systems forced to pay the payroll tax.

I'm not gonna quibble about the substitute plan but I can't believe how it gained passage.

The full membership of the state legislature didn't even see the 40-page bill until late Wednesday.

It was printed, expedited through committees and on the floor of both chambers in a matter of hours.

In the Senate, Majority Leader Malcolm Smith refused to engage in debate with those who had concerns about the bill. Instead he had the slow-talking, inarticulate and irritable Brooklyn senator Martin Dilan front the case for public transit. It was ugly. Even Dilan didn't seem to know what was in the bill.

Upstate lawmakers who want parity for bridges and roads when it comes to transportation spending badgered Dilan about a provision in the bill on that subject. It contained the word "intent" but no specific funding number for bridges and roads. Dilan didn't want to be bothered with such a concern and repeatedly said "intent" is sufficient language to motivate lawmakers to act on bridges and roads in Buffalo or Syracuse at some later date.

Another legitimate concern unanswered by supporters of the bill is the disproportionate burden on employers in the collar counties who will pay the same payroll tax as those in the city. Counties on the fringe of the MTA service area include employers who will get hit with the tax increase but do business in areas that get much less in the way of train and bus service.

Also unclear from the rushed debate on the bill is why public schools need to be reimbursed for the payroll tax months (up to a year) after paying it rather than simply be exempted from the tax to start with. Additionally, since reimbursement will be pulled from the annual budget, it appears taxpayers outside the 12-county MTA service region will be paying for the reimbursement.

None of that mattered to Smith. He had a 32-30 advantage lined up on the vote and he was perfectly content ramming the bill through without answering questions from the membership. When he finally got up late in the night to speak about the bill, he blamed the current financial predicament of the MTA on years of republican rule. After a couple hours of efforts by the minority to explore the legislation's potential weaknesses, Smith had little to offer other than nasty rhetoric about those with genuine concerns about a \$2 billion annual tax hike. The votes were pre-counted and a deal on the bill had been struck by state leaders behind closed doors. Smith had the numbers and he didn't care one bit about open debate on the merits of the bill.

I support the ultimate outcome. But man, what a lousy way of doing the state's business. I agree with the Long Island senator John Flanagan who called the process a "hit and run."

For the record, the measure passed 86-56 in the Assembly and 32-29 in the Senate.

5-7-09 1845

I came back to New York Wednesday. My Dad got up in the pitch dark of night and dropped me at O'Hare for the first flight to Cleveland. I landed at LaGuardia on a delayed connecting flight at about 2 PM. It's back to work Friday.

I've been mostly out of the loop on both sport and news for much of the last week.

Before I left Chicago, I read some web news stories on a state government compromise that delivers a bailout for New York City's bus/train/subway system. A day later - as I write this - few people have actually seen the bill - nor has a vote been taken by either chamber of New York's legislature. But let's assume the announced compromise is as it's described and let's assume it gets approval by the full legislature Wednesday night. If that happens, it's a major victory for the public transit user in this region and it's the efforts of the beleaguered governor of New York that should be appreciated.

Give credit where it's due. Governor David Patterson got a bill with a valid funding mechanism for guaranteed short-term future investment in public transit infrastructure. There's also dough in the measure to blunt the whopper of a fare hike that was about to kick in plus money to stave off a long list of damaging service cuts.

Patterson has been getting mocked for months because he can't control or coordinate the legislature's circus of different agendas in Albany. Rather than throw up his hands, the governor really kept at it on the public transit bill. He should be commended for stopping what was about to become a destructive partial abandonment of New York City's incredibly vibrant and important public transit grid. Patterson sealed a deal to preserve public transit despite blatant incompetence and stonewalling from state senate majority leader Malcolm Smith and the rest of his legislative body.

Smith is a Queens guy who comes off like a total stooge. He leads a democratic majority in the senate that has zero cohesion. Despite a detailed, non-partisan report showing specific fiscal benchmarks for running, maintaining and building public transit in New York City and the burbs, Smith and the senate spent months letting all interested parties twist in the wind. The senate's inaction forced the MTA to enact a doomsday fiscal plan that freaked out public transit supporters and defied logic at a time when people are flocking to buses and trains.

Smith really looked like a fool when he forwarded a muddled public transit funding alternative that omitted about a billion dollars in capital expenses needed to fund MTA system projects on the drawing board.

The compromise measure obtained Tuesday by Patterson isn't perfect. It hits the users of taxi cabs and fails to take advantage of the un-tolled East River crossings. But the money raised by a combo of new

taxes and fees (much of it a payroll tax on business in the region served by the MTA) at least temporarily comes close to the Ravitch Commission threshold for preventing a public transit system derailment.

The News editorial page ripped Patterson Wednesday for not gaining a bailout package that matches the duration of the Ravitch proposal. Public transit advocates are rightly disappointed that the future infrastructure money comes up short in length. But I'd say the Governor did pretty well considering Smith was just sitting on his hands with a dysfunctional state senate enabling his inaction.

Patterson (with surprising and important help from Assembly boss Sheldon Silver) averted a public transit doomsday. Time has been bought and a more lasting commitment to trains and buses can come later. Smith will hopefully be gone by the time the next doomsday comes around and perhaps the importance of properly funding this region's public transit system will gain an even more prominent spot on the state's agenda when it inevitably comes up again for debate.

5-6-09 1830

I'm out here at my Mom and Dad's house in Huntley, IL for a few days. The sleeping conditions are ideal. It's the perfect place to decompress after a week-long stretch of high-intensity living.

The three of us went to a local diner for a leisurely breakfast this morning. My Mom and I took a little bike ride this afternoon and then my Dad and I went over to the local high school to watch a portion of a varsity baseball game.

On Tuesday, I get to see my brand new niece plus the niece and nephew who I see less than I'd like to.

It sure is nice being on vacation.

I could easily participate in a system that would allow workers a week of vacation for every week one works.

5-4-09 1855

He's giving all credit to the horse, but jockey Calvin Borel's courageous and patient last-to-first ride is why Mine That Bird won the 2009 Kentucky Derby.

Borel twice had to steer Mine That Bird through lanes that closed up moments after he flew through them. On review of the replay, Borel and Mine That Bird's rail ride included lots of contact with the barrier that acts as a retaining wall.

They call Borel "BO-RAIL" for a reason. The jockey from South Louisiana has no fear when guiding the horses he rides to the rail. It's not just in the big races, either. Borel is always looking for the rail. While many other jocks will take the safe, sure route, Borel has the guts, upper body strength and vision to steer his mounts into ground-saving rail trips.

Prior to Saturday, Mine That Bird had accomplished much less on the race track than all but a few of the 19 horses that ran in this Derby. I'm not sure how anybody who bet on this race could look at the available data and believe that Mine That Bird had a prayer of being any kind of factor.

Borel believes that Mine That's Bird's smallish frame allowed the horse to skim over a wet, muddy surface while the larger animals in the race may have sunk into it and labored harder to run.

I'm not sure Borel's theory fully explains Mine That Bird's staggering and sudden improvement and the horse's domination over a field that included at least five others who were way, way faster going in. The bottom line is that there's no way the average horse racing fan who gambles on outcomes could have seen this coming.

The huge crowd that watched the race in person reacted with stunned silence as the emotional Borel celebrated victory well before crossing the finish line. The margin of victory was nearly seven lengths. A romp.

Since the outcome was such a fluke, the money returned to those who bet on Mine That Bird had to be carried out of Churchill Downs in wheel barrels.

It's possible that Mine That Bird will skip the Preakness and lengthen the long triple crown drought. My hunch is Mine That Bird's connections will feel significant pressure to at least attempt to make the race. The horse's co-owner Mark Allen seemed genuine when told reporters that Mine That Bird will run in Baltimore only if it appears he'll be able to bounce back physically from the grueling Derby run.

Derby day attendance was announced at 153,563 which is about what it is every year. Total Derby day betting was down only 5.4-percent from a year before. Based on the size of lines at the betting windows, I was expecting stats showing a sharper decline in wagering but it seems like the track made out ok considering the economy.

Lots more to say about TSR's week in Louisville, but it may take a day or two to kick the fatigue. There's no better place to physically recover from a long Derby week than paying a visit to my folks' house in Huntley, IL. After a one-hour Southwest Airlines flight this afternoon and a Midway Airport pickup from my parents, I'm settling in here in Huntley for a few days.

5-3-09 1850

Not much time for updates. It's been a daily cycle of eat, drink, gamble and sleep. Today is the big day. Just got a call from Montclair Mike saying I Want Revenge has scratched. That's too bad because Revenge would have taken a lot of betting action and I didn't think he was winning the race.

My pick is Dunkirk whose price now will get depressed by the withdrawal of Revenge.

Friday's highlight was the beautiful 20-length win by Rachel Alexandra in the Kentucky Oaks (pictured above). She ran so fast so easy and really gave the crowd a charge with a performance that was as dominant as you'll ever see in a Grade One stakes race.

The weather has been pretty good. We've dodged most of the heavy showers and this afternoon's Derby shouldn't be too wet (although it will be chilly).

5-2-09 0910

My Tuesday morning flight into Louisville landed about 11 AM, shortly after an intense line of thundershowers had passed through the area. After about a 90-minute tussle to secure a rental car that had a working compact disc player, I was off to Churchill Downs to take in a card that was mostly free of weather-induced changes. Yeah, the track was muddy, but the grass races remained intact. The lush turf course had been pretty dry and slurped up the morning rains without a problem.

There are two significant changes that I noticed at Churchill this year right off the bat. First, the track has unveiled a giant statue of the late Barbaro outside the heavily-used Gate 1 entrance. Barbaro won the '06 Derby winner and was the focus of wide attention as he attempted to recover from a shattered leg after that year's Preakness. As is the case with most serious leg injuries, Barbaro never was able to recover and died in January 2007. His remains rest below the new statue.

The other significant change is the new track announcer at Churchill. His name is Mark Johnson and he comes from Great Britain. Johnson has large shoes to fill. He replaces Luke Kruytbosch who died suddenly at the age of 47 last July.

Johnson's British accent is pretty thick and takes some getting used to, but once your ears adjust he is a refreshing and informative voice. He's an analyst who shares quite a bit of detail and he has great enthusiasm. I can see why Churchill hired this guy. Track officials did an exhaustive search and found a talent who has a keen eye for how a race sets up. They found a guy who expresses himself like a regular fan during a race's most exciting moments.

Johnson also does between-race banter with Jill Byrne on the in-house Churchill simulcast feed. He makes picks and predicts the shape of the upcoming race.

Most of my betting allowance for Tuesday came on the card's final four races. I play a multi-race wager called the "pick four" which requires successful selection of winners for all four races.

The pick four started with race seven and a field of just five horses. These were "maiden claimers," meaning they have never won a race and were exposed to an open sale for a price of 40-thousand dollars.

The four-year-old filly Set Point (pictured above - about to cross the finish line) won by two lengths and paid \$4.20 to those who bet two dollars to win on her. Set Point is trained by Neil Howard, a Kentucky horseman who has long presided over a stable of expensive horses. It was much to my surprise when I

looked at the stats that Howard is winning at a clip of well under ten percent this year.

My pick four wager was lost in the feature when Valtrus won a thriller on a turf course listed as “good.” I wasn’t too upset considering the sequence included victories by two favorites and another by a 16-1 maiden claimer that had horrendous form going into the race.

The hotel I’m staying at is really nice and quite a bargain considering its quality. More than six months ago, Tim from St. Lou discovered that a Comfort Inn had sprung up in Shively and was selling rooms at the bargain rate of \$99 a night. The place is indeed totally brand new and it is in close proximity to the race track.

I couldn’t find an officially announced attendance figure, but I’m guessing there was about 7000 in the house for Tuesday’s card. The crowds balloon as the week goes on, of course.

4-29-09 1100

I’m having great difficulty cutting and pasting text from my report of day one at the track. For now, click on the Derby Pix tab for some shots. Hopefully, I can fix my technical problem and get back to full reporting of Derby Week in the next 24 hours.

4-29-09 1245

LaGuardia Airport’s main departure runway (13) was shut down for two hours Monday afternoon after the sudden discovery of deterioration on a northwest portion of the strip. At about 3 PM, all arrivals and departures were forced to use runway 22 while repair crews addressed what the Port Authority described as “an asphalt problem.” FAA personnel working in the LaGuardia air traffic control tower told pilots that there were “cracks” in the runway. Since a single runway is no match for the rush of activity on a weekday afternoon, the FAA imposed a stop on all traffic bound for LaGuardia for a period until it was clear the runway repairs were near completion. Runway 13 re-opened at about five PM and delays averaged about an hour as a result.

-WVU’s Pat McAfee was taken in the seventh round of the NFL draft Sunday by Indy and will likely end up being the Colts punter this fall. Hunter Smith signed with Washington this off-season which leaves the punting job wide open for McAfee. There were two other punters taken in this year’s draft. SMU’s Thomas Morstead went to the Saints and University of Cincinnati’s Kevin Huber went to the Bengals. Both were taken in the fifth round and you’d fully expect both will step in and handle the punting chores for the teams that picked them. It’s always nice to get some new punting blood in the league and I’m excited to see these three guys booting it come September.

-Gary Sheffield is a lost cause defensively. When Florida’s Emilio Bonifacio hit a line-drive to left field to start Monday night’s game, Sheff casually attempted a one-handed catch and botched it into a two-base error. Said Howie on the radio broadcast: “It was the easiest fly ball in the world and it just clanked off his glove.”

In what now seems like a tradition, I got stuck at work ridiculously late the night before a ridiculously early Tuesday flight out of town for my annual trip to the Kentucky Derby. With just an hour in between to pack and shower, I'll start this getaway without the benefit of a night's sleep. But what the heck, I'm so excited to get to Louisville, the adrenaline will get me through the first day at the race track.

If you're near a computer Wednesday night, try and check out TSR Radio's special program discussing the Derby experience with a crew of veteran attendees. It'll air at 10 PM East. An archived recording of the show will appear soon after it ends. Just click on the TSR Radio tab at the top of the page for info.

Expect daily updates from Louisville the next five days and lots of photos.

4-28-09 0345

I was only half-watching the Yankee game Sunday night from my work post but I nearly fell out of my chair when Jacoby Ellsbury successfully stole home. There's no more exciting play in baseball and you hardly ever see it. With the bases loaded and two out in the fifth at Fenway, Ellsbury headed for home as Pettitte wound up and delivered the pitch. The score was 2-1 Red Sox at that point.

Ellsbury must have been so excited by the jump he got because he stumbled a bit just before he slid head-first into home plate safely. Pettitte's off-speed pitch was down the middle to JD Drew and Ellsbury got in well before Jorgie could apply the tag.

It was a ballsy play with the bases juiced and two out. And it was a serious rush to watch. It was a true straight steal of home plate.

With Miller, Morgan and Phillips working the game for ESPN, I assumed Morgan would step forward with analysis on the rarely attempted play. Heck, he has 689 career steals. But for some reason, Morgan kinda clammed up and it took way too long for ESPN to give viewers a replay. Phillips said it was likely that Francona had scouting data showing that Pettitte falls asleep with runners on third and is vulnerable to the big jump. A shot of Francona and Ellsbury discussing the play on the bench afterwards didn't really shed any light on whether Francona gave the green-light in advance but you gotta assume he did.

A half-inning later, Miller asked Morgan if he had ever stolen home. Morgan said he had done it twice but wasn't really allowed to try it much. Miller said the last successful steal of home by a Red Sox player at Fenway was by Billy Hatcher fifteen years ago.

You wonder whether if it's dislike of the Yanks that gave Francona the impetus to authorize such a risky play. Certainly, it has to be very deflating for the Yankees to be the victim of such a daring and perfectly executed theft. It turns out the run would have scored anyway but the jolt the Red Sox got from the play could extend way beyond this three-game sweep of their biggest rival.

4-27-09 0119

ESPN's coverage of the NFL draft tipped off many of the selections in the first round before the commissioner told those gathered at Radio City who was going where. Since ESPN had cameras locked in on just about everybody expected to go in the first round, those producing the broadcast cut to shots of players celebrating their impending selection after receiving official word from the team about to pick them. More than a minute before Roger Goodell announced that the Jets had traded for the fifth selection overall to select Mark "Floater" Sanchez, ESPN went to a shot of Sanchez in Irvine, CA putting a Jets hat on. It seemed to take forever for ESPN to detail what the Jets gave up to climb so high. The commissioner didn't announce any trade details. He simply would announce that a trade had occurred and then dispense with the pick announcement. By the time Goodell would announce the pick, the viewers at home already knew what he was gonna say half the time. And if you were a NFL GM looking to land BJ Raji, Jeremy Maclin or Donald Brown, all you had to do was watch ESPN and you could get on with your life well before the commissioner strolled to the podium.

If you're the commissioner, prohibit live shots of undrafted players until their name is announced. Restore some suspense – and heck – restore some integrity – to a process that currently allows the viewers at home to know who is getting picked even before the commissioner does. It's not ESPN that is conducting this draft, it's the NFL.

-I'll guarantee one thing right now about the two players selected in the first round by New York's two football teams. Hakeem Nicks (selected #29 overall) will have a far more productive NFL career for the Giants than Mark Sanchez (selected #5 overall) will dream of having for the Jets. I'm disgusted with the selection of Sanchez and tired of what now appears to be Woody Johnson's obsession with flash over substance at the quarterback position. My hunch is that Johnson forced Sanchez on Rex Ryan. The new head coach of the Jets lost meaty first and second round picks plus two defensive starters for a guy who will have a huge learning curve if there's any thought he's gonna have an immediate impact.

-ESPN's John Clayton believes Al Davis was the driving force behind the head-scratching second round pick made by the Raiders. Ohio University safety Michael Mitchell was taken with the fifteenth pick in the second round (47th overall). Clayton was stunned by the pick and told ESPN Radio listeners that Mitchell's name was nowhere to be found in his personal database which included information about 700 potential draft picks. Mitchell is a player that Clayton thinks most likely would have gone undrafted, yet the Raiders spent a valuable second round pick on him. Clayton concurred with another ESPN radio host who said that the draft boards of many NFL teams had up to a hundred safeties ahead of Mitchell. With their first round pick (7th overall), the Raiders passed on Michael Crabtree and took the lower-rated Maryland wideout Darrius Heyward-Bey. If indeed it's proven that Davis was the controlling force on the Mitchell pick, the commissioner may need to finally intervene and impose some separation between Davis and the team's personnel decisions. Enough is enough.

-Mets radio play-by-play man Howie Rose remarked during Friday night's game broadcast that the large pedestrian bridge connecting Citi Field's food court in center field with the concourse behind the seats in right field was packed with standing fans watching the game. Rose suggested that the bridge should be named with a nod to Met history. Howie's idea? Gil Hodges Bridge. Later in the broadcast, Howie

voiced displeasure that the Citi Field crowd was doing the “wave.” He recited a comment Ralph Kiner used to make on television whenever fans at Shea would crank up the wave. “The only good thing about the wave is it gives you a chance to straighten out your shorts.”

-The NHL’s one-game suspension of arrogant Rangers coach John Tortorella for his stupid clash with a fan during Friday night’s game in Washington is appropriate and just. It’s ironic, too. Torts scratched Sean Avery from the same game because of Avery’s undisciplined behavior two nights earlier. So what does Torts do? He flips out and gets into it with a heckling fan behind the bench. Torts is now banned from the most important game of the Rangers’ season. For the Rangers’ sake, Avery better be back on the ice Sunday. They need him. More than they need the hypocritical Tortorella.

-President Obama has scheduled his fourth prime time news conference in as many months for Wednesday and a story in the Post indicates the broadcast networks may be growing tired of pre-empting their regular schedules. A story written by Holly Sanders Ware says each Obama speech in prime time costs the networks a combined \$10 million per hour. That doesn’t sound like much, but it must be adding up. Ware said that if Obama continues to seek regular prime time slots, the networks may agree to a rotation that sees just one of the big four showing the event.

4-26-09 0145

The vault containing some of the details of how, when and where the CIA carried out torture during the Bush war on terror opened last week and the media’s review of those previously classified documents has given the public a lot to consider.

When the Obama presidency started, it was thought that the misguided national security and intelligence officials who signed off on water torture and other brutal techniques carried out on terror suspects earlier this decade would be protected by a new administration more concerned about the future than the dirty past.

Whether it was the ACLU’s public and persistent FOIA requests – or team Obama/Holder determining that a little sunshine on such evil darkness was a proper moral response – it’s out there now. Some of it, anyway. The CIA has acknowledged destruction of videotapes documenting interrogations during the period in which torture was used. Many of the folks involved with justifying it, authorizing it, carrying it out or turning their heads away from it without objecting to it are no longer in government positions of power. It’s possible the final stage of Bush’s reign brought efforts to throw some bleach on the crime scene before the new guy came in.

Obama’s reservations about Justice trying to unravel it all may revolve around reluctance to weaken or distract either the investigating agency or the CIA. He may also worry that legal pursuit of torture backers would end up being portrayed as a political ploy.

Maybe it’s enough to simply disseminate without redaction the names, places, times and available history of the torture era. The first wave of documents released in the last week prompted a stubborn rebuttal

from Dick Cheney and a real-time appendix to the record. A full examination could be a prosecution without a conviction.

But the more that comes out, the more the public will likely have a say on how to proceed. If there is outrage – and demands for accountability – it may encourage Obama to realize that pursuit of criminal prosecutions would serve everybody well. Having heard reaction to the first batch of revelations, Obama has already moved in that direction.

Full disclosure of the torture era and Obama's vow that it's over under his watch is enough for some. It's gonna take a lot of volume from a country worried first about the economy to get much more than that.

-This much I know about the NFL draft this weekend: The Jets own the 17th overall pick and would need to package it with their second and fourth round choices to land in Jacksonville's eight slot. USC QB Mark Sanchez may be the object of the Jets' desires – and he may be around at eight. He may not be. If he is, you'd expect a frenzy of phone calls Saturday night as Jacksonville fields offers for the pick. Personally, I don't want any part of Sanchez. In many years, he'd be a late first-rounder at best. He floats the ball and his highlight reel is deceptive because of the elite supporting cast at 'SC that made it possible. Yeah, the Jets need a quarterback, but trading the house to get Sanchez isn't the way to go. I want UNC's Hakeem Nicks, a future all-pro pass catcher with toughness. Some boards have Nicks dropping deep into the first round. I don't care. If he's there at 17, I want Nicks. Let's worry about a quarterback next year when McCoy, Bradford and who knows who else come out. Give Clemens an honest one-year shot and see what happens in the meantime.

I heard Pete Schrager (foxsports.com contributor) on Ferrall's radio show Wednesday night and he said it was possible that Pioli and the Chiefs may want out of the three hole simply because they don't want to pay Aaron Curry the money that slot will mandate. Schrager said it's not beyond the realm for the Jets to climb all the way to three to grab Sanchez. Jeez, that's crazy, but Schrager is a really solid NFL analyst and Pioli is part of a personnel guy movement advocating shrewd trade-downs to avoid big contracts for upper first rounders that aren't air-tight sure-things.

Among Schrager's other interesting predictions: (1). Even though he's the top offensive player in the draft, Crabtree will fall to the Raiders at seven because the teams drafting one through six have other needs. (2). Steelers will take a center with the final pick of the first round. "There are three prospects that are the best center prospects for twenty years to come: Alex Mack (Cal), Max Unger (Oregon) and Eric Wood (Louisville). If you can grab one of those guys at 32 and then take another offensive lineman with the last pick of the second round, you suddenly have a solid base for that offensive line," said Schrager. (3). Sanchez will be gone when Jacksonville goes on the clock with the eighth pick, perhaps to Seattle at four.

Nobody seems to know where Mizzou's Jeremy Maclin will end up. A few months ago, it seemed a consensus that he'd end up on the Raiders. That could happen if Crabtree gets snagged at 2 through 6 but several boards have Maclin going later in the first round. Perhaps even as late as #29 when Big Blue is up?

-Wednesday night's 2-1 Rangers win over the Caps was one of the more thrilling hockey games you'll ever see. The Blueshirts are now one win away from upsetting Washington in the first-round best-of-seven playoff series. It's been all King Henry in this battle as the Rangers goalie has stopped 148 shots in four games. Every time you look up at this series, the great Alex Ovechkin is blasting shots at Henry. Of the 35 shots taken by Eight the Great, all but one have been turned away by the King. If the Rangers end up winning this series, it will deprive the national hockey audience of the extreme pleasure of seeing Ovechkin make a Cup run. He's the best player in hockey, hands down and he's the most entertaining. I don't really understand it, but boorish Rangers fans boo Ovechkin every time he touches the puck.

-Met leftfielder Daniel Murphy was left out of the starting lineup for Thursday's loss in St. Louis. The kid can hit all day but his defensive deficiencies have been glaring. He's botched two fly balls into two Met losses and his throwing arm is horrible.

-There was another home run replay review at the new Yankee Stadium Wednesday and expect them all season long the way the outfield seats are constructed. Top two, Kurt Suzuki launched one off CC to left field above the Budweiser sign. A Yankee fan wearing sunglasses, a green rain poncho and a fielding glove on his right hand reached to his left and snagged the ball from another fan. Johnny Damon made an attempt but was no competition for poncho man. The first row of seats in right and left field are way too close to the wall and this kind of thing is gonna happen all season long until the Yanks figure out how to create some separation. Damon was clearly aggravated. Joe Girardi asked for a replay review and got it but the camera angle was unhelpful and the replays were inconclusive on the issue of fan interference. The Suzuki homer stood and poncho man threw the ball back on the field. What did anybody (other than Suzuki) gain?

4-23-09 1750

The sample size is small and the baseball season is still very young but you're starting to hear grumbling about the number of home runs being hit at the new Yankee Stadium. There were twenty dingers launched in the first four regular season games. Fourteen of the 20 have been hit to right field.

Dimensions at the new Yankee Stadium vs. the old are identical. The new stadium retained the short porch in right (314 feet down the line) and the fence was lowered a bit.

I haven't been over there yet, but some folks are guessing that winds out of the west are having a bigger impact at the new yard despite the fact the diamond's layout is set the same directionally. I don't really understand how this could be, but apparently the wind not only cuts through the building easier but may ride a different slope because of the way the place is built.

It's also possible the baseball has some more spunk in it this year. The steward of the fine internet site hittrackeronline.com Greg Rybarczyk says an early analysis across MLB shows home run balls are flying further on average this season.

The other theory is that the pitching in the Yankees/Indians series was atrocious.

Who knows.

When Asdrubal Cabrera lofted a fly ball to right on Saturday, it appeared to those who were there that it would be a routine out. Instead, it flew over the fence. There may be something to the wind tunnel theory.

What makes all of this band-box and launching-pad talk interesting is that it seems to have caught the Yankees brass off guard. If indeed the ballpark's architectural features are contributing to a wind tunnel effect, it may not be an easily correctable situation. If you look at the permanence of the structures down the right field line, it appears that moving the wall further from home plate would be quite a project.

Many fans won't care if the place is a home run haven. But the feeling I get is that the baseball establishment won't be thrilled with a Yankee Stadium that plays like Citizen's Bank or Coors Field.

One thing I'll say for sure. I'd much rather have Citi Field's problem of deep ball outs vs. the cheap pops getting out that you're seeing early on at the new Yankee.

4-21-09 0345

All of the region's newspapers ran stories Saturday about Gary Sheffield's 500th career home run at Citi Field the night before, but the one by Post reporter Mike Puma stood out as better than the rest. About halfway through his piece, Puma focused on the spectator who caught the baseball. It was 22-year-old Chris Matcovich of Suffern, NY. Puma obtained a gem of a quote from Matcovich.

Rather than pocket the baseball and test the memorabilia market, Matcovich agreed to hand it over to Sheffield at the end of the game. Matcovich told Puma he's about to graduate from college and has no job prospects but didn't think it was right to cash in on the baseball. "I respect the game too much to sell it or keep it. That's (Sheffield's). He worked so hard for it. If I hit a 500th home run, I'd wish somebody would do that for me."

In the end, Matcovich and his four friends at the game each received signed jerseys with additional stuff promised. Sheffield said teammates told him the ball would have cost "about a hundred thousand" dollars to acquire if he had to buy it on the open market. Sheffield posed for a picture with Matcovich and expressed appreciation to him personally for handing over the ball.

Who knows how many of Sheffield's five-hundred homers were aided by illegal performance enhancers.

On TV, it appeared Met fans reacted to the 500th as if they cared not a bit that Sheffield's name is included in the Mitchell Report.

-One thing to consider when you see emptiness in the expensive seating sections at New York's two new ballparks is that some of those seats may be sold, but the customers who bought them may choose to watch the game in a bar or restaurant inside the stadium. Most of those expensive seats include access to fancy hospitality spaces out of the view of the TV audience.

-I like the suggestion advanced by Tim McCarver on Saturday's FOX telecast of Yanks/Indians. To speed the pace of games, McCarver proposes banning mound visits by all position players except the catcher. He also says that a catcher visit should count toward the limit which forces a pitching change on the second visit of the inning.

-The voice of Chicago Blackhawks radio play-by-play man John Weideman was totally cashed for the duration of Saturday's game two playoff contest with the Flames. At the end of the game one broadcast Thursday, Weideman apologized for the condition of his voice and said he was suffering from a cold. The two off days in between clearly didn't help his vocal chords. Raspy and squeaky, Weideman's voice was much worse for game two and it was hard to listen to. Between the first and second period of Saturday night's game, Weideman again apologized. "Please bear with me," he said. Considering the magnitude of the game, it was unfair listeners were subjected to a voice so badly distorted. There must be dozens of hockey play-by-play men who could step in temporarily until Weideman recovers.

4-19-09 0315

After digesting dozens of critical assessments from serious Met fans who preceded my first visit to the new Citi Field, I went into the ballpark Wednesday evening ready to find faults and flaws.

I was plenty happy with the way things were at the now-demolished Shea Stadium. It was the perfect place for a guy like me. I'd buy a cheap ticket, and on most nights I'd sit wherever I want. Yeah, it lacked the amenities found at the new yards I'd travel to in other cities. But I was fully comfortable with Shea and the routine I had honed over a decade.

I'll list and discuss the many problems that exist at Citi Field later in this post, but let me say now that I believe Fred and Jeff Wilpon have delivered a facility with much to enjoy if you have the dough to get in the joint. It helps if you have a roll of twenties in your pocket once you pass through the turnstile.

I bought a \$23 promenade level seat for face value on Stub Hub a few hours before the game started and entered when the main gate opened at 4:40 PM. A huge crowd was waiting to get in when I exited the 7 train. Security didn't bat an eye when examining my camera and case containing a telephoto lens despite a vaguely worded Citi Field policy listed on the team's web site. "Small film or digital still cameras are permitted in Citi Field." An audio recording playing from loudspeakers at the gate said "commercial" camera equipment was prohibited. Bottom line, it seems like you can bring in the widely used SLR camera and a separate long lens.

There are dozens of large concrete flower planters outside the stadium where people can sit and wait for a friend. It's very much a wide open space minus the choke point that existed at Shea when subway-bound fans would get clogged in a narrow gap between the day of game ticket window and security barriers.

The Willets Point subway station itself hasn't changed a bit.

The main entrance featuring the Ebbets Field façade takes you into Jackie Robinson Rotunda (pictured above), an open-air space that includes two escalators leading to the main level behind home plate.

A strong new stadium scent hits you as you go up the escalator. It smells like newly-cured concrete. It's gonna take a few months of spilled beer and peanut shell dust to seep in before it goes away I guess.

Once in, the fan has full 360-degree access to the extra-wide concourse circling the main level. Railings with cup holders are set a few feet behind the last row of seats and allow good views of the field throughout. Ushers are mildly protective of their assigned seating areas but don't bother the souls standing at the rail.

You don't like your assigned seat? Stand at the rail. Nobody says a thing. Additionally, there are hundreds of tables set up all over the place to eat and drink before or during the game.

The food and beer choices are insane. Clearly, word is out on Shake Shack and its \$5.75 burger. Fans were lined up all night, at least fifty deep at Shake Shack's stand in center field. I went to David Pasternack's place in right field "Catch of the Day." I had a delicious flounder sandwich (\$8.50) and a cup of Blue Point ale (\$7.50). In the deepest corner of right field on the main level, there is a prepared food market that has all sorts of healthy take-out kinda stuff.

I unexpectedly bumped into Whitey a few minutes before first pitch and we ended up making multiple trips to a big stand in center field that sold imported bottled beer. It's not any ballpark you can enjoy the pungent, almost pot-like aroma of Czechvar in a cup. Very, very nice.

Whitey's pal had field level seats down the right field line and there were plenty of empty chairs in his section. I joined him in the third inning after standing behind a right-field rail for a while before that. To me, right field is the place to be. It's where the quirkiest features exist. An upper level of seats called "Pepsi Porch" hangs over the playing surface. The wall juts in and out and changes heights. It's sure to create lots of difficulty for those fielding drives to right and one can expect lots of disputed home runs. Delgado hit a homer into the Pepsi Porch and it was clearly gone, but when the white shirts come out they're gonna have to rely on video replay to examine long balls into the field level section in right.

The view from Pepsi Porch is fantastic if you can live with the blind spot beneath you and remember to glance at the video board when your view is obstructed.

The location of the new stadium takes you right up to the Willets Point chop shops which do business on a squalid parcel of land considered by many to be too contaminated to develop anytime soon (pictured above). The city is trying to run the chop shops out and wrestle away the site. The eventual hope is that the area turns into a place where baseball fans can hang out before and after the game.

Organ music replaces most of the loud pop tunes. I can't tell if it's a live organ or not, but the change is welcome. Ushers and concession workers seem to be under order to project friendliness. The bathrooms are fine and I found that if the one you're trying to access has a long line, just go to another one nearby.

The seats do seem roomier and are angled toward home plate.

I haven't been to Philly, but Citi Field to me most closely resembles the new Busch Stadium and PNC Park in Pittsburgh. I love the idea that the fan can take a full lap around and be tempted by both the consumables and the views. On a chilly night, it seemed warm inside Citi. It's no more contained than Shea I suppose, but I wasn't really getting much in the way of wind.

Now for the complaints:

The biggest problem I have – and I've been complaining about it since the blueprints were released – is the drastically reduced capacity. The Mets went from a ballpark that held 57-thousand to one that is now limited to 42-thousand. Last year, Shea averaged 51-thousand plus per game. Some of that is inflated because people wanted to say goodbye but the bottom line is that the ballpark was full all summer long.

There are lots of people who won't get to go to games at Citi when the weather gets nice because the place will be sold out – or because the only tickets available cost too much.

Lots of fans will either get squeezed out – or priced out - and that sucks. The Mets will argue that the only way to optimize the fan experience was to cut capacity, stack the stands on top of the field and make a place that doesn't have a bad seat. That's not an honest perspective. The ballpark's capacity was cut to increase revenue. The Mets don't want the fans who buy a ten dollar ticket, sit in the upper deck and pack a turkey sandwich. They want the guy that has serious cash. The guy that buys a full season at thirty grand – or the guy that pays big bucks to sit in a restaurant with clients.

The salt in the wound for fans being asked to pay seventy bucks per seat in many parts of the park is something you will likely begin hearing a lot about. It's a calamity in the making. It's the fact that hundreds (soon to be thousands, perhaps) of people in moderately expensive seats have started coming forward with stories and pictures documenting pretty egregious obstructions in view. It's pretty unbelievable and it's gonna be something that Wilpon is gonna have to deal with. The Mets bragged that there wasn't a bad seat in the house. If you listen to sports talk radio, all you're hearing the last three days is phone calls from Met fans saying their seats are no good.

Personally, I'm ok with an obstructed view at a baseball game as long as I can see home plate. But a lot of people feel duped because of a lack of advanced warning. I sympathize given the ticket cost and I think Wilpon has a problem on his hands.

One glaring problem with the ticket prices is the emptiness you see behind home plate (pictured above). Those seats cost between \$450 and \$595 for last night's game (a gold level contest) and it was clear few people were biting at those prices. Attendance was announced at 35,581 and it appeared that the only

empty seats were on the field level. The idea that pricing allows the best seats in the house to be unused seems very unfortunate.

The holier than thou aspect of the best seats behind home plate and the dugouts extended to the pre-game festivities too. At Shea, I would always go two and a half hours before first pitch to watch BP and take pictures. Regardless of where your seat was, the ushers would allow fans to congregate behind the dugouts and get close to the batting cage. At Citi, everything at field level behind and between the dugouts is off limits unless you have a seat down there. I was directed to the left field corner where I had the pleasure of watching John Maine shag fly balls. The Mets have killed a great and fun pre-game activity for kids in what I can only guess is a fierce determination to protect the sanctity of their 500 dollar seats. Wouldn't want to get those cushions compressed, would 'ya?

The silver platters for the Wall Street crowd trump Citi's many accomplishments. If the Dow was kicking at 15-thousand and all was well in the big city it would be hard to argue too much about the tilt toward suits. But those empty cushioned seats and exclusive-access clubs and restaurants evoke a haves/have nots feeling that's hard to ignore.

With green seats and ballpark personnel wearing either green or maroon jackets, there's not enough Met orange and blue. The advertising signage on the outfield facades seems in-your-face excessive. I was unable to find a stand selling the economy-size 24-ounce beer and Whitey was surprised to find that his Italian Sausage sandwich was served with a patty rather than a link.

Shea would always post the starting lineups on the big outfield board about 90 minutes before game time. I couldn't find that info on any board at Citi until minutes before the start.

The Mets won the game 7-2. Sheffield got his first start and went oh for two. He's sitting on 499 homers and I wouldn't mind if he fails to get 500 as a Met. We don't need him. He hasn't played the outfield consistently in two years. Right field at Citi is not going to be forgiving for the shaky defender. Sheff is famous for being a complainer. The Tigers are paying him \$13.6 million to stay away which has to raise a red flag. Omar sees Sheff as a no-risk proposition given his cost to the Mets (\$400-thousand) but he'll end up being a distraction. Just let Church play every day in right, Murphy in left and Tatis in a pinch.

4-16-09 1630

Four fighter jets said to be F-18's departed LaGuardia's runway 31 a few minutes before 7 PM Monday. Dozens of airport workers stopped what they were doing to see the impressive looking military airplanes launch into the sky. The boom from the F-18's engines rattled the windows and elicited smiles from those who stopped to watch them.

The four airplanes took off in rapid sequence. A few minutes after departure, they circled back in formation for a ceremonial pass over Citi Field before the Mets lost their home opener.

The big news of the day of course was the passing of a great baseball broadcaster. When I got word that

the great Harry Kalas died suddenly before he was to work the Phillies game in DC Monday, I tuned in to the radio feed of Phils/Nats on XM to hear if there would be any special tribute or discussion of his wonderful career.

Much to my surprise, XM gave listeners the Phillies feed (normally only the home team's broadcast is carried on XM).

It was a very raw and emotional three hours of radio.

Scott Franzke and Larry Andersen worked the broadcast and spent much of the afternoon struggling to balance descriptions of the game with anecdotes that paid tribute to their fallen booth partner. Just a few hours before the game, Kalas was found unconscious in the broadcast booth. He was pronounced dead shortly thereafter at a nearby hospital.

Imagine what it must have been like for Franzke and Andersen to call a game such a short time after getting news that their legendary co-worker was gone forever.

Franzke was clearly shaken up as the game began. He could be heard sobbing and sniffing. He asked listeners to sympathize with the difficulty of the task he and Andersen had. "Please forgive us. This isn't what you're used to listening to. I know you understand."

Franzke maintained a somber voice during the 9-8 Philadelphia victory. On a home run by Ryan Howard, Franzke described it as if it were a traffic light changing or if it were a routine grounder. The gaps of silence during the game indicate Franzke wasn't quite sure at times how to proceed. He said that Kalas had taught him that the best thing a young broadcaster could learn from him is that there was much work to be done in advance of the day's game. "One of his (Kalas) first rules about broadcasting a baseball game is to be prepared, and that is impossible on a day like today," said Franzke.

Andersen, a former big leaguer, was more composed in his performance as an analyst as the game went along. Andersen said he found it hard to understand how veteran Phillies players could even play the game given the impact Kalas had on them.

In the fifth inning, Andersen lambasted Nationals' center fielder Leston Milledge for showboating and sloppy play. With two out in the fifth, Milledge sailed a throw way over second base on a Werth single which nearly allowed the runner to take an extra base.

"That throw in by Milledge was just disgusting," said Andersen. "Seeing what I'm seeing down here from the Nationals, it's no surprise that they're 0-6 and it is a surprise that some of these guys are in the big leagues. They're doing some things that there's just no excuse for."

That same inning, Milledge hot-dogged it on a deep fly by Ibanez and celebrated the catch as if he scored a touchdown. It caused Andersen to rip Milledge for the second time that inning. "Now he's out there bumping around and laughing running off the field," said Andersen. "If I was on that team, I'd be in his

face saying: ‘You know what: Why don’t you start playing the way you’re supposed to be playing at this level.’”

Kalas was 73. He had a commanding, deep voice. I wouldn’t call it a sweet voice. It was authoritative and it captured your attention. The clip below has been widely re-circulated the last twelve hours, but click on it for his call of the final pitch of last year’s World Series.

4-14-09 0155

While Paddy Harrington got hit with a one-stroke penalty at the Masters Friday for doing absolutely nothing improper, Rory McIlroy escaped punishment for a second-round sand trap temper tantrum caught on tape by the BBC. Go figure.

After a botched attempt to get out of the sand on 18, McIlroy kicked at the surface beneath him in what appeared to be a fit of disgust. He would later tell rules officials he was attempting to smooth his footprints. The rule states that a player cannot “test” a surface before hitting out of a hazard. Two strokes is the penalty for an offense.

James Corrigan of the British newspaper The Independent reported that McIlroy was called at his sleeping quarters at 8:40 PM Friday night (several hours after the incident) and was asked to attend a special meeting of the tournament’s rules committee. Corrigan said the meeting at Augusta lasted ten minutes and ended with a decision of no penalty for McIlroy. Fine. The guys in green jackets made McIlroy sweat a little, but did the right thing in letting him off the hook. The rule is vague, anyway.

Meantime, Harrington was nothing but a gentleman as he got set to make a birdie attempt on the green at 15. Harrington prepared to tap the ball in but walked away as a strong wind gust kicked up. He came back to the ball and another big gust blew in and moved the ball a few feet without Harrington touching it. A rules official came in, penalized Harrington a stroke and ordered the ball be placed back in its original spot. Golf rules impose a penalty on a player if the ball moves after the player has “addressed” it. It doesn’t matter if it was an act of god that caused the movement. Harrington ended up making the four-foot putt but instead of going in the scorecard as a birdie, it was recorded as a 5 (par).

Golf needs to change its rules so that wind-blown balls on putting greens don’t penalize competitors who had nothing to do with the ball’s movement.

-A \$250 million renovation of Kansas City’s Kaufman Stadium garnered positive reviews from some of those who covered Friday’s home opener for the Royals against the Yanks. Tyler Kepner wrote in the Times that Kaufman Stadium “looks better than ever.” Kepner lauds the Royals for adding fifteen sections of outfield seats that offer fans close proximity to the distinctive fountains beyond the walls. Even though seats were added in the outfield, the stadium’s total capacity was reduced by about 2600 to 38,177. Wider concourses and full 360-degree access are among the other significant changes. Kansas City sports writer Joe Posnanski told readers he likes the newly-added gold crown (matching the team’s logo) that sits atop the big center field scoreboard. I haven’t been to Kaufman for twenty years, but it’s

one of my favorites and it looks more like a ballpark now with those added outfield seats.

4-12-09 0133

Your Masters leader Chad Campbell played an opening round as clean as the company who sponsors him. Campbell wears a Jani-King logo on his golf shirt. The commercial cleaning franchise company got major exposure from Campbell as he sponged a nine birdie, two bogey round of 65 from a course that had a kind set-up. Many top pro golfers wear the insignia of corporations in the financial services, athletic wear, hospitality or golf equipment sectors. To see Campbell's Jani-King tout is quite a departure.

Tiger had a nice uphill birdie putt on 14 but was not effective with his putter day-long. He missed an easy bird at 17 and botched his chip from the fringe at 18 which took the bite out of a mini-charge mounted on the back nine. Nantz recited an old Augusta cliché in reference to Tiger's round. "You can't win the tournament on Thursday, but you can lose it." Nantz's point (and probably hope) is that Tiger certainly didn't lose the tournament with his 70.

Verne Lundquist always has the best perch as he narrates my favorite hole on the golf course, the par three sixteenth. The pin placement at 16 on Thursday was juicy for an ace but nobody landed it in a spot for the kind roll straight to the cup.

There's no doubt the maintenance army at Augusta will get instructions to ratchet up the toughness of the hole locations. Yeah, they got some roars Thursday but when Larry Mize cards a 67, you know Billy Payne is gonna insist on a more difficult golf course come round two.

Assuming the course plays a notch tougher Friday, expect the good side of the cut line to sit at plus two, maybe three.

-Unless a massive public transit bailout from the state gets passed, regular Long Island Railroad service to Belmont Park will officially be eliminated before the spring/summer meet gets underway April 29th. LIRR spokesman Joe Calderone told Newsday this week that elimination of the Belmont train service will save the railroad \$112-thousand annually. "We need to have our customers start to prepare for what is becoming an unfortunate reality," he said. That reality became even more likely when state senators recessed for a lengthy spring break early this week without moving on an alternative to a comprehensive tax and toll plan that would retain existing subway, train and bus service in the region. Calderone told Newsday that the Belmont train has averaged only 100 daily riders. If that's accurate, perhaps cutting the Belmont train makes financial sense with or without state infusion of new money.

4-9-09 2119

A pretty major technological snafu opened ESPN's broadcast of the Par Three Contest at Augusta Wednesday afternoon. Raw footage of Spanish language interviews with Camilo Villegas and Angel Cabrera rolled for a solid two minutes before ESPN abruptly cut to a couple of commercials.

ESPN's primary voice on the telecast Mike Tirico came out of the production screw up and subsequent commercial break with narration of tee shots by the threesome of Palmer, Nicklaus and Player. He made no mention of what viewers saw to open the telecast but you gotta believe somebody in Bristol got an earful given Augusta National's intense scrutiny of the performance of its broadcast partners.

It's pretty cool seeing Greg Norman come back to Augusta off his top three at the '08 British. Norman is clearly in peak physical condition. His return to The Masters kicks up all the demons from his '98 collapse and memories of his two near-wins a decade earlier.

Norman aced the sixth on the Par Three course Wednesday. After the ball dropped in, he kissed Chrissy who happened to be carrying his bag. Norman can make the cut at this Masters, but his concern about the long par fours at 7, 11 and 17 indicate he doesn't think he can hit far enough to contend.

Hard to believe this is Tiger's fifteenth Masters. At age 33, he probably has another fifteen green jacket attempts in him as a threat to win. If he stays hungry and fit as you'd guess he will, he'll end up with 25 or 30 majors. Jack's record of 18 majors may go down in 2010. Tiger's major total is at 14 and don't be surprised if the record-breaker happens on the Lake Michigan shore at Whistling Straits in August 2010.

That said, Tiger's rehab from major knee surgery and his compact schedule of competitive warm-up tournaments makes this year's Masters a tough go for Woodrow. Yeah, his 67 in the final round at Bay Hill and the one-shot victory in the Arnie Invite gives the illusion that he's all the way back. But the field assembled at Augusta this weekend is loaded with rivals going into it with more optimum health and form.

Don't be shocked if the 19-year-old Northern Irishman Rory McIlroy makes a big run in his first Masters. Playing in the final opening round group, you'll see plenty of McIlroy on television Thursday since ESPN's coverage is limited to a three and a half hour late afternoon window.

Playing with McIlroy in the same threesome on Thursday and Friday is another young guy who can win this tournament. If he can keep his booming drives from landing in the needles, Anthony Kim has a game strong enough to contend on Sunday.

The other guy to watch for is Henrik Stenson (a 40-1 shot to win). The 33-year-old Swede has repeatedly been in recent major tournament contention and has the great Fanny Sunesson carrying his bag. Sunesson was Nick Faldo's caddy for two of his three Masters titles.

And you gotta mention Phil. He's running pretty hot and he knows how to play Augusta as good as anybody. If Phil is top five going into Sunday (whether Tiger is there or not), it's must-see sports television for the masses.

The weather down there looks to be seasonable and a non-factor on the golf course. There might be a shower late in the day Friday, but otherwise it shouldn't be unusually windy which likely will mean some

good scores.

If you're watching on TV, try to catch the tremendous coverage from ESPN's Tom Rinaldi. There's no better roving golf course reporter and his packaged stories interspersed with the live broadcast are always compelling. Once the coverage reverts to CBS on the weekend, Rinaldi will continue supplying stuff to ESPN on special segments airing within Sportscenter.

Gary Player announced that this will be his last Masters. His participation this year makes it 52 Masters in a row. The 73-year-old Player has missed the cut the last ten years and shot 83/78 last year. Since prior champs get a lifetime ticket into the tournament, it's always interesting to watch whether the old-timers bow out gracefully or hang around to the detriment of their randomly drawn playing partners. In Player's case, it's hard to push him out despite his declining game. No doubt he'll struggle with distance and slow the rhythm of his group (Luke Donald and Stephen Ames), but he remains a fundamentally sound golfer and a great ambassador for the game. Classify his swan song this year as timely and classify his longevity remarkable.

4-8-09 2055

If you're a Yankees fan, I think you want skipper Joe Girardi to be more vehement and persistent in arguing for a reversal on the Cesar Izturis home run call in Monday's opener at Baltimore. A fan clearly reached into the field of play and interfered with the eighth inning drive to right field by Izturis. It's not clear whether Yankee right fielder Johnny Damon would have caught the ball, but it doesn't matter.

The Yankees trailed by a run at the time. Damon went nuts to make sure Girardi knew it wasn't a clean homer. Despite the strong signal from Damon, Pokey Joe strolled out for a low-key chat with crew chief and home plate ump Randy Marsh as if the Yanks didn't feel strongly about the blown call. Girardi returned to the Yankee dugout in short order. He failed to get Marsh to invoke the new permanent MLB rule which allows the men in blue to double-check home run calls through a review of the video replay.

It is exactly this kind of situation that the new rule allowing video review to clarify close calls on home run balls ought to be used. Girardi needs to flip his lid, raise his voice, kick some dirt and insist on a review.

The use of video review is not confined simply to the sometimes confusing curler around the foul pole. You wonder if stubborn pride on the part of the umpire will lead some close calls to be left unchecked.

Given what was at stake at that moment, Girardi should have not accepted anything other than a review before going back to the bench.

-The Ford Field PA announcer sitting courtside had his mike turned off for the introduction of the starting lineups at last night's Heels/Spartans Big Dance final. Instead, it was the voice of CBS play-by-play man Jim Nantz making the introductions through the house system. Maybe it's just me, but it seemed like an intrusion by the network on a duty better left for the game's public address man.

-The Port Authority of NY/NJ has begun removing signs carrying the logo of banking giant HSBC affixed to all of the passenger jetways at LaGuardia Airport. A couple years ago, The Port cut a \$1.7 million annual deal to add the obtrusive advertising signage on jetways at JFK and LaGuardia. No word on why they're suddenly being removed.

4-7-09 0144

Much of SNY's Friday night Mets/Red Sox telecast was devoted to pictures and descriptions attempting to introduce viewers to the new Citi Field. It was just an exhibition game, but it was the first MLB contest in the new yard.

Play-by-play man Gary Cohen was filled with enthusiasm for the new Met home and about an hour into the broadcast, he made what to me was the most interesting statement of the night. Cohen said the highest row of seats at Citi is 25 feet lower than the top row at Shea. "Basically, if you're used to sitting in the upper deck at Shea, it doesn't exist any more." Cohen compared sitting in the last row at Citi to what it would be like to be in the "front couple of rows of the upper boxes" at Shea. "That's one of the advantages of having just 42-thousand seats," said Cohen who said Citi most closely compares to AT & T Park in San Francisco.

Since SNY analyst Keith Hernandez has long been openly obsessive about driving away from home games before the bulk of the crowd exits, he addressed his ease of departure at Citi Field. "There's easy access to get out of the ballpark when the game's over. There are a lot of areas where the people can file out," said Hernandez.

Both Hernandez and fellow analyst Ron Darling criticized the fact that both the home and road team bullpens at Citi are situated next to each other. All that separates the two pens is a chain-link fence. In-game fraternizing between opponents would be among the concerns.

Over on the YES Network, viewers got their first in-depth look at the new Yankee Stadium Friday night. It's amazing how much the new building looks like the old Yankee Stadium on television. The video board out in center field looks bigger and better than any I've seen.

Of course, it's hard to really size these places up watching on TV. It's my hope to hit both venues this month. I'm really itching to set foot in both of them.

-Post baseball columnist Joel Sherman says the new Yankee Stadium feels "cold" and "corporate" and lacks "charm and a sense of proportion." Sherman is complementary of the sightlines, video board and food choices but says it all feels "artificial and overdone." Wrong place, wrong time says Sherman. "They will tell you they built this stadium for the everyman...But this stadium, in actuality, was built for a moneyed class that in many respects does not even exist in this city any longer."

-When I work the PM shift, I always buy the newspapers at the Borders store on the lower level of

LaGuardia's central terminal building. On Saturday, the customer in front of me was none other than political consultant James Carville. I was so impressed by this sighting that I didn't even pay attention to his purchase. I couldn't come up with anything to say, but I looked right at him as he passed by me to exit the store. He was extremely thin, almost fragile looking. For a guy that has so much gusto on TV, he's far from imposing in person.

-After a visually impressive come-from-behind victory in the Wood Memorial here in New York Saturday, you can bank on I Want Revenge to be the betting favorite at this year's Kentucky Derby. Assuming he stays healthy between now and then, I Want Revenge will enter the race with back-to-back stakes race victories. Both were impressive. Expect some of the coverage leading up to the Derby to document the shady past of Jeff Mullins, the trainer of I Want Revenge. Like 2008 Derby winner Big Brown's trainer Rick Dutrow, Mullins is a hard guy to root for. Incidentally, Big Brown's primary ownership group bought a fifty-percent share of I Want Revenge just days before the horse's big Wood win.

4-5-09 0130

I get a lot of ribbing from my cousin's husband about Citigroup's \$400-million continuing commitment to pay for naming rights on the Mets' new ballpark. Every time I mention the new facility by its proper name, Dan the Cub fan fires TSR an e-mail through the "Contact Us" tab reminding me of the absurdity of a corporation propped up by taxpayer money continuing its flashy and expensive association with a for-profit baseball club.

I'm already on record predicting the Citi name would eventually come down and I agree that it's awkward at best for fans being asked to pay higher ticket prices to look at that signage every time they go to a home game.

But now it appears that whatever momentum there was for a public backlash that would pressure either the Mets or Citi to break the deal has waned. Citi Field it will remain for this season at least – and perhaps beyond.

I don't like it. It's symbolically improper in this economic climate for a failing bank giant that accepted billions in taxpayer dollars to be so prominently aligned with a New York baseball team. But as a Met fan ready for the season to begin, I've decided to let it go. I'm not gonna go crazy about it.

Citigroup is entitled to maintain an advertising and public relations budget as it reorganizes and figures out how to return to viability. Whether the company will get full bang for its \$20 million annual expenditure is debatable. But if you see all the hype associated with the opening of the facility bearing its name, I'm not sure you could say the company is throwing money after nothing.

The onus to do the right thing and keep the beautiful new sporting shrine clean and free of taint is on Mets owner Fred Wilpon. Mr. Wilpon got ripped off in the Madoff swindle to the tune of about the same amount he'll receive from Citi if the deal stays intact. Mr. Wilpon sees his pinched customer base

backing away from the foam-cushioned seats between the bags in the new yard and probably sees this as a bad time to choose purity.

I'm ok with it. I understand it. I don't love it. But I'm not gonna insist that the ballpark be referred to as "Taxpayer Field." I'm not gonna stay home.

Hey, I was perfectly content at Shea. I could go to a lot of games for cheap and I was as happy as could be the way things were. The new ballpark's reduced capacity and higher ticket prices will put a big crimp on my ability to hit the usual 25-plus games a year. But just like steroids, the name Citi Field isn't gonna make me go away. "Love of the game" is what I'll recite. Citi Field, here I come.

4-2-09 1700

If ever a political endorsement should carry weight, it's the one that may or may not come explicitly from outgoing Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau as a field of candidates vies to replace him.

The 89-year old Morgenthau announced five weeks ago that he's retiring after an honorable 35-year career.

In a city where the taint of inaction, incompetence, crooked deals or selfishness seems to stick to so many public servants, Morgenthau's long reign in a tough job was virtually free of scandal. He took down mobsters, Wall Streeters, street gangs and dozens of violent high-profile killers. He never sought the death penalty or promoted the idea of vengeance. He is the elected official I most admire in my time here, that's for sure.

Morgenthau never showboated like you see a lot of prosecutors do. He's credited with building and maintaining a diverse team of assistants and staffers that adopted his office's philosophy of fairness.

Crain's reported last month that guidelines dictating the conduct of district attorneys may prohibit Morgenthau from making a formal endorsement on a successor. But it's been reported that he's made it known far and wide that he vehemently opposes the candidacy of leading contender Leslie Crocker Snyder.

Snyder served under Morgy for a time, but moved on to a career on the bench in which she gained a reputation as a lock 'em up and throw away the key jurist. She attempted to unseat Morgenthau in the last primary election. During that campaign, she said she supported capital punishment and ran on a revolting platform plank that overtly injected Morgy's age into the debate over his continuing fitness to hold office.

Snyder has now flip-flopped on the death penalty after she garnered only 41-percent of the vote in '05 against Morgenthau despite her well-financed dirty tactics and a Times endorsement.

Her campaign launch for the soon-to-be vacant Manhattan DA post has already included attacks on Cy Vance Jr. who is seen as Morgenthau's preferred successor.

The third major candidate to announce his run for the job is Richard Aborn. I caught Aborn's live interview on NY1 a few weeks ago. It seems like Aborn may be getting squeezed out of the coverage of this race, but his forceful approach on the madness of guns and a large campaign war chest may make it a very interesting three-way race.

The primary election in September will likely produce the ultimate winner since all three are running as democrats. TSR's residency in the borough of Queens won't allow a vote in this race, but it will be fun to watch. I'll be rooting hard against Lock 'Em Up Crocker. It's what Morgenthau would want. A continuation of his approach is probably in order, at least this time around.

4-1-09 1720

The Mets will play a couple of exhibition games with the BoSox at the new Citi Field this weekend but the first game ever in the new ball park came last Sunday. It was a Big East contest between St. John's and Georgetown. I couldn't go because of work but The Heckler went and files this audio report: <http://www.divshare.com/download/6972568-723>

The Heckler attended his first Met game at Shea in 1972. This season, he has a fifteen game plan with seats in the promenade box section.

The regular season home opener for the Mets at Citi is April 13th.

3-31-09 1830

I stepped onto a brand new city bus on my way into work Monday afternoon. It had that unbeatable new bus smell with perfectly clean bright blue cloth on the seats. The bus couldn't have been in service more than a day or two. The brand new "Orion VII" hybrid-electric buses being added to the city's local routes have an attractive streamlined front end with distinctly sharp illumination of the bus route number and final destination on the computerized screen above the windshield. .

I'm impressed with everything about the new bus model (part of a rollout of hybrids that started a few years ago) except for the addition of an on-board automated announcement system. Every time a rider pulls the cord – or presses the "stop" button – the recorded voice of a woman (with no discernable accent) says the following:

"Please exit through the rear door."

Since the bus I take to work makes about a dozen stops along the way, there's an annoying repetition to the message that disrupts the rider experience. I can't imagine the driver is thrilled hearing it over and over again either.

Worse yet, many passengers heed the announcement whether it makes sense or not.

Ideally, a bus will board new passengers through the front door while exiting riders disembark simultaneously through the rear door. It's faster that way.

But since most elderly or physically-challenged passengers sit in the front of the bus – and since the front door requires no pushing – it makes more sense for them to exit through the front.

The automatic announcement doesn't seem to take that reality into consideration.

On my trip to work Monday, an older man sitting near the front of the bus struggled to make it to the rear exit when it was his time to disembark. "Excuse me. Excuse me. Coming out," he said as he maneuvered through a crowded aisle of standing riders. With a clear shot at the front door from where he was sitting – and nobody waiting to enter the bus – the guy should have just exited out the front. But because the announcement sounds like a directive, he fought his way to the rear.

I'd support scrapping the automated announcements completely. Continue to allow the driver to make personalized announcements through his PA system but drop the annoying automated system.

-Barring injury, Blake Griffin will be a NBA Hall of Famer. That's the assessment issued by Francesa Monday afternoon. "He won't be a good pro player. He will be a *great* pro," said Francesa. I couldn't agree more. As things stand at the moment, Sacramento has the worst record in the NBA and would have the most ping-pong balls in the hopper for the draft lottery. Whoever gets the number one overall pick will undoubtedly select Griffin. The Knicks will likely have a top ten overall pick and TSR is hoping Stephen Curry is there when it's Donnie Walsh's turn.

-Our pal The Heckler attended the first baseball game ever played at Citi Field over the weekend and he'll offer his assessment of the new ballpark in audio form here on TSR later today.

3-31-09 0005

The normally mild-mannered and highly successful horse trainer Todd Pletcher expressed anger after the star of his stable got beat in Saturday's Florida Derby. Pletcher's very expensive and highly-touted three-year-old colt Dunkirk made a big closing move on the final turn of the race track but couldn't catch up with the winner (Quality Road). Dunkirk finished in second, a little less than two lengths behind the winner.

Minutes after the race was over, Pletcher appeared on ESPN for an interview with reporter Jeannine Edwards. Pletcher was pissed about what he believes was a sudden change in the dirt racing surface at Gulfstream Park on Saturday. "They obviously sped the race track up today. It's been speed favoring all day. With our horse's running style, we were at a big disadvantage. I told Bill Murphy, the general manager of the track that if I'd have known the track was gonna be like this, I would have went to Aqueduct. It's frustrating that the surface has been so good – fair – safe - the whole meet (and) they want to change it."

All of the races run on the dirt track at Gulfstream Park Saturday were won by speed horses who ran their races on or near the front end. Track records were set Saturday at both the seven and nine furlong distances. Pletcher's contention that the race track was manipulated by those who maintain it could very well be legitimate.

It's not unheard of for race track superintendents (at the request of race track management) to change the maintenance of the running surface so that it produces faster times.

I don't buy it, but some racing observers say track records produce more excitement on the big racing days.

Murphy told The Hammer there was no deliberate effort to soup up the track for speed. Murphy said rain earlier in the week is to blame for any change in the track's makeup.

Track bias or not, Dunkirk is clearly a quality horse and could be capable of winning the Kentucky Derby. Problem is, his second place finish at Gulfstream leaves him with just \$150 thousand in graded stakes earnings. That total may leave him out of the big race the first Saturday in May since the lone criteria for entry is money earned in graded races. Only 20 horses get in and Dunkirk's \$150 K may not be enough to make the cut. \$165 K was the cutoff point in '08.

Dunkirk's racing career had a late start. His debut didn't come until January of this year. Most of his rivals already had run in three or four races by then.

Pletcher could opt to squeeze in another race for Dunkirk at Keeneland on either the 11th or 18th of April to pad the horse's money total. But Pletcher explicitly ruled that out in the Edwards interview. "If it works out and we get in (The Kentucky Derby), that's fine. If we don't, we'll go on to the next step. This horse has made huge strides in a short period of time. If it happens, fine. If not, we'll look forward to some big races this summer and fall."

The Dunkirk-on-the-bubble situation could provide drama in the days prior to this year's Derby. Is he in? Is he out?

I hope he gets in. He's worthy. And Pletcher is justified in his criticism of the dirt track's speed bias at Gulfstream Saturday. I've never heard him complain like this. He knows Dunkirk is a special horse but feels like he got beat by the race track. It's a defeat that may block Dunkirk's run for the roses.

-Congrats to my youngest brother and his wife on the birth of their second child. Erin McKenna (that's right, it's a lower case k in McKenna) had her first day in the free world on Friday and is said to be healthy and happy. For the purpose of an update, the TSR niece/nephew tally is now: nieces (2) and nephew (1).

3-29-09 0135

I've been hesitant to discuss the devastating "doomsday" fare and service changes looming for public transit in this city and region. The story has taken so many twists and turns and it is difficult to get a handle on a definitive end point. Most of the key players whose support is necessary to approve a MTA bailout package are on board and want to do the right thing. Unfortunately, there's been a whole lot of pathetic bluffing, inaction and bogus talk of compromise coming out of the state senate. As it stands now, Governor Patterson and New York Assembly speaker Sheldon Silver are firmly in support of a true bailout to keep subways and buses status quo. Those two power prongs of the three necessary for passing a bailout are thumbs up and ready to enact bridge tolls and taxes that will keep existing transit service intact. The state senate is thumbs down on the plan.

The somewhat arbitrary deadline set by the MTA for action by state lawmakers to close transit's \$1.2 billion hole has passed – and the MTA board has formally enacted plans for doomsday to begin May 31st. The MTA says they can rescind the doomsday plan if the money is delivered at some point prior, but the board is tired of waiting for the senate and has to be ready for the prospect of continued inaction.

The subway and bus fare will rise to \$2.50 from two bucks. On its face, that doesn't sound horrible. But the long list of service cuts, rail ticket hikes and increased costs attached to the multi-ride Metrocards would collectively deal a big blow to a regional transit system that handles 8.5 million riders daily.

It's a system that needs to hum along in its current form as declining economic conditions force even greater reliance on the train and bus.

What's maddening is that Silver and Patterson are sticking their necks out to fill the MTA budget gap with a politically difficult but proactive determination to make public transit a priority. If only the state senate would join in, the current transit grid would be saved from a brutal gutting.

The state senate has a democratic majority (32-30). Various reports indicate support for the MTA bailout falls along party lines with all but a handful of democrats ready to vote in favor.

What's disconcerting is that the key holdout democratic senators blocking meaningful action on the bailout all live in New York City. They all live in districts loaded with transit riders. I'll focus here on my state senator Hiram Monserrate. He's one of the holdouts.

It should be mentioned that Monserrate has a date in criminal court today. He's charged with the violent slashing of his girlfriend's face during an argument in his Jackson Heights apartment last December. His case is docket number 00576-2009 and he's slated to appear Friday for arraignment in the Kew Gardens courtroom (section K-4) of Judge William M. Erlbaum. Earlier this week, Monserrate was indicted on multiple felony and misdemeanor counts in connection with the attack. The girlfriend has recanted her original account of the incident, but the D-A has continued pursuit of justice in the case.

Monserrate has ignored calls for his resignation and senate leadership opened the current legislative session by handing him a committee chairmanship (which he stepped down from after the indictment was delivered). Monserrate continues to hold a key senate vote and in the case of public transit, he's failing to

properly represent his district.

The Center for an Urban Future says more than 138-thousand riders use subway stations in Monserrate's district each day. If you've ever been to the Jackson Heights subway hub at 74th Street and Roosevelt, you'd know that Monserrate's core constituency rides public transit. Yet, somehow Monserrate is hung up on East River bridge tolls (one of the funding mechanisms of the MTA bailout proposal). He's mixed up. He's siding with drivers who would have to pay a few bucks to cross the 59th Street bridge over the droves of subway riders who live in his district.

I'd like to think that the closer we get to actual implementation of the doomsday plan, the brighter the light will shine on the senate's inaction. The heat on guys like Monserrate may prompt a change in position. But this whole thing has been discussed in-depth for the last six months. If he and the holdouts don't get it by now, when will they? If their inaction continues much longer, it will do severe damage to the amazing web of bus and train routes that make this city work.

3-27-09 0005

With the opening of a new Yankee Stadium, there had been hope that beer would be sold in the bleachers. It had been an open question until the new set of Stadium policies went up recently on the Yankees web site. Turns out you still won't be able to drink beer in your bleacher seat, but there's nothing stopping you from knocking a few back. The appropriately-named Bleachers Café will sell brewskis and you can go there as often as you'd like. You'll have to slurp it down on the concourse and go back to your seat empty-handed when you're done. But at least you won't be completely jonesin' like at the old Stadium.

The bleacher sections at the old Stadium were closed off to the grandstand. It's unclear what kind of access the bleacher seat holders at the new Yankee Stadium will have to the rest of the building. The web site suggests that field level access will be limited only to those with seats in that area but the concourse seems open beyond that.

The new camera policy bans equipment with "extended length zoom lenses." If enforced strictly, this will hurt guys like me who routinely snap a few shots from afar with the telephoto.

One policy I definitely like (a vast improvement from the old Stadium) is the early gate-raising. Fans can enter at 10 AM for day games and 4 PM for night games.

-Students at Mizzou are on spring break this week. The basketball players aren't. They're getting ready for Thursday's regional semi with Memphis. They departed Tuesday for Phoenix. The success of Mizzou's hoops team has triggered several bonus clauses in coach Mike Anderson's contract with the University. The Columbia Daily Trib listed the bonuses in Sunday's newspaper. \$25 K for making the Big Dance. \$25 K for winning the Big 12 Conference tourney. \$25 K for making it to the regional semi. \$20 K for winning 25 games. \$10 K for winning 30 games. Anderson has two years left on a deal that paid him a base of \$850 K this year. In recent days, he's been linked to discussion about coaching vacancies at Georgia and Alabama – and when asked about them Anderson's words failed to include a commitment to honor his current contract. Georgia and Alabama may be able to offer more money, but jeez, they seem like inferior jobs to the one Anderson has now. For the record, Mizzou football coach

Gary Pinkel makes \$2.3 million per.

3-24-09 2255

I've long ignored the history of worker exploitation and unseemly business practices linked with the harvest and importation of bananas. Once they land on the supermarket produce shelf, I'm right there looking for a bunch to take home. I like to eat a banana every day. I bring it up now because I've discovered a banana brand that is exceptional and consistent. I can't give you as much information as I'd like, but in the last six weeks or so, the "Rita" brand banana has replaced the usual Dole and Bonita bananas that occupied the rack at my go-to grocer on 37th Avenue. The Rita sticker applied to each banana shows Ecuador as the country of origin. A web search seeking information on the Rita banana turned up nothing.

The Rita is easily the best banana I've ever had. It ripens at a slow rate. It has excellent flavor and stays plump and firm. Each Rita bunch I've bought has taken me through my work week with the final banana still very much solid and bruise-free. The Bonita gets mealy. The Dole inevitably surprises you with a dark blemish or spot when you peel it, forcing you to do some surgery on it – or to nibble carefully around the rot.

I'd like to think Rita will stick around at my grocery store but each time I walk into produce, I fear she'll be gone. Rita, don't leave me.

3-24-09 0130

The reason Madison Square Garden was near-empty for New York City's high school basketball championship game Saturday was because the event was closed to the public. That's right. It was a public high school athletic event that was not accessible to city residents.

The city's closed-door policy on the game is too bad for the kids who played in it and it's too bad for the high school hoops fan who couldn't buy a ticket.

Coney Island's Lincoln High School won the game and its fourth consecutive city title. Lincoln's star player Lance Stephenson scored 24 in the game. Stephenson was Lincoln's main man for each of those four titles and he will finish his high school career as the state's all-time leader in points scored. In a week and a half, he'll announce his college plans. Maryland, Kansas and St. John's are said to be the three options.

This was the second year both the boys and girls PSAL title games at the Garden were closed to the public. A melee at the 2007 game (which continued with violence outside the arena) prompted the city's high school athletics leadership to make the horrible decision to limit attendance to a small group of people with connections to the participating schools. Rather than tighten security in and around the arena, the PSAL elected to play the game before a private, hand-picked audience.

-It took a while for the comments to surface, but New York's outgoing Catholic archbishop Edward Egan did an interview on an Albany radio station March 10th that included a surprising assessment of an outdated and controversial church policy. Cardinal Egan told the Post's Fred Dicker that the church's centuries-old requirement that priests be celibate merits further review. "I think that it's going to be discussed. It's a perfectly legitimate discussion. I think it has to be looked at. And I am not so sure it wouldn't be a good idea to decide on the basis of geography and culture not to make an across-the-board determination." Coming from Egan, the remarks are jaw-dropping. I had not heard of the comments made nearly two weeks ago until Paul Vitello of the Times picked the story up and got reaction from a variety of church policy observers. It's impossible not to read Egan's comments as anything but a shift in view. Yeah, Egan is retiring in a month, and yeah, he's not the Pope. But he's perhaps this country's most powerful Catholic and he's saying celibacy isn't guaranteed to be a condition of priesthood forever. His words give progressive Catholics some hope. Let priests marry. Let 'em be women. Let 'em have kids. The effectiveness of a spiritual leader shouldn't be measured on adherence to rules that defy normal and healthy human instincts or inclinations.

3-23-09 1155

The MTA has installed a pair of Metrocard vending machines inside LaGuardia's Central Terminal Building. It's about time. For too many years, the out-of-town traveler and novice user of New York City public transit faced a difficult and potentially confusing task of initiating the journey. If one didn't do advanced research on the fare collection system unique to New York's buses and trains, he or she could get demoralized before even launching the trip on public transit at the airport.

I go to airports in other cities and they practically hold your hand and guide you to public transit. It's easy and accessible. For some reason at LaGuardia, it's always been every man for himself. The installation of the Metrocard vending machine is a good step toward assisting the out-of-towner.

Four city bus lines stop at LaGuardia's central terminal. All four make connections to the vast network of subway trains. Problem is, many folks new to this city's public transit system get on a bus at LaGuardia lacking the proper fare. It often results in awkward situations where impatient bus drivers instruct passengers to exit the bus until they have their ducks in a row.

New York City buses don't accept paper currency. It's either two bucks in coins or a Metrocard purchased in advance. If one pays with coins, the paper transfer issued on request is only good for a subsequent ride on another bus – not the subway. The only way to make a free transfer into the subway system from a city bus picking up at LaGuardia is to use a Metrocard (the plastic fare card that carries either a cash balance or entitles the rider to unlimited trips over a defined period of time for a flat fee). But until the Metrocard vending machines were finally installed at LaGuardia this week, the only way to buy a Metrocard at the airport was to know the tightly-held secret of their availability at a newsstand near the United Airlines baggage claim area.

It was ridiculous. Most people don't walk around with gobs of change in their pocket. And there was no MTA or LaGuardia signage steering people to the newsstand selling Metrocards.

I can't tell you how many times well-intentioned travelers step onto the bus I'm riding and they're immediately faced with ejection because they lack the proper fare. Those who do have coins are screwed out of two bucks because once they arrive at the subway station, they're forced to pay another two dollar fare to enter the subway.

The two new Metrocard machines can be found inside the Central Terminal Building just opposite the city bus stop. The machines accept credit/debit cards.

-My favorite neighborhood Mexican restaurant has been shut down by the city for sanitary violations. A late February city inspection produced 46 "violation points" at Taqueria Coatzingo, which far exceeds the average violation point total of 16 for restaurants city-wide. A report from the inspection details the violations and says the city ordered the restaurant's closure February 18th. I had no idea Coatzingo was in any kind of trouble until I stopped by for my usual order of tacos al pastor after the hockey game last week. I was alarmed to see the place completely dark. The door was closed and locked. There was no sign with information for the faithful customer. The Chowhound message board includes entries claiming the restaurant is renovating. It's long been clear to me that Taqueria Coatzingo failed to emphasize cleanliness in the dining area, but the food was so consistently great I didn't care. A look at Coatzingo's inspection history reveals a mountain of violations, many of them in the kitchen area. The place is always busy and there's no doubt it is a successful business. If you're the owner of this place, why not buckle down and run a clean ship? Extended shut-downs will drive away the faithful.

-The NCAA got a dead reception in Miami for the first and second round games of the men's hoops tourney this weekend. Just 8990 were on hand for the Friday night double-header that featured wins by Cleveland State and Arizona. The day session included Syracuse and Arizona State and drew 10,163. Times reporter Pete Thamel described the atmosphere at American Airlines Arena (capacity 19,600) as "unusually lame." Black curtains blocked off large swaths of seating in the upper level behind the baskets. Anybody who knows the Miami sports market could have predicted what happened there this weekend. Why not the NCAA? And why in the world doesn't New York get more frequent consideration to be a tourney site host? My pal Mike says it's a hotel problem. I don't buy it.

3-22-09 0100

Not only was a really big sports record taken down in Newark Tuesday night, it was broken by a guy considered to be the greatest player at his position in the modern era.

Martin Brodeur's 552nd career win in his 15th full NHL season breaks the total of 551 wins by retired netminder Patrick Roy. Brodeur needs just four more shutouts to break Terry Sawchuck's long-standing record of 103 in a career.

There have been plenty of goalies who have shown short-term flashes of brilliance that exceed Brodeur's puck-stopping skills. But none in the last thirty years have done it as consistently well for as long as Marty.

Not being much of a historian, I turn to Stan Fischler who has been watching hockey since 1939 and currently makes his opinions known widely to the New York hockey audience on TV and nationally on satellite radio. I heard Fischler say last week that he considers Marty the greatest goaltender to wear a mask. He splits NHL goalie history into the mask-era and the no-mask era and says Glenn Hall was the greatest ever to not wear a mask. Interestingly, Brodeur told Fischler recently that if goaltenders still played the game without a mask, he flat-out wouldn't play.

Fil Bondy of the News said in Wednesday's paper that Brodeur's achievement may be the most significant accomplishment on the New York sports scene since Maris hit 61.

Brodeur is 8-1 since returning from a four month absence to recover from the only major injury of his career. The fact that he came back so good so fast is amazing. Because he doesn't play the typical butterfly style, he avoids a lot of wear and tear on his legs and hips. He's a masterful stick handler and that was on display again Tuesday night.

With two minutes to go in the game and the Devils up 3-1, Brodeur gave up a cheapie. It was a knuckler from Byfuglien to make things interesting. The Hawks had a few chances to tie, but when time expired the Marty Party was on. Brodeur was handed a pair of scissors and he started to cut the netting away from the goal. When he realized that cutting the net is a time-consuming proposition, he let his teammates take over. Marty then took a victory lap around the rink and soaked up the cheers from a loud and appreciative sold-out crowd. Many of the fans wore Brodeur jerseys.

For the Devils, it was their tenth straight home win. On a team loaded with leaders playing within an unselfish system that stresses defense, there's no doubt this team is on track to contend for a Stanley Cup.

Brodeur's historic victory wasn't the only milestone of the night. A beautiful second period assist by Patrik Elias made him the all-time Devils point leader. Elias now has 702 points, one more than John MacLean who was standing behind the Devils bench last night as an assistant coach. Elias was drafted by the Devils out of the Czech Republic in 1994. Late in the second period, he received the puck on a penalty kill. It had been flipped to him high in the air by teammate Mike Mottau. Elias streaked down the ice and made a brilliant backhand pass to Brian Gionta who knocked it in for the score. Elias raised his hands and flashed a big grin before hugging Gionta behind the Blackhawk net. Devils fans knew immediately about the significance of the Elias assist. They gave him a long-running standing O and chanted "Pat-rik, Pat-rik, Pat-trik."

It should be noted that both Elias and Brodeur have declined opportunities to make larger sums of money on other teams. Since the Devils are often overlooked in a media market that puts the Rangers front and center, the two have had long careers with a single team in relative anonymity. Heck, Brodeur's 552nd didn't even make the back page of either NYC tabloid (instead it was David Wright's game-winning hit in the WBC).

Me and the Heckler sat in the last row of the upper level behind the benches. Section 213, row 9. It was

an excellent vantage point. Before they game, we had a few St. Patty's Day cold ones and dinner at Suspender's in the Financial District. It was good launching point for our PATH train ride to Newark.

On the way, we went past the site of the new Red Bulls stadium in Harrison. It's an impressive looking building and I can hardly wait until 2010 when it opens officially.

3-18-09 1555

It was a great St. Patty's Day Marty Party. More later...

3-18-09 0050

They'll run a horse race in the U-K town of Sunbury-on-Thames (16 miles southwest of London) tomorrow that will carry a big prize. The cash purse is nothing extraordinary (\$115-thousand) but the winner of the mile and an eighth race gets an automatic berth in the Kentucky Derby.

The third race on the card of Kempton Park Racecourse Wednesday is called "The Kentucky Derby Challenge Stakes." Regardless of any past or future failure, the horse that wins at Kempton under the lights Wednesday gains automatic entry to the biggest horse race in the world to be run on the first Saturday in May.

The field of 13 three-year-old colts and one gelding will travel over Kempton's synthetic surface. Of the 14 contestants, ten of them will be making their 2009 racing debut. Many of the horses have turf pedigrees and none of them have accomplished much to date.

The horsemen in this country probably aren't crazy about a less-than-great horse a continent away gaining a coveted spot in the Kentucky Derby (limited to 20 participants and accepted in order of graded stakes earnings) through the handout of a special Euro pass. But what the heck. It's a novel idea and it'll bring an unknown quantity to a Derby field that can never have too much mystery.

That's assuming the winner of Wednesday's Kempton race actually comes here for the Derby. There's a \$100-k bonus for showing up, but you don't know for sure if the winner at Kempton wants to make the trip to Churchill Downs to run on real dirt and go down to likely defeat.

Aqueduct says it will simulcast and take bets on the race. It's unclear if the OTB channel in NYC will show it. The OTB web site makes no mention of it but they're so haphazard in their operation that they may plug a cable in at 350 PM Eastern time and give viewers the race without warning.

For the fun of it, I'm picking Spring of Fame who has won on both a synthetic surface and at the distance.

-Mizzou's 3 PM first-round tourney matchup against Cornell Friday is up against three games that the New York sports fan may argue are each more important to the area. Pitt, Temple and WVU are in action in the same staggered time slot. Even though Cornell is not too far away, Mizzou probably won't be the

primary game. The best I could hope for is a steady dose of “look-ins” and a full-on online stream. The broadcast tandem lowest on the totem pole of Craig Bolerjack and Bob Wenzel will be in Boise. My favorite duo – Ian Eagle and Jim Spanarkel - was relegated to the worst sub-regional pairings-wise in Miami.

-Happy St. Pat’s Day. We’ll celebrate with cold ones in Newark as we watch Brodeur go for the all-time wins record by a goaltender against the Blackhawks.

3-17-09 0155

I didn’t see much St. Mary’s this college basketball season, so I can’t get worked up about their snub. I believe Memphis deserved the final number one seed over U-Conn but the bracket boss told Nantz and Kellogg repeatedly that the committee was going off “body of work” in all of its decision-making. OK. U-Conn had a nice body of work until it lost its best player Jerome Dyson and went 4-3 without him. In previous years, the committee disregarded “body of work” in favor of assumed team strength based on current conditions. That’s the thing about the selection committee. The philosophy of what comes out of that room changes year-to-year. But who cares, because Memphis is just fine on the two line and stays away from Philly. They go to Kansas City where they’ll blow-out Northridge and Maryland and get ready for a regional-semi matchup against my alma mater in the desert.

Mizzou earned the three seed with a great late-season push. They get an easy Ivy to start and then the winner of Marquette/Utah State. Their first two games are in Boise. Just for the fun of it, I did some internet searches to see what it would cost to fly from Columbia, Mo to Boise leaving Thursday and returning Monday. The best deal I could find is \$883 round-trip with the following routing: Columbia-Memphis-Minneapolis-Boise and a return of Boise-Seattle-Minneapolis-Memphis-Columbia. The total travel time round-trip would be about 24 hours. You could save a couple hundred bucks flying out of either KC or St. Louis but the routing remains rugged. Clearly there are limitations for fans traveling by air to Boise. I’d expect empty seats at the games for sure.

Dayton will be a fun sub-regional site. It’s loaded with schools that have rabid fans that will be scrambling for tickets. Top-seeded Louisville could meet Ohio State in the second round on Sunday plus you’ve got Pitt, Tennessee, Siena and Okie State that will have good crowds that try to make the trip.

It’s hard to believe Miami is a participating host of a sub-regional. It’s a nice place to visit, but it’s a basketball dead zone and a long trip for the teams participating especially Arizona State, Arizona and Utah.

I don’t really understand why Chattanooga isn’t in the play-in game rather than Alabama State. I suppose the Southern Conference is better than the Southwestern Athletic, but ‘Bama State nearly beat Auburn on the road and breezed through their conference schedule.

If you’re looking for a first-round gambling play, take Binghamton (plus-20) against Duke.

My favorite first-round matchup is Butler/LSU in Greensboro. My favorite second-round matchup (if it happens) is WVU/Kansas in Minnie. Self vs. Huggins. Wow.

I feel bad for Illinois (five seed) and UCLA (six seed). The Illini will have a distinct non-neutral court disadvantage playing Gonzaga in Portland should the two meet in the second round. Same goes for the Bruins who would have to play Nova in Philly.

I don't seen any thirteens and higher with a shot other than Binghamton but I like all of the 12's except for Western Kentucky.

My pick to win it all is Oklahoma. They have the best player in the country in Blake Griffin. I think they'll slug out a win over Syracuse and will get help avoiding UNC in the South. By the time they get to the final four, they'll find that all the one seeds are gone. I don't love it that Oklahoma can't make free throws but I see Griffin knocking down doors all the way to Detroit.

-Talk about a nice web site redesign. The most helpful resource one can use before heading out for a meal at a New York City restaurant is the great web site menupages.com. The site's content remains unchanged but the new look and feel is very nice. MenuPages has compiled menus from nearly seven-thousand NYC restaurants and includes a growing amount of feedback and analysis from regular diners. It delivers the same concept to restaurant-goers in seven other locales including Chicago and Boston.

-LaGuardia Airport had one-hour plus flight delays Sunday afternoon and it was the airport operator that was fully to blame. The Port Authority of New York/New Jersey closed runway 13/31 for much of the day to make way for construction crews. It caused big backups on the single remaining strip (runway 22). The timing of the runway work is puzzling when you consider that Sunday afternoon is prime time for moving passengers. Extended periods of low airport traffic volume on Saturdays and late evenings would be a much better time to close runways. It wasn't until 3:44 PM Sunday that the Port re-opened runway 13/31, but by that time numerous flights had been delayed and thousands of passengers had been impacted.

-Sunday night's USA/Netherlands matchup in the World Baseball Classic looked like a Marlins game. Playing in Miami, it appeared the two teams drew a crowd of only a few thousand. Officially, attendance was announced at 11,059. They probably should have played this one in Amsterdam.

-The fantastic Coney Island pizzeria Totonno's was badly damaged by fire over the weekend. Citing "friends and relatives of the owners," NY 1 is reporting that Totonno's vows to rebuild and re-open within six weeks. You've not rounded out your New York City pizza pie-eating credentials if you haven't eaten at Totonno's on Neptune Avenue.

3-16-09 0119

I have known for months that I would attend Tuesday's Devils/Blackhawks game in Newark (St. Patrick's

Day night), but only in the last couple of weeks was there a building suspense about whether the game would have big historical significance.

After missing much of this season with a torn biceps tendon, Devils goalie Marty Brodeur has been chasing Patrick Roy's record for most career victories by a goaltender (551). With a 3-1 victory in Montreal Saturday night, Brodeur won his 551st, tying Roy who was on hand. On Tuesday night, Brodeur will be between the pipes in search of 552.

Me and the Heckler will be there hoping to witness history. It should be crazy. St. Patty's Day night with a huge hockey milestone on the line. I can't wait.

-When Mets fans exit the 7 train at the subway station adjacent to the new Citi Field this season, the signs will say "Mets / Willets Point." A spokesman for the MTA told the Times last week that the transit agency asked the Mets for compensation in exchange for putting "Citi Field" on the subway station signs. The deal would have included the corporatized stadium name on subway maps and all official references to the station. But the MTA says the Mets declined to cut a deal and so the more generic station name will simply include the name of the team and the neighborhood that includes the stadium. Up until now, the signs said "Willets Point / Shea Stadium." The Mets and the taxpayer-subsidized Citigroup banking giant have a 20-year, \$400 million agreement that puts the Citi in Citi Field. You'd think the Mets would share a slice of that loot with the MTA so the subway station signs conform precisely with the name of the ball yard fans are visiting.

-The International Brotherhood of Teamsters has formally launched an effort to unionize baggage handlers at Continental Airlines. In recent years, both the IAM and TWU have narrowly lost union elections decided by the roughly eight-thousand ground workers at Continental. It could be different this time. The Teamsters have a swagger and a credibility that was perhaps lacking during the drives conducted by the IAM and TWU. The fact that Continental's aircraft mechanics are also Teamsters may help. On the other hand, Continental boosted the pay scale and restored the 401-K match for the workers being courted by the Teamsters earlier this year. Given the economic uncertainty, the company may again promote a climate that causes some workers to fear the unknown of union membership. Interestingly, the Teamsters are conducting the current drive without regard for the possible passage of the Employee Free Choice Act which would eliminate one step in the process by which workers unionize.

-The Long Island businessman and likeable horse owner Eric Fein couldn't contain his giddiness outside the winner's circle after Saturday's Tampa Bay Derby. Fein's horse Musket Man moved a step closer to a possible run in the Kentucky Derby when he won by a neck despite traffic trouble earlier in the race. Fein jumped into horse ownership just a few years ago. It's unusual, but his first horse purchase was a big net gain and he's remained in the game. Fein and a group of owners took Big Truck to the Kentucky Derby last year (the horse finished 18th). As Fein was being interviewed on TVG after Musket Man's win, a big group of family and friends entered the frame and repeatedly interrupted with words of congratulations. One man gave Fein a big smooch on the cheek.

-Despite a ballooning lead as he approached the wire in the Louisiana Derby, the jockey Gabriel Saez

used the whip at least one time too many as Friesan Fire completed a 7-plus length victory.

-I heard an interesting NCAA tournament trend from ESPN Radio's Erik Kuselias Saturday morning. Kuselias said that no team that has lost its first game in a conference tournament has gone on to win the NCAA tournament. If that trend holds up this year, it would disqualify Oklahoma, Kansas, Pittsburgh and U-Conn. The trend is backed with lots of history, but I believe all but U-Conn are title contenders regardless.

3-15-09 0144

We took the nephew over to the mighty blue Atlantic Wednesday.

The Town of Palm Beach.

It's a 16-mile barrier island dominated by tony dwellings with insane landscaping. The New York/New Jersey imprint is deep. The privileged folks who own property on Palm Beach Island do their best to block off what is theirs from each other and certainly from whatever riff-raff that may loom from the other side of the bridge. And when I say riff-raff, I'm talking about guys like me.

The folks with property fence off small "private" areas that seem to creep onto the public beach. There's a line in the sand I guess you could say.

It took a while, but we found a nice publicly accessible beach. The nephew got a major kick when the small waves crashed against his knees. The undertow would then gulp up the wet sand from around his tiny feet and he would fight the pull. He thought it was fun - and funny.

I haven't been to the beach in a long time. I can report that the bikini swimsuit is still in vogue and the women who wore them at the beach we visited did an excellent job selecting optimum size, color and style. I would post a photo documenting this observation but it at no point on our beach visit did it seem appropriate to snap pictures of said subject.

We had an excellent breakfast at Green's Pharmacy on North County Rd. in Palm Beach. It's a little diner inside a drug store. I had eggs, bacon and excellent "home fries." The coffee hit the spot. My nephew took all of the jelly and marmalade packages out of a holder on the table. He stacked them one on top of the other. A marmalade tower. Older diners reading the New York Post couldn't help but notice this amusing development. After building a few marmalade towers, the nephew then became interested in opening the jelly packages. That prompted a gentle rebuke from his Dad and efforts to distract him until his waffle arrived.

It's been quick and it's been fun. Back to the big city early Thursday morning. A big thanks to my brother and his pal Marc B. for making it all happen.

-Raissman is reporting that Max Kellerman may be on the brink of becoming Francesa's sidekick on

WFAN. That would be some kind of duo if it happens. Kellerman is strongly opinionated and has a really interesting background. His NYC roots run deep and he's very smart. I'm not sure whether it would work chemistry-wise, but I would really love to see it go down. Francesa and Kellerman. Bring it on!

3-11-09 1900

Greetings from Palm Beach Gardens, FL where I'm in for a quick visit to see my nephew and his Mom and Dad. I'm staying at a ridiculously nice place owned by my brother's pal. It's several miles west of the ocean, but it's a beautifully landscaped five-bedroom house overlooking a canal. I'm not sure how anybody could live here full-time, but it's one heckuva place to escape if you're trying to shake the winter doldrums.

My two-year-old nephew spotted a lizard on the outdoor deck this evening and didn't know what to make of it. He doesn't see creatures of this type back in Chicago.

The flight down was hassle-free.

I sat on the left side window of a 757-200. There were about fifty empty seats on the airplane. Aside from the really big and steady feel you get when the 757 reaches its cruising altitude of 36-thousand feet, the thing I enjoy about the 7-5 is the little TV screen on the seat-back in front of you. It gives you all the real-time cockpit data and images of the flight path as you go from point A to point B. You know exactly where you are when you look out the window. You know exactly how much time is remaining on the flight. To me, there's no better in-flight entertainment than a stack of newspapers and the real-time flight data right there in front of you.

The path of this flight followed a straight line from Newark to West Palm Beach which meant that the final 75 minutes of the two and a half hour trip was over the mighty Atlantic. It was at about the North Carolina/South Carolina border that you start seeing nothing but water below you. Uniformly spaced puffs of clouds dotted a stretch before it turned to clear blue below. The plane's ground speed seemed to max out at about 525 mph and there were only a few patches of bumps.

I almost always take the New Jersey Transit train to Newark Airport these days, rather than the bus. I've refined the various steps in the commute such that the total trip door-to-door from Queens to the airport is about 90 minutes.

I was a little surprised to see that the blue upholstered seats on the train (10:44 AM Bay Head bound) I stepped onto Tuesday were all visibly soiled. A brownish color could be seen on all the seats as I walked up and down the aisle. The trains are relatively new. The seat cushions are ready for replacement.

At the Newark Airport train station, the escalator leading downward to the tram that takes people to the airport terminals was out of service. It forced people with luggage to make a difficult journey down a stairwell.

Hard to believe, but all of the first round Big East Tourney games at the Garden Tuesday were internet only. No TV. So, I missed the victories by DePaul, St. John's and Notre Dame. I couldn't help but laugh when I heard DePaul got the job done. Go Blue Demons.

Time for shut-eye. The window is open and a cool breeze is blowing in. It feels like what a June night would be back home but here it's only March.

3-10-09 2330

WABC-TV (Channel 7) in New York led off its six pm newscast Monday with a story about the planned waste transfer station to be located just a stone's throw from LaGuardia Airport.

Investigative reporter Jim Hoffer's piece was labeled an "exclusive" even though the Queens Chronicle broke the story in the paper that hit stands last week. Hoffer and Channel 7 must believe nobody reads the neighborhood papers.

Oh well. The tilt on Hoffer's "exclusive" piece was much the same as the Chronicle's. He had wildlife biologist Steven Garber and Queens congressman Gary Ackerman saying on camera that it's crazy to process garbage in such close proximity to an airport already fighting a bird problem.

What was new and compelling about Hoffer's report was videotape he included showing a Bronx waste transfer station similar to the one slated to open near LaGuardia. It showed birds swarming the outside of the Bronx trash depot even though it was an indoor garbage processing operation. The Port Authority (which operates LaGuardia) and the FAA are on record in support of the new trash plant near LaGuardia because they both say it will be a contained, indoor operation that won't attract birds.

After Hoffer concluded his report, anchor Liz Cho acted flabbergasted. "Insane," she said with that trademark flutter of her eyelashes.

-Forgot to mention it last week but the Jets added the vicious-hitting Wisconsin walk-on Jim Leonhard. The 26-year-old safety signed a three-year, \$6 million dollar deal and reunites with Rex Ryan. He'll be a popular player, I predict. Hopefully the talk about the Jets taking an interest in USC QB Mark Sanchez doesn't pan out. The guy throws too many floaters. TSR wants Hakeem Nicks in green next year and man, can we get a new punter?

-TSR heads back to the sunshine state today. This time, I'll hit the ocean side for a 36-hour visit with the nephew along with my brother and sister-in-law. I look forward to seeing those palm trees flutter in a warm breeze.

3-10-09 0159

You wouldn't necessarily know it by watching on TV, but veteran political reporter Peter Baker says

President Obama relies on teleprompters more than any US president in history. In a piece printed in the Times last week, Baker said Obama uses prompters for even the most routine announcements. The teleprompter displays text and can make life easier for the politician, newscaster or preacher. If deployed properly, the current technology is all but invisible to those watching on television.

Baker was brushed off by an Obama spokesman when asked about the President's reliance on teleprompters, but Baker speculated that for Obama "a teleprompter means message discipline, sticking close to the intended words...He presumably feels a certain fidelity to the crafted text."

It's understandable I guess. Obama is pushing a broad and complicated agenda and he's discussing it in a variety of public settings. All the scrambling under extreme pressure these first couple months can certainly jumble the mind and interfere with a clean delivery of message. Why not use a machine to assist as long as the words rolling on it are coming from a place he believes in.

As we saw in the debates, Obama can be great – or occasionally less so – when he's speaking off the cuff. I don't know. I guess it depends on the event. I'm a little surprised he insists on prompters for the introduction of a cabinet appointee when he would be just as effective or more so without looking at a high-tech cue card. He's plenty talented to pull off most of this stuff without a prompter. He may actually sound more credible if the words come from within, even if those words strayed a little from the pre-arranged text.

3-9-09 0100

As if there weren't enough birds in the vicinity of LaGuardia Airport, the FAA and Port Authority are going along with plans by the New York City Department of Sanitation to build a new waste transfer station just a couple thousand feet from one of LaGuardia's two runways. Reporter Brian Rafferty broke the story in the Queens Tribune, a weekly community paper. The new facility on 31st Avenue in College Point will process an estimated 2700 tons of city trash daily. A stream of city garbage trucks will deposit contents at the indoor transfer station and then barges will move the containerized and compressed waste out through Flushing Bay. According to Rafferty's story, the transfer station sits just 2200 feet from the end of runway 13/31. Both the FAA and Port Authority have given thumbs up to the transfer station. Both agencies told Rafferty that fresh garbage will be handled in a protected setting – without exposure to wildlife.

Bit if you've ever seen or smelled a New York City garbage truck, you know that it seeps, secretes and offends its immediate surroundings, especially when it's hot out. Hungry birds will flock to a line of garbage trucks on the way into the transfer station, seeking a morsel that may escape. Knowing the way birds communicate, they will likely tell their bird friends there's food to be had as the trucks enter the facility.

Given what occurred to US Air flight 1549 in January, it seems crazy that the airport operator, the top government aviation regulator and the city of New York would even consider a project bound to be a geese and gull magnet.

There are too many birds at LaGuardia as it is. Build a big garbage depot across the bay and you might as well start throwing bird seed on the runways and taxi-ways.

-I took a car service from my apartment to the airport last week and the young man who was driving told me he had just three weeks on the job. The man said he was one of several workers who had been let go from the BR Guest Restaurants group which operates several popular Manhattan eateries. The man helped manage the company's Queens warehouse operations and had been with BR Guest for nine years. He seemed to take his job loss in stride and without bitterness. Despite a certain decline in income, the driver exuded what seemed like genuine enthusiasm about his new occupation. He told the story of a fare the previous night that started in Corona and ended all the way in Coney Island. "I like driving," he said.

-Jockey Robby Albarado wasn't thrilled Saturday when HRTV's Scott Hazelton attempted to get a preview of the seven-year-old Brazilian-bred Einstein's chances in the Santa Anita Handicap. Hazelton did a live interview with Albarado about 90 minutes before the Big Cap and inquired about Einstein. "I'm not riding Einstein," said Albarado (he was aboard Blue Exit instead). It's likely Hazelton stumbled onto a sore subject with his gaffe. Albarado won aboard Einstein in the turf feature on Derby Day last year but lost the mount on the versatile son of Spend a Buck after a disappointing run in last year's Arlington Million. Julien Leparoux (known affectionately as "The French Tickler") rode Einstein to victory in Saturday's pace-less Big Cap pushing the horse's career earnings to nearly \$2.3 million. It was the third time Leparoux rode Einstein since Albarado was taken off. Blue Exit and Albarado finished dead last in the race.

-Einstein's trainer Helen Pitts is now listed in the Daily Racing Form as "Helen P Blasi." Pitts married Churchill Downs outrider Greg Blasi last year. Greg Blasi is the brother of Scott Blasi who is trainer Steve Asmussen's right-hand man. Pitts-Blasi said on HRTV that Einstein's Big Cap win was the biggest victory in her training career.

3-8-09 0116

I'd have to go way back in my gig-attending life to find a concert that matched the flat-out rowdiness and intensity of Wednesday night's Lucero show in Pensacola, FL. Man, what a show. And man, what a crazy scene they have down here. I don't know what kind of substances the rock kids consume in these parts, but they were really bouncing off the walls for the triple bill at Sluggo's on Cervantes Street. It was nuts. Maybe the Pensacola music crowd's enthusiasm is heightened by the fact that their town gets skipped by many touring acts and the fans really let loose when a big band visits. I don't know. But if I was booking rock bands, I'd send 'em to Pensacola. They have a scene, that's for sure.

They moshed. They scuffled. They packed a decent-sized venue. They drank like it was going out of style. And it was pretty clear a good number of folks were tripping their asses off. One young lady got carried out from near the stage and was laid flat on the floor next to the front entrance. She was attended to and was said to be ok. Throughout Lucero's 80-minute set, much of the crowd showed love for the band by holding up beer bottles to toast the stage.

Sluggo's sits on a busy but somewhat dicey stretch of main drag west of downtown. I arrived at 830 PM. About fifty people stood around with open containers of alcohol in plain sight, waiting out front. The doors opened at 9 PM. The main performance space greets you as you walk in and there's a full bar and vegan café in a separate room off to the left. With a capacity I'm guessing to be about four-hundred, the only major drawback of the bar is the fact there's just one toilet each for men and women. Just one. PBR's are two bucks and a range of imports sell for three dollars.

The local folk punk band This Bike is a Pipe Bomb started the evening. They went on about 945 PM. The bass player for This Bike is also the personable and friendly co-owner of Sluggo's, Terry Johnson. She tended bar before and after This Bike's set. I knew nothing about This Bike ahead of time but really enjoyed their show.

The talented songwriter David Dondero was next. It was just him and his guitar. Comparisons to Conor Oberst are valid. A loud and chatty woman standing stage right interfered with Dondero's concentration and prompted him to suddenly stop in the middle of a song early in the set. He pleaded with the irreverent woman to take the conversation elsewhere. "I'm trying to sing a song and all I hear is you. Just go next door and I'll save your spot for Lucero," he said. The woman stayed put and hurled an insult at Dondero. The crowd failed to choose sides and there's was awkward silence before Dondero moved on.

When Lucero hit the stage, the place went upside down. On all of the band's up-tempo tunes, the young folks up against the stage pushed, shoved and loved. It was high-energy output from the band and high-energy input from the crowd.

At one point, the mosh got a little rough. In between songs, Lucero's bass player John Stubblefield asked one of the fans to tone it down. "Quit that chokehold. You. Quit that chokehold," he said in a refreshing southern accent.

Right about the time Lucero played an unbelievable version of the tune "Last Night in Town" off the Nobody's Darling record, a ceiling panel popped loose and dangled in front of the fantastic singer Ben Nichols. A Sluggo's employee would later remove the ceiling tile completely which only added to the rough and tumble look of the performance space.

When Nichols has a gap in the singing portion of his responsibilities, he often lunges downward with guitar in hand. It's a pretty dramatic sight.

Lucero has several more dates on its current tour. The next record the band puts out will be their seventh (not including a live release) and it'll be their first on a major label (Universal). I'd rather not make comparisons to other acts but I guess I'd say there is not a harder-rocking and authentic Southern band out there right now. And yeah, that includes the DBT's.

I should definitely say hats off to Pensacola for supporting a really cool live music venue and filling it

with a raw energy level that doesn't exist at live shows here in New York.

I had a couple of really good Pensacola restaurant experiences. Wednesday morning breakfast at The Coffee Cup on Cervantes was excellent. In business since 1945, you can tell this is the place people flock to for the first meal of the day. Construction workers, lawyers and Moms with babies gather in a pretty simple dining room. I had two biscuits and gravy (\$3.80) and several cups of joe. The menu included an item that caught my attention. "Tomato gravy and biscuits." When I inquired about what for me was a previously unheard of gravy flavor, the waitress told me it was "an acquired taste." She brought me a sample and I was glad I didn't order it. Nothing special.

The alligator soup, oyster po' boy and key lime pie at The Fish House on Pensacola Bay was ridiculously good. I could eat the alligator soup daily and not get tired of it anytime soon. Same goes for the key lime pie (naturally colored yellow) built with a graham cracker crust.

On Tuesday night, the place to knock a few back was McGuire's on Gregory. The three dollar martini special was as good as it sounds. The interesting thing about this place is that dollar bills signed by patrons are plastered up all over the ceiling, walls and wherever there is space. The server claimed that there are currently about 850-thousand dollar bills on display.

-Among the front page news items in Pensacola during my visit was a proposed plan to slash high school athletics in the state of Florida. All non-varsity sports would see a 40-percent reduction in the number of games or competitions on their schedules. All varsity sports schedules except for football would get cut 20-percent. So varsity soccer, for example, would go from 25 matches to 20. The board of directors of the Florida High School Athletics Association cites contracting athletic budgets for the measure and will vote on it next month. It's too bad the collapsing economy is taking kids who play sports down with it. High school sports may be seen as an easy place to cut when schools are faced with a shrinking revenue stream, but deep consideration should be given to the value of athletics for the high school student.

3-5-09

Greetings from Pensacola, FL where the great rock and roll band Lucero will play Wednesday night at a venue called Sluggo's. The talented singer/songwriter David Dondero opens up.

I've always wanted to see Lucero and missed them on the band's most recent stops in New York. Since the flights are free, I came down Tuesday afternoon and am making a little getaway of it. The shot above comes from the airplane window as we made the turn for landing at PNS airport.

I took a 11:45 AM departure out of LaGuardia and then made a connecting flight in Houston. As I went through security screening at LaGuardia, there was a commotion in front of me centering around a well-dressed man with a fluffed-up bleached-blond mane of hair. Everybody was doing a double-take as he walked through the A concourse. People mouthed the name "Rod Stewart" and gawked as he passed by.

It turns out the guy was on my flight. A group of women in their 20's seated in my vicinity giggled when he walked down the aisle to board. One woman snapped his picture and another asked if he would sign

her shirt. He politely declined.

When he got up to go the bathroom, I got a pretty good look at him and I'm about 95-percent sure it wasn't Rod Stewart. The guy I saw had a face that was a little more weathered than the recent photos I've seen of Rod on Page Six. Add to that the fact that he was sitting in 9C, a coach seat. One more potential disqualifier: the woman who accompanied him was nowhere in the same stratosphere as the women seen on Rod's arm the last three decades. Perhaps the guy on my flight goes around knowingly as a celebrity look-alike. He clearly has to be aware that he draws attention.

The weather was fifteen degrees, clear and sunny on departure from New York. It was 55 when I stepped off the plane in Pensacola and is supposed to be 60 and sunny on Wednesday..

I'm staying at a pretty nice lodging spot in downtown Pensacola, not too far from Sluggo's. I decided against a vehicle rental, so I plan on sticking close to downtown and will not get down to the long strip of Pensacola Beach sand on the mighty Gulf of Mex. Depending on how things go, the next report may not come as soon as I'd prefer...

3-4-09 0838

The big snowstorm that hit NYC Monday failed to deliver the punch that was predicted. The weathermen said we'd get 12 inches and up. It turns out we only got about eight and a half. School was called off and many of my co-workers used the weather as an excuse to stay home. But it really wasn't a crippling event. The texture of the snow was such that walking in it wasn't cumbersome like it would be if the snow was moist and heavy. This was powder.

In Queens, the secondary streets were plowed but still snow-covered at mid-day Monday. All of the major thoroughfares were treated with chemicals and just wet. At the airport, the biggest problem was a howling wind out of the north that caused delays of up to four hours.

-The food court on the lower level of LaGuardia Airport's Central Terminal Building has added a gourmet market with dozens of items available for easy take-out onto your departing flight. The stuff isn't cheap, but it beats most of the rest of the crappy run-of-the-mill options. It's called "Angelina's Metro Market" and it's been open for three weeks. I got a pretty good blueberry muffin (\$2.75) and a large coffee (\$2.25) before work Monday. A long refrigerated display case included fresh meat, pasta, cheese and salad options. The place is run by an outfit called Mar Air Foods which controls several Dunkin' Donuts outlets at JFK and Dulles airports as well as other non-airport locations.

-It wasn't quite as dramatic as Rick Santelli's recent on-air diatribe against the homeowner assistance plan, but CNBC's Larry Kudlow wiggled out pretty good on the air Monday. Kudlow lashed out against the latest infusion of government money into AIG. With his arms flailing, Kudlow voiced frustration about the government's open-ended approach to propping up failing companies without any real expectation of tangible returns on investment. "What are we doing? What are we waiting for? Who's in charge? In the name of systemic risk, we're just throwing billions and billions and billions of taxpayer

dollars to what end? I don't know. I'm not smart enough. I don't get it." When Kudlow was finished, CNBC anchor Trish Regan giggled for a few seconds, informed viewers of what was coming up in the next segment and went to a commercial break.

-The title track and first single off the new Thermals record is the catchiest tune I've heard in a long while. "Now We Can See" starts with a fun and simple chorus that draws you in, pumps you up and prompts immediate sing-a-long effort. "Oh-way-owwh-o-oh, Oh-way-owwh-o-oh, Oh-way-owwh-o-oh..." It gets stuck in your head after just one listen and makes you feel like jumping around with both fists extended high. "Oh-way-owwh-o-oh..."

-Speaking of rock and roll, TSR has a bag packed and leaves for a quickie trip to the Florida panhandle Tuesday to catch up with the great Memphis band Lucero. I'll hit the Wednesday night stop of the band's tour in Pensacola. It's a town I've never been to before. It'll be nice to leave the snowy sidewalks and frigid winds for 60 and sunny for about 36 hours.

3-3-09 0210

The season's biggest winter storm rolled in late Sunday night and is predicted to dump a foot of snow on NYC by the time it ends Monday afternoon. It's fitting that a winter that has seemed harsh by New York standards (despite being within normal statistical ranges) would finally get its one big coastal storm before we can move on to spring-time. A Nor'Easter, they call it.

My employer pre-cancelled a good portion of the Monday morning flight schedule in Newark and left just a couple of departures intact for the start of business at LaGuardia Monday. Normally, the powers-that-be are over-ambitious about operating in bad weather. With this storm, there was early decisiveness to scrap the AM schedule and start fresh Monday afternoon with a full head of steam. It's a good approach.

As I came home from work at about 12:30 AM Monday, only an inch or two of snow had fallen but it was coming down pretty good. As of 1:15 AM, the New York City public school system had not declared Monday a snow day despite dozens of closures by parochial schools in the area. The NYC public school system has not cancelled classes in five years.

-The weekend trade of Matt Cassell looks like a steal for the Chiefs, but you have to believe Bill Belichick knows exactly what he's doing. He opens up a big chunk of cap space and gets a high second rounder in a draft said to be overloaded with first-round talent. I don't know. That game Cassell had against the Jets in Foxboro was an eye-opener because of his scrambling ability. He looks like a sure thing going forward. Some have questioned how Cassell with Vrabel thrown in doesn't bring at least a first rounder in return. There are reports the Pats turned down a proposal that would have netted them the number 12 pick overall in a three-way swap involving the Bucs and Broncos. The fact it was ex-Pat personnel guy Scott Pioli (now KC's GM) who got two Pats for a discount adds to the controversy. Some have called for a league investigation. In the end, I think the conclusion of any analysis of this trade will find that Belichick had a plan and executed it.

3-2-09 0130

The big and busy Virgin Megastore in Union Square is closing shop this spring. The Manhattan record store is always packed with people searching the vast collection of compact discs. On most days, there are six or seven cashiers working to check out the steady stream of shoppers. It isn't the most cutting edge place and its link to a corporate giant isn't attractive to those who could walk to nearby independently-owned record shops. But what made it such a popular spot was the depth and range of its inventory. You could walk in with a list of somewhat obscure and/or popular releases and there was a pretty good chance the disc was on the shelf. I guess since a lot of people have started downloading music rather than buying discs, even a record store with mammoth sales sees what the future holds and is raising the white flag while the gettin' is good.

-It's nice to know there's a federal entity protecting depositors in the event of a bank failure, but the policy of secrecy surrounding the FDIC's "watch list" of at-risk banks seems to run contrary to the interest of those doing business with those banks. The FDIC acknowledges publicly the existence of 252 banks on its national watch list. It says banks on its watch list could fail. But it won't name the banks on the list. Yeah, if customers knew their bank was on the list, it could spark a run of withdrawals. And yeah, individual depositors are protected by the FDIC up to 250 K. But shouldn't there be full disclosure from the FDIC on discoveries that raise questions about a bank's viability whether the individual depositor is insured against losses or not? Why have a watch list at all if a bad bank about to go bust is a secret until the very end?

-There's still two months to go before the Kentucky Derby, but a speedy grey horse on the west coast ran a big race Saturday afternoon and could be a major factor on the first Saturday in May. At odds of fifty cents on the dollar, The Pamplemousse won The Sham at Santa Anita by six lengths. The Pamplemousse took the lead in the race shortly after it started. Despite time clock readings that indicated he may be going too fast too early, The Pamplemousse expanded his lead entering the home stretch and appeared to be comfortable covering the mile and an eighth race distance over a synthetic surface usually considered to be a disadvantage for horses with his running style. Among those who have an ownership interest in The Pamplemousse is Alex Solis II, the son of the jockey Alex Solis. The younger Solis is a bloodstock agent and picked out The Pamplemousse at a sale for the partnership that now owns the horse. The elder Solis has now ridden The Pamplemousse in four of the horse's five career races and would presumably be aboard in the Derby. To thicken the plot line further, The Pamplemousse is trained by 70-year-old Julio Canani who has never run a horse in the Derby despite a long, successful career that started from scratch when he moved to the US from Peru in 1963. Canani is a colorful and cheerful character prone to making wacky observations about the sport. When a reporter for the horse racing channel HRTV asked Canani after The Sham victory whether The Pamplemousse can win future races (including the Derby) if the horse is forced to race from behind a fast pace, Canani said: "Who cares?" The reporter failed to follow up, but Canani seemed to imply that The Pamplemousse is either so fast or so good that it doesn't matter.

-Aaron Heilman made his spring training debut for the Cubbies on Saturday in Mesa, AZ. Wearing uniform #47, Heilman struck out four over two scoreless innings. Cubs manager Lou Piniella opened camp without knowing how to pronounce Heilman's name. The Trib's Paul Sullivan says the Cub skipper

has referred to the ex-Met reliever as “Heidelman” on “a couple of occasions.”

3-1-09 0133

Of all the teams I used to root for before moving to NYC more than a decade ago, only the Chicago Blackhawks still have a prominent place in my order of allegiances.

I went to see the Blackhawks in Nashville this week and will catch them when they make a stop in Newark next month.

Not only was it the pull of a Blackhawks hockey game that brought me to Nashville but my friends Jeff and Deborah are long-time Predators season ticket-holders with a pair of seats about twenty rows behind the penalty boxes. They hosted the quick visit starting with a great pre-game dinner at Rotier's Restaurant near the Vanderbilt University campus. In business since 1945, Rotier's is a dimly-lit joint famous for its cheeseburger served on French bread. The well-done patty between fresh and thick sliced bread required two hands. Why French bread? I never found out, but it was a good way to eat a burger. The fries were excellent. Bud bottles were three bucks.

From dinner, it was a few miles to the downtown arena called Sommet Center. Deborah has government-issued parking privileges just a few blocks from the venue. Both Jeff and Deborah donned Predators jerseys before entering the arena. What's interesting about their wardrobe selection is a mutually-agreed upon arrangement by which one never wears the home jersey if the other is wearing the same. So, over the course of some forty home games in a season, never will you see Jeff wearing the dark blue home jersey when Deborah has hers on. On Tuesday, Jeff wore the white road jersey while Deborah wore the home blue.

I last visited Nashville with my Dad for a hockey game about five years ago. The most notable change at Sommet Center since my last visit is a new scoreboard (with video capability) that hangs over the ice. Also changed is the name of the arena. No longer is it called the Gaylord Entertainment Center. Gaylord sold its interest in the team – and gave up the arena linkage in 2005. Sommet provides “outsourced business services.” It's a Tennessee-based company that gained naming-rights on the arena in 2007.

There have been several behind-the-scenes maneuvers in recent years that raised questions about whether the Predators franchise would remain in Nashville. Hamilton, Ontario and Kansas City are among the cities looking to add a team. Jeff says the Predators are on pace to break even financially at this season's end and expect to meet an attendance goal that would stave off relocation at least short-term.

On the outer fringe of the playoff race, the Predators needed to beat the Blackhawks Tuesday to stay in post-season striking distance. After two periods, the Hawks looked solid with a 3-1 lead. Jeff and Deborah were pretty pessimistic about a Preds rally in light of the fact the team is dead last in the NHL in goal scoring. But ex-Hawk JP Dumont scored a big game-tying goal for the Preds with 15 minutes to go and Nashville got two more scores with less than five minutes in regulation to win 5-3. Attendance was 15,075.

Locally-brewed Yazoo Pale Ale was our refreshment of choice at the game. Preds fans are enthusiastic and well-behaved it seems. Whenever a penalty is called on the opposing team, Preds fans hold up a balled-up fist and then simulate a pouncing cat with a downward motion of the fist.

The young country music star Taylor Swift was at the game. When the scoreboard's video screen showed Swift (who released the top selling country record of 2008) in a mezzanine level seat, the crowd reacted with surprise and cheers.

After the game, Jeff took me to Robert's Western World for the full-on Nashville honky tonk experience. The bar on Nashville's bustling Broadway strip hosts live music seven days a week starting at 11 AM.

The twangy trio Phil Hummer and the White Falcons from Old Hickory, TN (pictured above) was on stage during our time at the bar. Phil has a Joe Ely sounding voice and his band was hard-working and entertaining.

The flights between Newark and Nashville were pretty much on time and uneventful. Big thanks to Jeff and Deborah for making it such a fun trip.

2-26-09 1755

All those misguided Rangers fans chanting "Fire Renney" at the Garden the last few weeks got their wish Monday. Head coach Tom Renney was handed walking papers by GM Glen Sather after a prolonged stretch of lackluster efforts that included back to back losses against inferior teams this past weekend.

Renney is a great hockey coach and he will win plenty of games wherever he lands. His firing from the Rangers is a misplacement of blame. As time passes, the goofs who called for his head will wish they had him back.

It was Sather who gave the final OK to removal of the heart and soul of last year's great Blueshirts team by parting ways with Jagr, Shanahan and Avery before the current season started. Even without those three, the Rangers continue to have an extremely talented roster. Problem is, there has been no credible, seen-it-all leader to step forward and flip on the jolt switch when the team hit the skids. Scott Gomez can't flip the switch. Chris Drury can't do it either. Markus Nasland has been a dud.

Renney's style was not to intervene. He's the kinda coach that's built for the long haul. He's the kinda coach that allows a roster to sift out the soft and get jump from an assertive core without yelling, carrying on and making crazy statements in the press. In each previous season with the Rangers, Renney got cohesion from teams that didn't look they'd work on paper. Renney was a class act who probably knew that his relaxed, patient and confident exterior that held consistent as this team crumbled wouldn't help him keep his job. But that's the way he was. He acted as classy losing as he did when his team was winning. He stayed true, and it's too bad he's not sticking around.

-Sunday's New York Times used Associated Press wire copy in its sports section for game coverage of the

three local NHL teams. Each team played important games the night before. The Rangers played up in Buffalo and the Devils/Islanders played out on Long Island. I could understand not sending a reporter to cover the last-place Islanders at this point, but both the Devils and Rangers are intriguing stories these days. The Times sports section does a great job going beyond the game but it's hard to believe it would choose to run just a few paragraphs of coverage from a news service as the local teams enter the home stretch of the season.

-TSR gets on a bird Tuesday for a quick trip to see the playoff-bound Chicago Blackhawks play in Nashville. Back with a full report here on Thursday.

2-24-09 0155

Birds continue to move free and easy at LaGuardia Airport and the absurdly ineffective procedures for airplane avoidance of them continues without upgrade despite discussion of radical change in the wake of the bird-induced double engine failure that ended with a Miracle on the Hudson.

A few days ago, as the first wave of morning departures launched off runway 13, a cockpit crew member flying a 737 bound for a Midwestern city told the LaGuardia control tower that he observed birds at one-hundred feet above the end of the runway. The tower asked the pilot if his airplane struck any of the birds on takeoff and the pilot said no. Those birds dispersed within a minute.

Lacking technology to provide current information, controllers in the tower proceeded to tell at least a dozen subsequent departures about the bird sighting made at 643 AM. As late as 703 AM, the tower continued to tell departing aircraft about what at that point had become old and irrelevant information.

A bird sighting made by a pilot leaving or arriving LaGuardia is likely of little help to a flight crew twenty minutes later. Birds are usually moving. A flock in a flight path ought to be detected by more advanced means than a stale word of mouth.

-The meltdown by Tommy Armour III on the slope below the putting green on the eighth hole at The Riviera Saturday was among the more disastrous ones you'll ever see from a PGA tour pro. After hitting his second shot on the par four into deep grass just off the side of the green, Armour was in birdie territory. He had a nightmare sequence instead. It took Armour *five* swings to get on the green. With each blown shot, you could sense Armour was getting aggravated. After finally landing his ball on the green, Armour boiled over. Rather than exchanging the wedge he was holding for a putter, he stepped away from his caddy (his brother swung the wedge with all his might into the ground. It appeared to be deeply embedded. Having blown off steam, Armour accepted the putter, lined up his 22-footer for quadruple bogey and drained it. Armour started Saturday at eight-under for the tournament and was hanging with the leaders. His collapse on the eighth hole knocked him out of contention in a flash. Armour III is the grandson of Tommy Armour who won three major golf titles in the 30's and whose name appears on golf equipment to this day. Armour III has had a pretty mediocre professional career with just two PGA tour wins in the 28 years since he turned pro. At the age of 49, one would expect Armour III to seek the easier competitive terrain of the Champions Tour when he becomes eligible in 2010.

-The best public high school basketball player coming out of New York City this spring is still undecided on which college he'll attend. Hoops Weiss of the News says Lance Stephenson was in Lawrence for KU's game against Nebraska Saturday and has already made visits to St. John's and Maryland.

-College basketball writer Lenn Robbins of the Post reported last week that the long-running alternating home and home series between St. John's and Duke is nearing an end. Robbins says Duke wants out of the series in part because it can schedule dates at Madison Square Garden and the Meadowlands without having to play an opponent that it routinely walks over.

-It seems like there may be a disconnect between the baseball writers who universally criticized A-Rod's press conference performance to open Yankee camp in Tampa and a significant portion of the baseball fandom willing to forgive, forget and move on. I've heard plenty of callers to sports talk radio the last few days who are satisfied with A-Rod's evolved explanation. And TSR received the following message in the electronic mailbag from loyal reader Matt from Chicago:

"I'm curious....his name came out (shouldn't have, not his fault) that he was on 'roids. He said I did them, I shouldn't have, and I'm sorry.

What more do people want from him? Is it important what he took? How he took them? Where he got them? What more "truth" do they want? He's already had to say more than he had to, since his name wasn't supposed to be out there in the first place.

And believe me, I'm no big A-Rod booster. I just don't get what more people want other than the pound of flesh they've already gotten."

2-22-09 0100

It hasn't received wide coverage, but ABC News has reported that the captain of the flight that went down outside Buffalo last week worked part-time at a grocery store until as late as last August.

Little about 47-year-old Captain Marvin Renslow's flying career has been made public beyond the number of flight hours he compiled – and the fact he just recently upgraded to the Q400 from a smaller twin-prop. We know Renslow racked up nearly 3400 flight hours and was hired by Colgan Airlines in September 2005.

Obviously, there's a career history that precedes Renslow's employment at Colgan that has not been disclosed publicly. It may not even be relevant.

But ABC's report that Renslow worked a grocery store job to supplement his pilot paycheck is something worth thinking about.

Here is a guy entrusted with such a huge responsibility and level of pressure - and he's paid less than

some of the men and women loading bags onto his airplane. He's certainly paid less than most of the salesmen, lawyers or accountants sitting in the back of the plane who paid a few hundred bucks for a round-trip ticket on the routes Colgan flies for Continental.

According to a database that publishes pilot pay scales, a Colgan captain with three years seniority flying a Q400 makes \$56 per flight hour. With 75 flying hours a month guaranteed – and another ten or twenty more than that normal – Renslow was on pace to gross let's say \$60 K annually after the switch to the Q400.

Before the switch – on the smaller airplane – while moonlighting at the grocery store - he was at \$43 per flight hour. That would work out to about \$45 k annually.

Sitting next to Renslow in the cockpit on the airplane that crashed was a first officer who was making not a whole lot more than \$20k annually.

People have already second-guessed the pilots' actions in this case. At some point, the NTSB will make a determination on whether or not errors were made.

No matter what happens, it should be understood and remembered that major airlines break off a large portion of their route maps and cut deals with small regional airlines like Colgan to fly for them. They slap the big airline's company logo on the contract airline's tail and sell tickets to people as if it's one big, happy airline. But the major airline doesn't pay the contract airline a number or rate that allows the contract airline's pilots to make much money considering the responsibility. The breakdown and sub-division of the arrangement certainly is not made clear to the flying public. They often only see the logo on the tail.

The big airline's pilots make two to three times as much as the contract airline's pilots. The logo on the tail is the same.

The disparity doesn't suppress all young commercial pilots starting careers because many of them dream of working their way up to the major airlines. Some simply love to fly and make a career at the feeder carrier. But the difference in pay is substantial and the job is much the same.

Renslow had a wife and two kids. The public doesn't know a whole lot about him right now but when I heard about his grocery store job it made sense. He likely needed to find a way to supplement a pay check that wasn't cutting it.

I guess in the current economic environment there are bigger things to worry about than the pay scale of pilots. But what Renslow and his co-pilot got paid seems out of whack. As we saw last week, the airplanes don't just fly by themselves.

2-19-09 1800

One of Dan Bejar's finest Destroyer songs shows up on the new "Dark Was the Night" double-disc compilation out this week, but it's not his voice you hear. The New Pornographers have contributed a drab and sugary cover version of "Hey, Snow White" and there's no evidence Bejar was anywhere near this track (even though he's an irregular lyrical contributor and even more irregular touring member of the band).

This new cover is atrocious. Carl and Neko sing sweet over synth – and the main guitar rips that define Bejar's version flutter weakly in the background of the New Porn adaptation. All the guts contained in the original are stripped out.

It's nice New Porn contributed to the 31-track effort to raise money for AIDS awareness/research, but leave Bejar's stuff alone.

To hear how the song is meant to be done, click below for ridiculously great footage of Bejar and his band performing it at the Troubadour last year. It was captured and made available by a 35-year-old movie producer's assistant named Ed from LA who has uploaded a ton of great live music clips.

Man, I really hope Bejar hits the road again in 2009.

I heard a large portion of "Dark Was the Night" on a one-hour special that aired this week on the satellite radio station XMU. Bryce and Aaron Dressner of the band The National narrated the program. Perhaps the best tune I heard off the two-disc, triple-vinyl comp is an excellent version of The Handsome Family song "The Giant of Illinois" performed by Andrew Bird. The song is about the freakishly large man Robert Wadlow who died at the age of 22 in 1940. His officially recorded height at the time of death was 8 feet, eleven inches.

2-18-09 1715

The Yankees do a lot of things right, but the A-Rod news conference on Tuesday to address his past steroids use was a total bust. The young Yankees media relations director Jason Zillo presided over a snow job and serious chain yank with the 35-minute event in a tent at Tampa.

After starting about twenty minutes late, Zillo laid down a ground rule that even a Presidential spokesman wouldn't think of. No follow-up questions. That way A-Rod could better stick to the A-script.

A-Rod started with prepared remarks. It seemed like he had not even looked at the curled-up three pages he held in advance. He stumbled, stammered and didn't seem to believe what he was reading. When he tried to muster a fake sob for the bored, indifferent Yankee teammates who sat nearby, he couldn't get the tear-making ducts to generate even a mist.

I was young, I was stupid was the theme. My nameless cousin scored the stuff from the DR and the same cousin shot me up. I didn't know what the stuff was. I did it for three years and I'm not sure it worked.

All the top New York baseball writers were there. Since they weren't allowed to ask follow-ups, there was no good way to create an inquiry that could penetrate the "young and stupid" script.

When Joel Sherman and Sweeny Murti asked questions that reached at A-Rod's lack of credibility and authenticity, A-Rod smiled and shrugged the questions off knowing he could prompt Zillo to rescue him.

A-Rod says he recently made a call to Katie Couric to explain why he lied to her – and he confirmed that he gave a personalized shout-out to Selena Roberts for smearing her. When reporters told him that fellow major leaguers Jamie Moyer and Roy Oswalt ripped him as a sham, A-Rod said he was sorry they felt that way.

Even the good intentions and presence of a leading anti-steroids advocate suffered from association with this event. Don Hooton lost his high school son to suicide and blames the depression that preceded his late son's death on steroids withdrawal. Hooton's foundation may get some dough from A-Rod but it's probably not worth making joint appearances if Tuesday's song and dance is any indication of A-Rod's commitment to the cause.

I'd agree with Francesa who said Tuesday that the Yankees are aiding and abetting A-Rod's misguided approach to parse and stonewall while changing and expanding the story as it goes along.

Francesa says damage control is one thing. But he says the team's hope that a tightly-scripted news conference gives A-Rod closure is ridiculous. "They took the media for a joy-ride here. They accomplished nothing. They ended nothing. If they think the story is going away based on today's testimony, they're nuts. All he gave you today was the next chapter. He still left a million things unplugged. He still didn't tell you the truth."

2-17-09 1700

The refusal to let a rising Israeli tennis star enter the Arab country hosting this week's stop on the women's professional circuit has generated interesting reaction. Of all the parties involved with the Barclays Dubai Tennis Championships being played in the United Arab Emirates, it's The Tennis Channel that has taken the boldest position.

While both the WTA Tour and the remaining participants in the tournament say the competition will continue this week, The Tennis Channel has abruptly decided to pull the plug on its coverage in protest. Viewers in the United States will not see this tournament, even though Serena, Venus and most of the top players in the world will carry on.

Tennis Channel boss Ken Solomon told Richard Sandomir of the Times that it was an easy decision to cut carriage of the event. "It's a simple and clear issue. Sports are about merit, absent of background, class, race, creed, color or religion."

It is the country of origin – and religion – that has prompted the United Arab Emirates to refuse

admittance to 21-year-old Shahar Peer even though she was included in the tournament's draw. No Jews allowed - even if you're a mild-mannered professional tennis player well down the list on the player rankings. What made the UAE's action even more devious and reprehensible was the fact it waited for all the other players to arrive before telling tour officials it was barring Peer.

The organizing body of women's tennis (the WTA) has complete control of this event and could shut it down in a heartbeat. But WTA chairman Larry Scott told Harvey Araton of the Times that the tour will wait until next year to punish the UAE for interfering politically. Scott said Peer's family told the WTA it didn't want all of the players who traveled to Dubai to suffer because of Peer's situation.

To me, the reaction here is all mixed up. Both the Tour and the players should walk away from this event. If that doesn't happen (and it appears it won't), The Tennis Channel should continue with its coverage and use its powerful broadcast platform to magnify the controversy that is playing out. Show us who is sitting in the stands. Show us the players participating in a country that has excluded a Jew. Stick a microphone in front of Serena Williams after she wins the final in straight sets and ask her what she'll do with the six-figure check earned in a country that has shut out a Jew.

-New Met reliever JJ Putz did a live spring training interview with Scott Clark during channel 7's 6 PM newscast Monday night and made it clear he's not thrilled in the set-up role. Putz told Clark he thought he was headed to Detroit to close games before he was sent to the Mets in the Heilman deal. Putz will work the eighth inning to set things up for K-Rod. To see Putz publicly act sour about his '09 role is a concern. This will sound crazy, but if I were Jerry, I'd consider feeding Putz unannounced save chances on occasion just to keep him on his toes. You wanna be the closer? Here 'ya go. You obviously can't have a committee when K-Rod is brought in for big dollars, but work Putz into the ninth-inning mix.

-In case you haven't heard, Scooter has found his groove and will get married this August. He made it official a week ago Saturday. The thinning ranks of the unhitched will lose a great longtime member, but the defection is fully understood in this instance. The wedding should be a serious gas. Way to go Scooter.

2-17-09 0125

It wasn't long after Continental Connection flight 3407 went down outside Buffalo Thursday night that a heretofore obscure web site gained a large worldwide audience.

Just hours after the crash, the news networks were re-broadcasting conversations that included the first officer of the doomed flight, an approach controller, a Buffalo tower controller and other inbound cockpit crews. The audio recordings normally aren't released by the federal government for weeks - even months after any incident it investigates. But in this instance, they were archived and available on the web site LiveATC.net. With permission from the web site, media from around the world used the recordings as the foundation of its early coverage.

Air traffic control conversations are broadcast over airwaves that can be picked up with a regular police

scanner and LiveATC.net uses a network of people interested in collecting, accessing and distributing the transmissions. The crash of 3407 is the first instance I can ever remember of an almost immediate dissemination of the related air traffic control conversations. Aside from revealing the suddenness of the airplane's trouble, the ATC tapes included other crews bound for Buffalo discussing the accumulation of ice on approach.

Having been scooped on some level, the lead federal investigating agency (NTSB) may have moved a little quicker than it normally would to release details from the cockpit voice recorder which survived the fiery wreck. Less than 24 hours after the crash – the NTSB told the media that 3407's Captain and First Officer discussed the presence of ice on the airplane shortly before it fell from the sky.

The question now is whether the airplane's de-icing system worked properly on the twin-prop Bombardier Dash 8 / Q400.

Clearly, the folks that run Continental (and Colgan Air – which operated the Q400 as a contractor) are confident that whatever happened is an isolated incident. How else would you explain their decision to operate the first flight of the day Friday from Newark to Buffalo using the same aircraft type? Just nine hours after 3407 went down, Continental and Colgan sent another Q400 airborne bound for Buffalo at 727 AM with 47 passengers on board.

The flight number 3407 has been replaced with the number 3411 in the schedule. Colgan (doing business as Continental Connection) will continue to operate four daily trips using the Q400 between Newark and Buffalo.

With a snowstorm expected mid-week in upstate New York, you'll find out for sure whether the airline is rock solid confident about whether the Q400's de-icing system is infallible during flight.

The NTSB has a long way to go on this but don't be surprised if it urges the FAA to intervene and add another level of assurance that the prop-driven airplane can safely fly through conditions that include icing.

-The most distasteful crash-related coverage came during the 3 AM hour Friday when Fox News correspondent Rick Leventhal was put on the air to file a live report from the passenger seat of a moving news van hundreds of miles from the scene. "Our GPS tells us we should be there by 8:15," said Leventhal. He told viewers he had been given the plane crash assignment at midnight and was racing to the scene from New York City. Leventhal boasted that he had "Streambox" technology in the van which would allow him to "live stream" the video of his journey. "We're gonna try to get the feed up on Fox News Live," he said.

What happened to the idea that reporters report the news; they don't make the news?

Here is a nationally broadcast cable news channel five hours after the first fatal plane crash in this country in two and a half years – and what do the viewers get? They get Rick Leventhal yammering for a solid

ten minutes about mundane details of his trip to the crash site. If Leventhal lacks judgment in this instance, there has to be a producer at the home base with a better nose for news. Go to Leventhal when he gets there.

Perhaps Fox was hamstrung by the fact that its Buffalo affiliate has no news gathering operation. If that's the case, there has to be a way to cover the story from afar until Leventhal arrives.

Over on CNN, Anderson Cooper worked through the night and his network turned out to be the most comprehensive television source for early information on the crash (despite an erroneous assertion that the plane had 50 seats – it actually has 74). Among those who assisted Cooper's coverage was the former Chicago weatherman Jim Tilmon who beautifully balances avoidance of wild conjecture with a sharp application of aviation knowledge to the available facts at hand.

Unfortunately, CNN's greatest resource for aviation-related information was fired from the network just two months ago. You can bet Miles O'Brien would have been all over CNN's coverage of flight 3407 had he still been on the payroll.

Luckily for those who value his insight, O'Brien continues to share knowledge on his [newly-created web site](#). His writing on the crash of 3407 is by far the best I've come across. In a post filed early Saturday morning, O'Brien cites NASA research showing that extension of an airplane's flaps can trigger sudden loss of control if the horizontal stabilizer (tail) is coated with ice. The NTSB has said the airplane went down shortly after the flaps were deployed.

-Colgan Air operates fifteen Q400's bearing the Continental logo on the tail. Just last week, Continental announced that it expanded its agreement with Colgan by adding 15 more of the 74-seat twin turboprops starting in 2010. Continental has cited the plane's ability to use Newark's shorter "crosswind" runway as a key benefit. Since flights using the Q400 don't join the long conga line waiting for takeoff on the long, primary departure runway, its usage allows for greater capacity at a busy airport without further adding to the delays for takeoff.

2-15-09 0200

The undefeated, consensus number one women's college hoops team came to Queens this week. U-Conn brought a 23-0 won/loss record and a 32.7-point average margin of victory this season into Carnesecca Arena. It was a wonderful opportunity to see one of the most dominant college sports teams of the last two decades.

What knocked my socks off more than anything about U-Conn was the full spectrum of basketball skills on display from their best player Maya Moore (pictured above). Just a sophomore, Moore may be the finest all-around college player in the women's game. She plays a ferocious defense. She blocks shots. Double-doubles are near-automatic for her. And she runs up and down the court harder than anybody else. Against St. John's she had 20 points, 11 boards, four blocks and two steals in 39 minutes. They're not gaudy numbers, but her dominance can't really be quantified by stats. It's just clear she's a very

special talent.

If the WNBA can remain financially solvent for a few more years and Moore can stay healthy, she's probably a number one overall pick and will put lots of people in the seats. It doesn't hurt that she has an electric smile and a 3.74 GPA. She's said to be in the running for college basketball's player of the year award this year.

Moore wears number 23. She may not have the moves of the guy who made that jersey number famous, but she certainly does the number proud. Her father is Mike Dabney, a talented guard for the Rutgers hoops team in the mid-70's.

My knowledge of women's collegiate basketball is very limited. I don't really start paying attention to the sport until the women's version of March Madness – and I all but ignore the WNBA. Jackie Stiles was the last women's player that had me going out of my way to watch. But I tell ya: Moore is incredibly fun to watch and if you get a chance to catch a U-Conn game on the tube, check her out.

U-Conn won the game 77-64 and never was able to really bury St. John's. After the game, U-Conn coach Geno Auriemma (pictured above) told reporters he was glad to have a game in which his team was tested. It's been nothing but blowouts for most of the season. A couple of weeks ago, his team beat Syracuse by 54. Earlier in the season, the Lady Huskies beat Washington by 58 and Holy Cross by 59. That's how good they are.

U-Conn's women haven't lost to St. John's since 1993. Auriemma is 681-122 over 24 seasons at U-Conn.

Admission to the game was 12 bucks. It is three times that amount to get into a men's game. The ushers working the women's game allowed you sit wherever you wanted except for three rows that were taped off behind the U-Conn bench. Attendance was announced at 2189. I would guess at least a third of the crowd consisted of girls from the area under the age of sixteen who cheered wildly for U-Conn. It appeared several hundred at least made the trip from Storrs, CT and the vicinity.

-How windy was it in Queens Thursday? It was so windy, the big metal street corner waste baskets were blowing over with their contents flying all over the place.

-I'm not sure I've ever seen a Letterman interview that made me laugh as hard as the one that aired Wednesday night. Who knows if Joaquin Phoenix is pulling an act – or if he's on a long, strange trip – but Letterman was as good as I've even seen him. It was pretty amazing television and the video is up all over the place if you haven't seen it.

-Francesca asked Yankees GM Brian Cashman Thursday if the team would have agreed to a 10-year, \$275 million dollar deal with A-Rod prior to the '08 season if it knew then what it knows now. Cashman didn't answer the question directly but his response was telling. "A lot of people can infer and take the obvious leap of faith of directions that (the negotiations) would have taken," said Cashman. The GM seemed to suggest A-Rod would not be on the Yankees if the steroid revelations had been known prior to

November 2007. As Cashman discussed the “what-if” with Francesa, he realized he was saying more than perhaps he should. He caught himself and acknowledged the headlines his statement would create if he answered the question clearly. “It would certainly play loud if I answered it.”

-I told my Dad when the A-Rod/steroids story broke that a full apology and detailed acknowledgement of his usage would go a long way in restoring A-Rod’s place in the game. The nonsense he ended up feeding Gammons early this week screwed up his best chance at redemption and I think he faces a rough ride from baseball fans in this city going forward. The treatment he got when he struck out with the bases loaded on a Friday night in August is nothing like the wrath he’ll get now at the new Stadium. Bottom line: the Yanks thought they were getting a clean pursuit of Ruth and now they’re stuck with a younger, more polite version of Bonds. There’s no way A-Rod works the full length of his current contract in a Yankee uniform. No way.

2-12-09 1805

After a long period of civility since their radio show broke up last August, things have suddenly turned nasty between Chris Russo and Mike Francesa. It all started early Wednesday morning when Russo went on Howard Stern’s program and got pulled by Stern into several discussion topics aimed at smearing Francesa. Russo initially resisted Stern’s effort to stir things up, but then went along when the subject turned to the Super Bowl.

Stern mocked Francesa’s decision not to join the rest of the nation’s sports radio hosts at the Tampa Convention Center the week before this year’s Steelers/Cardinals clash. Known as “radio row,” dozens of radio outlets set up booths each year the week before the Super Bowl at a league-specified location. Major sports figures descend on radio row and make themselves available for interviews. Russo was on radio row the week before the Super Bowl this year doing his program that airs on Sirius-XM. Francesa, meantime was doing his show that week in the lobby of a Hyatt hotel eight blocks away. Said Stern to Russo: “Your ex-partner thinks he such a fucking big deal that he’s gonna stay in a hotel eight blocks away and people are gonna come to him like he’s Jesus.”

Rather than saying Francesa’s location during Super Bowl week was irrelevant to him, Russo gloated that Francesa’s decision backfired: “I had 56 guests that week. Mike had 26 guests that week.”

With more prodding from Stern, Russo also seemed to take pleasure in the fact that he interviewed Francesa pal Bill Parcells – and Francesa did not.

<http://www.divshare.com/download/6533400-5cb>

At one point, as is Stern’s custom, the shock jock asked Russo if he had ever wanted to have sex with Francesa’s wife. Russo made it clear he wanted no part of that kind of talk but Stern asked it three different ways and the damage was done. It was incredibly disrespectful to Francesa – and Russo’s refusal to fully repudiate the Stern nonsense was disappointing.

Given the high-profile nature of the Stern show, it didn't take long for word to reach Mike about his ex-partner's guest spot. Francesa was clearly agitated about the Russo/Stern segment when it was brought up by a caller to his program a little after 2 PM Wednesday. Francesa said he had been flooded with calls from both the media and fans seeking his reaction. He said he would address the issue in "due time" and later said he would discuss it "before six." At about five minutes after six, Francesa gave his reply. He said he has never liked working on Super Bowl's radio row and could care less how many guests he may have lost by taking his show to the Hyatt. Francesa said he hadn't talked to Parcels in six months – and wasn't bothered that Russo landed the Tuna as a guest.

Francesa also said that Russo's suggestion on the Stern show that WFAN's ratings had sagged since the Dog left is ridiculous. In fact, Mike said his program's position had improved in the most recent measurement period minus Russo versus the same period the year before with him.

<http://www.divshare.com/download/6535434-edc>

Francesa said the discussion about his wife wasn't worthy of comment.

In the end, Francesa may have the last laugh. If Sirius-XM files Chapter 11 as has been suggested, the reorganization process could lead to the nullification of either or both of the bloated Russo and Stern contracts.

Whatever the case, Russo ought to know that going on Stern's show invites a whole bunch of potential problems – and there's little to be gained by joining the self-proclaimed "King of All Media."

2-11-09 2155

If Tuesday's 381-point Dow free-fall wasn't enough of a statement, many of those who watch and cover Wall Street gave a big thumbs-down to the much-awaited wheel-out of Tim Geithner's plan to power-scrub troubled assets from a system loaded with banks on the brink of failure. On CNBC, investment banker Robert Albertson said Geithner's big speech demonstrated a failure to understand capital markets. Albertson says Geithner simply re-stated the previously known goal of unfreezing the credit markets rather than offering a specific plan to remove toxic assets from the books of banks. He says the financial world is desperate for a signal or information that indicates Geithner understands how to proceed.

Money manager Mike Crofton – also on CNBC – said Geithner's speech was long on rhetoric and short on specifics. "It had no hope and showed no change."

I don't know. I watched the President's prime time news conference Monday. The way he plugged Geithner's forthcoming announcement boosted expectations. At least a couple of times, Obama said something has to be done right now. We can't wait. Yet, you watch Geithner and he's talking about seeking input as he moves forward. Where's the right now?

After watching the speech, Paul Krugman told the Wall Street Journal that Geithner completed his announcement without saying what the plan is. "So, what is the plan? I really don't know," said Krugman who was inclined to give the new guy the benefit of the doubt. "Maybe, maybe, it's a Trojan horse that smuggles the right policy into place."

When the clock hit 4 PM Tuesday, traders on the NYSE could be heard cheering as if they were thankful the session was over. That cheer turned to genuine enthusiasm when several Sports Illustrated swimsuit models rang the closing bell.

2-10-09 1815

Geese or gulls?

Was it a flock of Canadian Geese or a swarm of seagulls that shut down both engines shortly after US Airways flight 1549 departed LaGuardia on 1-15-09?

It's a question that has yet to be officially answered - and it was the most glaring omission from Katie Couric's exclusive first and otherwise fascinating 60 Minutes interview with Miracle on the Hudson pilot Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger and the rest of his crew. The Couric piece aired Sunday night.

Katie probed Sully on the details of the bird strike but she never asked him what kind of birds they were. Captain Sullenberger at one point said "large birds" filled his line of vision after takeoff and he said when the airplane struck them it felt like the plane was being "pelted by heavy rain or hail." Given a wide opening to ask the obvious, Katie failed to ask the question about bird type.

Several news outlets including the Associated Press and Newsday have written presumptively that the birds were geese. There has been no government, airline or eyewitness source to step forward and confirm that the birds were geese.

When I first heard it was Katie that landed the initial sit-down interview with Sullenberger, I feared she may blow it. I would have preferred Scott Pelley in this spot, but after you watch this piece you realize that anybody could have done it. Just roll the tape and let Sully tell the story. The guy needs just minimal prodding and quizzing to recount an episode that blows your mind ten different ways.

Among the details I hadn't heard before that emerged from the interview:

- Sully grabbed the airplane's maintenance log book just before he exited the half-submerged aircraft.

- When he called home to tell his family he was ok shortly after the incident, his wife twice chose not to take the call while she spoke on the other line. On Sully's third try, his wife picked up.

- At a CBS-staged event a few days before the 60 Minutes piece aired, the entire Miracle on the Hudson flight crew reunited with several passengers and their families in Charlotte. One guy wore a t-shirt that said: "Sully is my Co-Pilot" and he had Sullenberger sign it.

Despite saying he intends to get back into the captain's seat, I kinda got the feeling from the interview that Sullenberger has flown his last commercial flight. His acknowledgment of sleepless nights and his initial reluctance to feel good about the steps he took when both engines shut down – make him a good candidate for retirement.

Make the book deal. Hit the speaker's circuit. Continue as a consultant for the aviation industry. Sully is clearly a star if he wants to be. At the end of the interview, he seemed to acknowledge why his story is so important. "Something about this episode has captured people's imagination. I think they want good news. I think they want to feel hopeful again. If I can help in that way, I will."

-If and when the complete list of 104 baseball players said to have tested positive for banned substances in 2003 ever comes out, Mike Francesa says he is confident there are two Yankee greats who are definitely not on it. He singles out both Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera. Said Francesa on his show Monday: "I would bet a lot of money that neither one of those two names is on the list. I'm positive. I would bet serious money and I would take anybody's bet on those two names." The list of players was never supposed to see the light of day, because it was compiled as part of a trial program to determine how prevalent the juice had become in the game at that point. It seems possible that the same sources who leaked A-Rod's name to Selena Roberts may be sitting on the balance of the list.

2-9-09 2100

On this day one-hundred years ago, my grandfather (referred to in my family as "Grandpa") was born on a farm three miles outside the town of St. Henry, Ohio. His parents - Veronica and Henry - named him Clarence Bernard. He was the fifth of six children. His birth date is February 9, 1909. All of his brothers and sisters are dead now. He has outlived his wife, a daughter and a grand-daughter. Clarence (pictured above) is still kicking pretty good. On Saturday, the family had a big day-long party to celebrate the milestone birthday. 42 of the 44 members of the extended family were on hand. Only a son-in-law recovering from surgery - and a young great-grandkid on the west coast who struggles with long plane rides failed to make it.

My grandpa wasn't crazy about being the focal point of attention - or the recipient of adulation - but he clearly loved having his very large extended family together in one spot. It hardly happens any more. My family (on my Mom's side) has spread out to both coasts with a cluster staying put in Chicago and so it's rare that the whole bunch gets together.

Just recently, my grandpa elected to start using a motorized scooter to assist most of his movement. He attends Sunday mass. He has a daily subscription to the Chicago Tribune. He loves crepes and typically picks up the tab when someone takes him to the Egg Harbor Café in Elmhurst. He doesn't drive but it was only about a year ago that he quit and gave up his vehicle. When he passes by other residents in the hallways of the assisted-living facility he calls home, he bellows out a personalized greeting with enthusiasm. He has plenty of aches and pains - and they're probably worse than he lets on - but jeez - a hundred years?

A little more than two years ago, Clarence lost his wife at the age of 98. They had been married 72 years. It seemed possible that when my Grandma passed, it would have snuffed out my Grandpa's will to live. His grief is deep and plain to see. Losing his life-long partner crushed him but he's built in a way that doesn't really allow for surrender.

When I told people in recent weeks that my Grandpa was about to turn 100, the question everybody asked me was "how did he do it?"

I asked him that question over the weekend, and he just chuckled and said he wasn't sure how or where he got his longevity.

His vices during the adult prime of his life were limited to a before-dinner stiff one and these stinky thin cigars with plastic filters on the end. He ate plenty of meat when times were good and his diet included plenty of my grandma's homemade pie.

When he retired from his job at the US Postal Service and became a permanent resident of Fon du Lac, Wisconsin, he took daily bicycle rides over hilly terrain. But you can't really say he was a fitness buff.

I guess I'd attribute his longevity to a philosophy of moderation - and an internal mechanism that processed life's ups and downs with a calm consistency. Who knows?

Happy Birthday Grandpa. I won't say "and many more." It's probably best at this point to simply wish you comfort and peace. It's great to see you stick around so long - and it was great to see that smile on your face after you blew out the candles Saturday night. Congratulations.

2-9-09 0005

Greetings from the official hotel of my grandfather's 100th birthday celebration. It's a Courtyard By Marriott. I'm staying in my parents' room. It's a bleak and somewhat isolated setting for a lodging spot - but it's conveniently located near both the assisted-living facility that houses the birthday boy - and it's close to O'Hare Airport which is good for the flock of out-of-town visitors who jetted in for the weekend. I have a big family on my Mom's side of the family tree. It is my Mom's father that is hitting the hard to attain birthday milestone and it's expected that there will be near one-hundred percent attendance for this celebration. In all, 40 plus are expected. The only notable absence will be a favorite uncle who is marooned in California under doctor's order as he battles a health concern.

Last night, I convinced my Dad and brother Tim to make the trip out to Arlington Heights, IL to see St. Viator's ten-point victory over Palatine in a non-conference high school basketball clash. It was public vs. parochial. When I was in high school twenty-five years ago, St. Viator (and most of the Catholic schools for that matter) couldn't compete athletically with the big suburban public schools. Viator was transitioning from all boys to boys/girls at the time and that change seems to have paid off for the school's athletic programs. The school has added state titles in soccer on both the boy's and girl's side and appears to compete now on an even playing field with the public schools. That was certainly the case against

Palatine.

Unthinkable twenty-five years ago, St. Viator handled Palatine easily to push its record to 13-7. Palatine is 3-17. With that kind of record, you'd think Palatine is a hapless bunch but that isn't the case. The young rotation (including hard-charging junior Nat Pearson - pictured above) went ten or eleven deep, played hard and were a pleasure to watch. Palatine is coached by Eric Millstone who replaced the legendary Ed Molitor after a 32-year run as the coach. Eric Millstone is the son of Doug Millstone who for a decade coached the boy's basketball team at my alma mater - Buffalo Grove High School. To replace a well-respected veteran coach will be tough for the young Millstone, but you can tell just by watching the way his team plays that he's gonna have success. His kids locked in on him every huddle, and he has a real gentle, intense approach as he interacts with everyone from his players to his assistants to the refs.

The most impressive player on the floor in this game was the six-foot St. Viator junior point guard Alan Aboona (pictured above - #12). The playmaker leads his team's Catholic school conference in scoring. He's as good a passer as he is a scorer. He's also a star on the school's soccer team.

2-6-09 1625

High-quality high school basketball has been played in these parts forever. An emphasis on strong defense, occasional and stifling full-court press, and active/multiple screen sets on offense has never seemed to leave the game they play here.

The game I attended Tuesday night with my Dad just a half-mile from his Huntley home was Illinois high school basketball as I remember it growing up - and as it should stay forever. It beats most of the basketball being played at higher levels and in other parts of the country including the public schools in New York City.

Prairie Ridge and Huntley battled right to the wire in a Fox Valley Conference showdown in front of about 600 fans on a frigid night. In the end, it was the visitors from Prairie Ridge that eked out a thrilling a 44-43 victory.

Prairie Ridge wore black jerseys that simply said "Ridge" on the front in an Old English font.

Far and away the most talented athlete on the floor was Huntley's Jordan Neukirch (pictured above - #15) who scored 18 points from inside and out. Built like a big fire hydrant, Neukirch has a three-point shooting touch from the corner and can muscle to the hoop with some good-looking moves. When Huntley called timeout with 10 seconds left in the game down one, Neukirch was designated to take the game's final shot. He never got the opportunity. When Huntley in-bounded the ball, Prairie Ridge defenders clogged things up pretty good and the outlet man was forced to dish to Huntley's Zac Boster as the clock was about to hit zero. Boster had to rush up a long trey. It was on target but clanked off back rim. After the game, Neukirch sat on the bench, hung his head and stayed there for a while as the rest of his teammates walked to the locker room. As a fan sitting there, you felt for him because he probably

would have made the winning hoop if he got his hands on the ball.

I told my Dad when the game started that it was pretty clear that Neukirch was a football player. A subsequent internet search shows that not only does he play football, he's one of the best players in the state. Neukirch is a dominant two-way player. He had 1730 yards rushing, 24 touchdowns and led the school's defense from the middle linebacker spot this past fall. Prior to his senior season, Neukirch's parents enrolled him at a nearby private high school with a powerhouse football program. Neukirch's father acknowledged it was an unapologetic effort to get his son in a program that would better expose him to division one college football recruiters. It turns out Neukirch and his parents changed their minds. He stayed at Huntley for his final year, led the football team to a rare playoff appearance (including a post-season win) and he will leave as one of the greatest football players in the school's history.

This morning, Neukirch signed a letter of intent to play football at Illinois State University.

Prairie Ridge head coach Corky Card (pictured above) had an interesting way of communicating to his players on the floor when the clock was running. Rather than calling out a number or a phrase, Card would raise laminated, color-coded cards and his players would glance in his direction. It wasn't clear to me what the cards signified - whether it was a specific offensive play - or a more general theme or set. At halftime, one of the student managers on the Prairie Ridge bench handed Card a laptop that appeared to show shot selection and from where one or both teams were making field goals. Card walked to the locker room with the laptop in both hands. He examined the screen as he walked.

Prairie Ridge senior Bryan Bradshaw (pictured above - #33 with the ball) scored the game's key hoop with a couple minutes to play. His nifty move and drive split defenders and the basket gave his team a 42-37 lead. Huntley would score the next six to take the lead back with 30 seconds to play but a shooting foul put Ridge's Chad Ljunggren on the line for two. You could totally tell this kid was gonna knock both free throws down. He had a confident smirk on his face and stuck his hands out for the ball urging the ref to let him just take the shots already. After swishing the first one, Huntley called timeout to ice Ljunggren but after he came out of the huddle he just smiled and fired without any hint of nervousness and gave his team a one-point lead that would stand as the final outcome.

Admission for the game was four dollars.

-One of the guys I listened to on the radio here in Chicago in my teens and twenties passed away Tuesday at the age of 62. Eddie Schwartz worked the overnight shift and did a type of free-form program that you don't really hear much on either terrestrial or satellite radio these days. I first became aware of Schwartz when the popular radio personality Steve Dahl would mock him mercilessly because of his weight (even though Dahl himself was a fat-ass) and the high-pitched tone of his voice. Dahl also targeted Schwartz because of the simple and non-structured flow of his graveyard shift show which on some nights lacked much in the way of a theme. But once I started listening to Schwartz - first on WGN-AM - and then on WLUP-FM - I couldn't get enough. Open phone lines in the middle of the night on a radio station with a far reach invite a bizarre mix of listeners. Schwartz would bring out the best, worst and most unusual of his audience whenever he went to the phones. If a fire or a crime of significance was going down in the

city in the middle of the night, he'd often get a phone call from Chicago Fire or Chicago Police on the scene for a recap. Schwartz had been pretty sick and had been off the air for a decade. He died at a nursing home in Waukegan.

2-4-09 1659

Greetings from Cleveland where I have an extended sit before catching a connecting flight to Shy-town. I'm on vacation for the next ten days and will spend a good portion of it in Chicago for festivities connected to the 100th birthday of my grandfather. The actual birthday is next Monday, but the celebration will happen this weekend in the burbs just a few miles south of O'Hare. I'll stay with my folks for a few days in Huntley, IL before we set up shop in the designated birthday party hotel near the assisted-living facility that houses my grandpa. I caught the 0959 departure to Cleveland out of LaGuardia Tuesday morning. A light snow was falling so airline workers applied de-icing fluid before we pushed from the gate. There were fewer than 25 passengers on a 737-500 with a capacity of 114. The airport here in Cleveland is like a ghost town. Airport workers outnumber passengers on large stretches of the concourse. Tuesday is traditionally a slow travel day, but clearly there are fewer people taking to the skies these days.

My Dad and I hit the Huntley High School hoops game tonight. A report on that tomorrow.

One story from the stack of papers I got before leaving town made me smile. It's a nicely done obituary on the passing of Union Square's Vegetable Peeler Man. If you've been to Union Square, it's likely you've had the pleasure of catching his act. Check out [the obit](#).

2-3-09 1355

Francesca interviews Joe Torre at 4 PM Tuesday to talk about the much-discussed book the ex-Yanks skipper collaborated on with SI's Tom Verducci. "The Yankees Years" hits bookstores today. For Torre, the telephone chat with Francesca will be the second interview since excerpts of the book were released last week. Torre did the Larry King show Friday night. Francesca said Monday that King didn't read the book and failed to question Torre legitimately - suggesting that Torre will face his first tough round of questions about the book when he appears on WFAN Tuesday. Francesca said King was "lost" and said his Friday night program was "hideous" and a "clown act." The consensus of the New York media to date says Joe betrayed trust by breaking the seal of silence that generally protects the baseball clubhouse. I haven't read the book yet, but I've seen enough of the stuff that's come out to say I'm surprised Joe would participate in a project that discredits players once under his command no matter how much those players may deserve it. It's such a departure from the way Torre conducted himself as the Yankees skipper. Credit Joe for not running away from any of the controversial quotes or anecdotes. Torre has not attempted to shift any responsibility for the book's content to Verducci even though it is Verdooch that is the book's narrator (Torre is referred to in the third person).

-I usually feel indifferent about the graffiti which covers portions of residential buildings, commercial space or vehicles in this city. Lawful or not, some of it actually enhances the urban landscape. But there

are certain objects that should be completely off-limits to the spray-painter. If you've ever been to the underground arcade at Bethesda Terrace in the middle of Central Park, you'll know that it's definitely one of those places. Over the weekend, the arcade was badly defaced with black, red and purple spray paint. Much of the graffiti included the letter/numeral combination "3D." The phrase "U Not Ready" also appeared. Four young people were busted for vandalism. If they haven't received it already, their punishment should include a lengthy lecture about how offensive their actions are to a lot of people who cherish the many special places inside Central Park. To deface that ornate arcade is comparable to tipping a gravestone or throwing a rock through the window of a place of worship. I became aware of the story by seeing the Monday evening report of Channel 7's Steve Fleischer.

2-3-09 0133

Well, what can you say? That was a riveting fourth quarter of Super Bowl football. Steelers Fan Mike was at the game in Tampa and spoke to TSR early Monday morning. Just click on the black arrow on the left side of the audio icon below to hear his recap. It runs 14 minutes, 34 seconds.

I have yet to see a replay that truly convinces me that Santonio Holmes got his right foot down on the game winning touchdown, but conversely there was no angle which allowed the on-field call to be overturned. It appeared to me the right foot rested on his left one as he gained possession. But jeez, everybody including Ken Whisenhunt seems ok with the call – and the non-reversal – so what the heck.

Holmes is deserving of the game MVP award – no doubt – but James Harrison's pick was the play of the game.

When Al Michaels said there was a flag on the Harrison TD right before halftime, I thought Steelers corner Deshea Townsend would be cited as the culprit and the score would be nullified. Townsend's right hand locked onto Kurt Warner's shoulder pad as the Cards QB tried to tackle Harrison at about mid-field. Turns out Arizona was flagged for a facemask leaving only a video review to confirm that Harrison got in for the huge game-changing TD. Where were the Cardinals skill players on the Harrison tackle? Harrison was chugging down the field like he was carrying a big sack of bricks and all somebody has to do is prevent him from getting to the house.

-It seemed like bad strategy for Arizona to defer after winning the coin toss. Only the stoutest of the stout team defenses should be deferring. Take the ball. Set the tone with your team strength.

-Also somewhat questionable at the time of the play was the decision to punt rather than let Neil Rackers try the 53-yarder down six with three and a half to go. As it turned out, the punt was a good one and the holding call on Hartwig led to the safety. When Fitzgerald scored on the ensuing Arizona possession, it looked pretty good for the Cardinals even though there was still a fat two and a half minutes on the clock.

-Jets special teams coach Mike Westhoff told Francesa last week that Cardinals punter Ben Graham didn't deserve to be punting in a Super Bowl. Westhoff would know. He coached Graham during the Aussie's four-year stint with the Jets that ended when the team cut him last fall. Graham had a brutal 27-yard dead duck of a punt to start the fourth quarter in the Super Bowl. He redeemed himself late in the game with

that great pooch job that landed just shy of the goal line. Both Graham and Steelers punter Mitch Berger are barely-surviving members of the bottom fringe of the punting profession.

-The live Matt Lauer interview of President Obama during the pre-game show was painful to watch. The one-on-one from the White House Map Room included about a 25-second audio dropout and Lauer's awkward insistence that he know who was cleared to send e-mail to Obama's Blackberry.

-Costas spoke with Roger Goodell on the pre-game show and the notable comment from the commish came when Costas asked him about a play late in the Ravens/Titans playoff game. Flacco and the Ravens offense got away with a clear delay-of-game situation and under the rules there was no replay review. Goodell told Costas he supports the use of video replay to assist officials when there's a dispute involving the clock.

-Springsteen sounded way off key on Born to Run. Working on a Dream got clipped in a bad way. Tenth Avenue Freeze Out sounded pretty good. Glory Days was great in large part due to Little Steve's comedy routine with the Boss about going overtime. I don't know. I think when the Boss sits down and looks at a tape of this performance, he may wonder if it was worth the promotional boost it gave the new record and forthcoming tour. The gig worked for Petty last year, but it didn't feel right this time around. I mean, I think Bruce really tried to make it work – but he's only natural when he's playing for three hours at a crack.

2-2-09 0259

Times reporter Monica Davey bested the Chicago papers with her up-close coverage of Rod Blagojevich on the day he was removed from office. Unaware to the end that full access does not necessarily guarantee a sympathetic portrayal, Blagojevich allowed Davey and photographer Amanda Rivkin to join him on the state's nine-seat airplane as it took him from Chicago to Springfield and back on the final day of his impeachment trial. Among the more incredible anecdotes in Davey's story was the re-telling of an incident on the return flight after Blagojevich made a rambling plea in the state senate in a futile attempt to stave off his ouster. Davey says the airplane's on-board telephone rang. She said Blagojevich ordered staffers not to answer the call in case it was official news that he had been stripped of power. Davey said Blagojevich feared his state-paid airplane ride home may not reach its final destination if it was communicated to him that the senate had acted and he no longer was governor. After ignoring the phone call, Davey said Blago cracked wise: "I tell you what. I'm not jumping out. Not for those people, no way. I don't like heights."

Davey also described how Blagojevich exited the Capitol after making his final plea to the state senate. "He left the Capitol in Springfield through a secret basement corridor full of grunting, clanking pipes, bare walls and puddles."

Davey was careful to point out in her front page story on Friday that the Times paid "expenses" associated with the day's travel. Davey didn't specify what she meant by "expenses," but presumably the newspaper paid the state of Illinois something equivalent to what a round trip flight between Chicago and Springfield would cost.

A day later, Times reporter Malcolm Gay included excellent information about Blagojevich's inclination to stay away from Springfield during his tenure as governor. Springfield is the city that includes both the governor's mansion and state capitol – two places that Blagojevich didn't bother visiting much. Gray went to the woman who oversees public tours of the state capitol and asked her about the ousted ex-governor. Said Jenny Glisson: "I never saw him (Blagojevich) one day after he was elected; I have not seen him in six years. All the other governors used to leave their doors open so tour groups could look inside. This governor had the doors shut."

-Since the vote to convict Blagojevich on an article of impeachment was unanimous in the state senate, Illinois House member Milton Patterson has the distinction of being the only state legislator to cast a vote against kicking Blago out of office. On January 9th, the House voted 114-1 in favor of impeachment. Patterson defended his no vote by saying he went by his "own gut feeling." Patterson represents the Englewood neighborhood on Chicago's south side. He is licensed as both an electrician and real estate broker.

-Without fanfare, the MTA has added overnight frequency to the Q33 bus route linking the busy Jackson Heights, Queens transit hub with LaGuardia Airport. The new service supplements the existing schedule and guarantees a bus in both directions every half hour during graveyard hours. Previously, the Q33 made just hourly runs between the hours of 3 and 5 AM. TSR often rides the 4 AM Q33 bus to LaGuardia and it is always packed to capacity. The addition of a 3:30 AM departure out of Jackson Heights will likely relieve the crowding problem at 4 AM. Whoever at the MTA made this decision – and implemented it – should be commended for being responsive to a clear demand for service at an odd hour. It should also be mentioned that the gentleman who operates the 4 AM bus on most days (sorry – I don't know his name) is on time – all the time - without fail.

-In a Q and A with the Post's Justin Terranova, the great and versatile play-by-play man Ian Eagle confirmed that he was offered and declined the opportunity to work opposite Mike Francesa on WFAN. Eagle called the idea of filling the chair left vacant by Chris Russo "enticing." He said that if he weren't so wrapped up with his various play-by-play responsibilities, he "would've done anything for that spot." No doubt Eagle would be the perfect guy to complement Francesa on a five and a half hour, five-days-a-week radio show. The Bird-Man is funny, smart about the local sports scene and seems to have the respect of Francesa. This is just a guess, but if Eagle's combined paychecks don't currently exceed what he'd get paid for doing Mike's show, he probably believes (and justifiably so) that his career trajectory will take him to a place far better than being Francesa's sidekick.

2-1-09 0100

I took the 7 over to Shea Stadium Thursday to get a look at the demolition. The home opener is two and a half months out and there is still plenty of work to be done to convert the Shea site into a parking lot.

On a cold and sunny January afternoon, dozens of workers could be seen amongst the rubble and what's left of the structure.

Since the city prohibits implosion, the steel and concrete that held the place together for more than forty

years is being twisted and torn away a little at a time. A half-dozen excavators fed debris into dump trucks.

The Mets say demolition will be complete within a month.

Several people were gathered at the west end of the Manhattan-bound side of the Willets Point subway platform when I came by Thursday a little after 2 PM. They were there to watch the workers. Some took pictures. One guy just stood motionless and stared at what's left of Shea. Three or four trains went by while I was there and none of the regular folks on demolition watch stepped onto the train.

-The Mets say sales of the various multi-game ticket plans has produced the full season equivalent of 25-thousand tickets sold. The Mets are characterizing this as "better" than this same time last year – but I believe it kills the commonly held theory that Citi Field would be a total sellout the entire season. Single-game sales start in early March – and yeah – plenty of games will be sold out. But I think the number cited by the Mets seems to guarantee there will be plenty of weeknight games in April, May and September that will be easily accessible to the average fan.

-Action on the Arizona Cardinals has all but pushed the Super Bowl line to 6.5 with bettors playing Zona now being forced to pay an extra five to ten percent juice to lock in at the full seven. We'll say 30-10 Steelers with Santonio Holmes hoisting the MVP. Don't forget to check here Monday morning for a Super Bowl on-the-spot audio recap from Steelers Fan Mike.

Of all the prop bets listed below (and available at all the major books), I think I like the over on Berger the best. I also think the over on Santonio is a lock.

Total rushing yards for the Cards over/under 72.5
Total rushing yards for the Steelers over/under 115.5
Total first downs for the Cards over/under 17.5
Total first downs for the Steelers over/under 19.5
Total net yards by both teams over/under 666.5
Big Ben total passing yards over/under 230.5
Big Ben total completions over/under 17.5
Willie Parker total rushing yards over/under 80.5
Hines Ward total receiving yards over/under 65.5
Santonio Holmes total receiving yards over/under 58.5
Mitch Berger shortest punt over/under 31.5 yards
Kurt Warner total passing yards over/under 255.5
Larry Fitzgerald total receiving yards over/under 95.5
1-29-09 1735

Here he comes, Chicago. Before Aaron Heilman (pictured above) could even develop a taste for the coffee in Seattle, he was traded Wednesday to the Cubbies.

After eight years in the Mets organization, Heilman was shipped to the Mariners six weeks ago in the JJ Putz blockbuster. Heilman avoided arbitration and signed a one-year deal worth \$1.625 million. Wearing a Mariners pullover, Heilman introduced himself to a gathering of fans in Seattle last weekend. He had been told by management that he'd vie for a spot in the Mariners rotation – but then without any warning, he was traded having never thrown a pitch for Seattle.

In exchange for Heilman, the Mariners got Ronny Cedeno and Garrett Olson from the Cubs. Cub fan message boards seem to indicate opposition to the deal with many posters believing Olson has more long-term upside than Heilman. Cubs GM Jim Hendry reportedly had long coveted Heilman which would suggest the Notre Dame grad will stay put, rather than be used again as a trading chip.

What uniform number will TSR's favorite ex-Met wear in Chicago? Lefty reliever Neal Cotts currently wears #48, the number Heilman wore here in New York. Carlos Marmol wears #49. Perhaps #47?

I was hoping Heilman would get a full season in Seattle to see whether he could make the transition back to a starting role without the pressure cooker environment. But I'm guessing Heilman is happy to be back home. He lives in the Chicago burbs.

-After watching the under-card of the professional mixed martial arts event held in Anaheim, CA last Friday, I really hope New York maintains its ban on the sport. There's been much talk that New York lawmakers are prepared to approve legislation that would allow the brutal fights to be sanctioned and held at Madison Square Garden and other venues in New York. The parent company of the leading MMA organization has started pouring money into their New York lobbying efforts. According to campaign financial disclosure data available on the New York State Board of Elections web site, Zuffa LLC (which runs the Ultimate Fighting Championship) gave \$25-thousand to the New York State Democratic Committee on January 18, 2008. The company additionally cut \$10-thousand checks to the New York State Senate Republican Campaign Committee in June and September of last year. There's a time lag on 2009 contribution information, but you'd assume the money spigot is still on. The woman who chairs the NY state athletic commission has already said she supports MMA, so it's only the state legislature that stands in the way now. But we would agree with those who characterize MMA events as "human cockfighting." Let these fights be held elsewhere (including in New Jersey where a big event was staged last year – headlined by the big lug Kimbo Slice). New York is a boxing town. To allow MMA events at the Garden would be to cheapen the legacies of the legitimate sports and events that have made history there.

-A friend who works at one of the big Chicago ad agencies called Wednesday to say she had been laid off. She described how her employer informed her and it sounded cold and hard. With no mention of a possible recall – and advisement of an abrupt end to her medical coverage at week's end - she was told she had an hour to vacate the premises of her workplace.

1-28-09 2145

When you walk around this city and consider that it has only just begun to absorb an economic drubbing

not seen since the 70's, you wonder what things will look like a year from now. Or three years from now.

Since every extreme human condition imaginable exists and is on display even in good times, one might say the bad times may not look much different. But I think astute observers are bound to see things that show a decline in the overall health of the city.

Crime stats aren't changing much yet – although bank robberies were up 57-percent in 2008. The mayor says a planned six-percent cut in the city's upcoming budget will likely bring layoffs of cops, firefighters and teachers. Wall Street is hacking jobs by the thousands. I was walking up Third Avenue with my Dad the week before Christmas and couldn't believe the amount of businesses that were either empty – closed – or touting quick liquidation sales.

To pay for a roof over one's head even here in Queens is crazy expensive, so job losses would seem to guarantee a quick corresponding displacement of a portion of those people from their dwellings. Because the cost of living is so high, there are plenty of folks without the kind of cushion necessary to ride out a boot from the job.

I don't really understand enough about the homeless problem to know whether the depressed economy is pushing people into the streets. I know when it has gotten really cold the last month you can see folks establishing position and seeking comfort in warm, public places like the airport or in subway stations.

I can do the math in my head and know it wouldn't take long for people without a nest egg and/or some kind of friend/family support of last resort to end up in a bad spot if the job went away.

1-27-09 2200

Several violent incidents at and near public high school hoops games in Chicago this winter have prompted the outrageous implementation of a ban on fans. That's right. The games will go on, but there will be severe limits on who can go to the games.

Calvin Davis oversees athletics at Chicago's public schools and announced last week he was imposing the following plan (effective 1-26-09) to eliminate the spate of skirmishes connected with the Public League basketball schedule.

- A mandatory 4 PM tip-off for all varsity games – boys and girls

- No fans associated with the visiting team are allowed to attend games unless they are pre-approved by the home team's principal

- Certain games deemed to be of special concern will be closed to all fans

No word on how long the fan ban will stay in effect. It's similar to one imposed here in New York City which effectively bars the regular fan from attending the city's public high school championship games at

Madison Square Garden.

In both of these situations, no level of violence should result in prohibitions or limits on attendance. High school athletic events are meant to be played before fans. If some thug with a gun or goofball intent on starting a brawl interferes with a high school sporting event, the perpetrator should be held accountable.

To exclude fans is to punish the high school athlete. Advocates for kids must fight hard for the preservation of the high school athletic experience and reject short-sighted or desperate responses to people stirring shit up at a hoops game.

There has always been – and always will be – the prospect of a “rumble” when the fans for two competing teams gather for a competition. The only difference these days is the proliferation of the gun. Deal with the gun. Deal with the thug. But don’t change the way we play our games – or who can watch them.

-He wasn’t there to accept an award, but my favorite ex-Met Aaron Heilman took out a quarter-page ad in the program handed out at the annual gathering of baseball writers in New York Sunday night. The New York chapter of the Baseball Writers’ Association of America held its 86th annual awards dinner and those who saw the Heilman ad were struck by its thoughtfulness. According to a friend at the event, the Heilman ad said thanks to both the Mets and the New York fans for the opportunity to play in New York. Heilman was traded to Seattle late last year. He’s been assigned uniform number 49 and will vie for a spot in the Mariners starting rotation. The annual writers’ dinner includes the distribution of baseball’s major awards: MVP, Cy Young, Rookie of the Year and Manager of the Year. Of the eight individuals who won those awards, only Rays manager Joe Maddon failed to appear in person.

-The new Boss record “Working on a Dream” comes out today. The reviews have been all over the map. Greg Kot of the Chicago Tribune hated it, saying half the record “trots out the kind of facile imagery that would’ve gotten (Bruce) tossed out of a Nickelback songwriting seminar.” Brian Hiatt of Rolling Stone loves it to death. He called it the “richest” of the three Bruce w/E Street releases this decade (Rising/Magic/Working) and said there were “more musical surprises” on Working than any record Bruce has ever made. I haven’t heard the whole thing yet but I’m not crazy about the title track which has gotten heavy play on E Street Radio. I love The Wrestler. The rest I’ll hear this week when I buy the disc.

-One of TSR’s most loyal readers is going to the Super Bowl this weekend and has agreed to file a post-game report. The observations of **Steelers fan Mike** will appear here in audio form on Monday so make sure you have your computer speakers ready to go and punch up TSR the morning after the Super Bowl.

-It’s worth noting for the record that three democratic US Senators (plus Bernie Sanders) voted against the nomination of Tim “TurboTax” Geithner. Russ Feingold, Tom Harkin and Bob Byrd refused to march to the beat of their party and were unwilling to approve Obama’s choice to run Treasury. Geithner’s tax problem fails the smell test. He fails to meet the standard one would expect from someone about to

preside over both the IRS and a financial system badly in need of a leader with an air-tight background and reputation.

1-27-09 0120

When NTSB investigators pulled guts and a feather out of one of the engines attached to the “Miracle on the Hudson” airplane last week, it only added to the pilot’s claim of bird blame. Gulls and geese are a common sight at and around LaGuardia Airport. The birds comfortably coexist with the airplanes and meet little visible harassment or discouragement. (check out the gull that decided to perch on the tail of a 737-700 this past Friday at LaGuardia – pictured above).

It makes you wonder whether the Port Authority of NY/NJ (the entity that controls airport operations) views the bird menace with the proper level of seriousness. In an op-ed piece printed in the Post last week, a biologist hired by the Port Authority in the late 90’s says the airport operator stonewalled his efforts to solve the bird problem. Steven D. Garber was brought in after a bird eradication campaign using guns was halted in the courts by environmentalists. Garber believes the bird populations around LaGuardia can be controlled in environmentally sensitive ways but he said the Port wouldn’t allow him to execute his plan “openly, honestly, and effectively.” Said Garber: “The PA didn’t want to fix the deadly bird problem at LaGuardia...it wanted to look like it had already fixed things.”

Garber believes the Canada goose can be effectively limited if the resident breeding geese near the airport are “rounded up” during molting. He also suggests a concerted effort to discourage bird feeding in a five-mile radius and aggressive removal of bird nests and eggs in that same radius. The man has a plan but says he left the Port in ’99 after realizing the agency was dragging its feet. “PA officials have never been interested in solving this problem, only in whitewashing it.”

-You wonder if US Airways is considering legal action against the Port Authority NY/NJ if indeed the cause of its forced landing in the Hudson is blamed on birds. A federal report titled “Wildlife Hazard Management at Airports” cites an incident at nearby JFK airport that could serve as precedent. On June 3, 1995, an Air France Concorde ingested “one or two Canada geese” into one of its engines just as it was about to touch down for arrival. The report says shrapnel from the damaged engine destroyed a second engine and severed hydraulic lines and control cables. The plane landed safely but the report says “damage to the Concorde was estimated at over \$7 million.” The French Aviation Authority sued the Port “and eventually settled out of court for \$5.3 million.” The Port may argue in the most recent “Miracle on the Hudson” incident that the birds ingested were flying well beyond the purview of the airport. It’s estimated that the airplane had been airborne for at least thirty seconds before it met up with the birds. But at what point does responsibility for bird control leave the airport operator? Shouldn’t the Port Authority assume power over bird control at any reasonable distance deemed within the range of arriving/departing aircraft? And if not the Port, then who?

-Everybody’s talking about how bad New York Governor David Patterson botched the process that culminated with his appointment of Kirsten Gillibrand to fill Hillary’s US Senate seat. There’s no doubt it turned into a circus. But to me, the worst part of the whole thing came when Patterson formally

introduced Gillibrand at an Albany news conference on Friday. Mugging it up and standing front and center for the event carried nationally on the cable television networks was scuzzball lobbyist and former republican US senator Al D'Amato. On a day meant to elevate a young and fresh democratic face, you had a slimy vestige of the past right behind the podium. It was salt in the wound for progressive democrats who cringe at Gillibrand's 100-percent rating from the NRA. Bipartisanship is great in certain situations, but when you're filling Hillary Clinton's senate seat, somebody needs to bar the door when Al D'Amato comes knocking.

-New York's Major League Soccer franchise has waited much too long to get the new soccer-specific stadium it needs for true legitimacy. It was thought the long wait would end this year with the opening of a brilliant new 25-thousand seat English-style building in Harrison, NJ right off the PATH train. But now the Red Bulls are saying cold weather has slowed construction and the stadium won't be ready until the 2010 season. My first cynical thought was that weather was being used as an excuse for deeper problems connected to the economy. But when you look at the live camera aimed at the construction site (streaming online since ground was broken a couple years ago), it is clear the project is past the stage where anybody would consider scrapping it. It appears much of the building's frame and outer shell is complete and periodic checks of the web-cam would indicate steady progress has been made in the last six months. Until it opens, the Red Bulls are forced to play on the FieldTurf at cavernous Giants Stadium where the team is a fish out of water.

1-25-09 0111

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs held his first briefing Thursday and right off the bat he got an earful from aggravated television reporters who got shut out of an official event the night before. On advice of White House counsel, Chief Justice John Roberts came by to re-administer the oath of office. It had been botched on inauguration day so the lawyers determined it would make sense to get a flawless one in the books. Rather than make a big deal about the do-over, Gibbs used the pool concept and allowed just four print reporters in the White House Map Room to watch it. There were no media cameras – still or otherwise and the only photo of the event came from the in-house photog. At Thursday's briefing, both Chuck Todd of NBC and Bill Plante of CBS whined hard that their exclusion contradicted Obama's vow of transparency. Gibbs seemed unwilling to fully defend his decision to limit media presence but cited the size of the room as a problem. I think what was really happening here is that the White House didn't want to further embarrass the chief justice and wanted to keep the event's fanfare to a minimum. If you open the event to everybody, it gets carried live on all the cable networks and gets perhaps more play than it deserves. Yeah, I know it gets into dangerous territory when open government functions are held behind closed doors – or shielded – but I think Gibbs wanted this treated as a quick book-keeping matter. Earlier in the day, Joe Biden had made a wise-crack about the Roberts inauguration day flub, and Obama was clearly steamed. Gibbs just wanted the story to die. Todd, Plante and the rest of folks getting pissy about this need to understand that the world doesn't always revolve around the TV medium.

-On the ESPN program College Football Live on Thursday afternoon, draft guru Mel Kiper predicted that speedy Mizzou wideout Jeremy Maclin will take get taken number seven overall by the Raiders. The Jets

select number 17 overall, and TSR is already on record as saying we want UNC receiver Hakeem Nicks if he's there in that spot.

1-22-09 1640

I usually wait the year or so it takes for most good movies to hit my array of cable channels. Earlier this week, I watched *Starting Out in the Evening* – a simple and sad story about an aging author who can't seem to make headway on his novel despite unexpected inspiration in the form of an admiring grad student.

It's only rare that I hit the movie house because the movies inevitably come to me.

But I've been itching to see Mickey Rourke in *The Wrestler* and so I hit Clearview's multi-screen cinema at 62nd and First on Wednesday afternoon. It's been playing in the city for a month or so.

The film was made at a cost of only \$6 million. Director Darren Aronofsky says the movie's budget was limited largely because many of the people sought to finance the project were leery of Rourke's involvement. That quandary prompted Aronofsky to replace Rourke with Nicholas Cage in the starring role. It didn't take long for Aronofsky to un-do the decision (go back to Rourke – part ways with Cage). If you see the movie, you'll see why Rourke is absolutely perfect for the role. I'm not saying Cage couldn't have pulled it off, but it's hard to imagine anybody doing it better than Rourke.

He plays a loser. A screw up. A guy who doesn't really have his shit together. Since Rourke has some real life understanding of this kind of character, he totally nails it.

Shot on 16 mm film, there's a grainy look and a documentary feel. It's all New Jersey, all the time and a lot of the acting feels improvised. Rourke plays a great professional wrestler well past his prime. He's barely able to pay the rent on his weathered trailer and keeps his life afloat by headlining cards and signing photos for enthusiastic East coast wrestling fans in small venues. To maintain his persona, "The Ram" takes roids, bleaches his hair and goes to a tanning spa. In the ring, he gives all for his craft despite a heavy physical toll.

I won't blow the whole movie, but I'll just say that Rourke is amazing playing "The Ram." The scenes where he walks into the dressing room to get ready with the other wrestlers are really compelling.

Aronofsky should probably have re-done a badly blown sequence when Rourke smooches Marisa Tomei in a tavern. The two stop in for "just one beer" after Tomei's character assists The Ram in the selection of vintage clothing items for his daughter. The dialogue prior to the smooch looks like improv gone bad. But hey, it's only the one scene that sticks out. Otherwise, the delivery style – whether scripted or not – really works.

Rourke picked up an Oscar nomination in the best actor category this morning for *The Wrestler*. The only other performance among the leading men nominated I've seen was Richard Jenkins in *The Visitor*, so I

can't guess who will get the trophy. Both Jenkins and Rourke were great - as great as you'd hope to see at the movies.

The excellent Springsteen song made for The Wrestler is kinda wasted. It rolls over the closing credits. It's a great tune but there's no real good place for it in the body of the movie since The Ram likes nothing but rock of the Cinderella and Ratt variety.

Admission for the 2:45 PM Wednesday showing of The Wrestler was \$12. There were about thirty people in the audience.

1-22-09 1045

Tangible change for those starving for it may require time to take root, but the process that formally transferred power from Bush to Obama Tuesday was quite a refreshing sight to see.

I started the morning with the TV tuned to C-Span, then switched to the HD signal of CNN which delivered all of the visuals in beautiful 1080i.

Who knows what Bush and Obama said to each other when they jumped in the limo at the North portico of the White House for the trip to Capitol Hill. It was just the two of them with secret service in that limo for a ten-minute ride to the capitol. Do you think the pleasantries that Bush likely offered made Obama re-think whether he should put an "X" through the following two paragraphs of his prepared inaugural address:

"As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man, a charter expanded by the blood of generations. Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience's sake. And so to all other peoples and governments who are watching today, from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was born: know that America is a friend of each nation and every man, woman, and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and that we are ready to lead once more."

"Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please. Instead, they knew that our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint."

No matter how awkward it must have been to diss an outgoing president who by all appearances allowed for a gracious and civil transition of power, they are words that needed to be said.

They were the most important passages of the speech for sure. And even if Obama had second thoughts about them as he rode in the limo with his two-term predecessor, it was too late. Embargoed copies of the

speech had gone around the world and political reporters had probably already run a yellow highlighter over the two grafts.

The day was behind schedule from the start as it took a long time to seat the platform. The republican giants Cheney and Poppa Bush raised eyebrows when they entered slowly with infirmities. But it was the democratic kingpins Byrd and Kennedy who couldn't make it through the day. Both left a capitol luncheon with medical distress.

As the clock struck noon marking the official switch to the new president, the quartet of Perlman/Yo-Yo/Montero/McGill performed what sounded to me like what a college radio station would play during the lunch hour. It was beautiful.

Stevens and Biden nailed the oath but Roberts effectively tripped up Obama when it was his turn. The chief justice was stilted and lengthy with that opening line and it messed up the new president. If Roberts was cool, he would have said "take two" so that the audio/video archives wouldn't have such an uneven performance in the permanent record. But take it as it is. It's still seals the deal.

When the Marine One helicopter now dba as Executive One gave Bush and his wife a lift to their airplane ride out of Andrews, the outgoing commander got a good low-altitude aerial view of a massive crowd celebrating his departure. They sang Steam's "Na Na Hey Hey."

What were the negatives of the day? It's hard to find many, but there were a few:

- (1). Gay marriage opponent Rick Warren's delivery of the opening prayer was an insult to those who hoped "change" would include a vigorous rejection of hate and exclusion.
- (2). Roland Burris had a pretty good seat on the inauguration platform – and that is pretty outrageous.
- (3). Perhaps it was the cold weather – or the fact the parade started an hour-plus behind schedule but the crowd along the parade route actually looked sparse or flat-out empty in spots. There were also reports of large numbers of people denied access to either the parade route or the mall because of clogged security checkpoints. CNN reported the stories of people holding tickets touting certain levels of access that were shut out.
- (4.) All day long, CNN hyped a pending exclusive satellite image of the Capitol grounds that it said would illustrate the breadth of the crowd that assembled. The image was finally broadcast at about 5 PM, and I'm not sure how it added to the live pictures that well captured the massive throngs throughout the day. The satellite picture was a pretty basic overhead shot. Nothing special. When David Gergen asked Wolf if the satellite image could help formulate an attendance figure, Wolf ignored him.

I'd imagine the physical and mental demands of inauguration day for Obama may compare to how a bride or groom may feel on their wedding day. After much preparation and attention to detail, there were many marks to hit. When you can barely stand much longer, you gotta work the reception room and thank everybody for coming. There's no time to eat cake. It's not until the next day you can really start your new life. And man, what a life Obama is getting himself into starting Wednesday.

An older African-American woman from the state of Georgia called C-Span when I first flipped on the tube Tuesday. She said she was gonna have a viewing party with 15 or 20 of her friends. C-Span host Susan Swain asked the woman for details of her party. Said the woman: “We’re gonna raise the flag and sing some songs.”

1-20-09 2145

Just two days before US Airways flight 1549 went down in the Hudson, CNN says the same airplane on the same route using the same flight number experienced a serious engine problem shortly after takeoff. CNN cites the accounts of three passengers on board last Tuesday’s flight 1549 (the “Miracle on the Hudson” was Thursday). All three on board told CNN that they heard loud banging noises shortly after takeoff and that a public address announcement from the cockpit said that the number two engine compressor had stalled. They said passengers were told that an emergency landing was planned. One of the passengers – John Hodock – said he saw fire coming from the engine. It turns out the flight continued on without incident but you’d have to say this information is relevant simply because of the airplane’s tail number. CNN was able to obtain confirmation that the registration number of the aircraft that flew Tuesday’s flight 1549 was N106US. That’s the same airplane that ended up in the Hudson two days later.

Everybody seems to want this story to be about the miraculous outcome – and indeed the final outcome was a miracle. But it may be too early to make the cause of this incident an open and shut case of two engines shutting down from bird ingestion.

-It should be noted that Brian Williams made no reference to the CNN revelation on his NBC Nightly News program despite the fact the information had been in the public domain for hours.

-Expect the Super Bowl line to bob back and forth between 6.5 and 7 before finally settling at a flat touchdown by game time. The Steelers are famous for taking casual money – and their status as favorites adds to the allure for the bettor who jumps in only on the big days. What might make the most sense is a money line play on the Steelers at -250. The books are expected to post a long list of prop bets sometime tonight.

-Happy inauguration day to all. I had toyed with the idea of making it a day trip if the flights had room – and to my surprise – there’s space on the first one down and the last one back. But I decided I don’t have the stamina to move with the masses packing a city I don’t know that well. I’ll watch it on the tube. Among the most anticipated moments on this historic day will be an event listed in the White House schedule of events.

1:25 PM THE FORMER PRESIDENT makes remarks at departure ceremony. Andrews Air Force Base – Hangar 6.

1-20-09 0005

It’s been about twenty-five years since a flu bug hit me as hard as the one that took over from head to toe

on Friday night. It was a vicious assault on the stomach, the head and the body temperature control mechanism. It was impossible to eat or drink anything and efforts to sleep it off have been unsuccessful thus far.

You can see how the flu can kill people in an already weakened state.

As I write this Sunday evening, I feel like a corner is about to be turned and that recovery is on the way. But for about 36 hours, it was absolute hell. I'll omit the detail describing the worst of it.

Living alone is usually something I enjoy just fine, but when you're shivering with sweat unable to gain a vertical position, you realize how great it was when you had your Mom in the house. She would convince you that this too shall pass as she handed you a glass of iced ginger ale.

There were moments in the last couple of days when I considered checking into the emergency room at the crazy city-run hospital down the street. I thought about what that experience would be like relative to the potential relief it would bring and I quickly decided I would rather take my chances staying put.

-The cockpit crew of the US Airways airplane that went into the Hudson on Thursday said it was birds that killed power in both of its engines. Birds are common off the end of the runway used in this instance. Less than 24 hours after the outcome that captured the nation's attention, arriving airplanes at LaGuardia were using the same path although in the opposite direction. One flight captain arriving at about noon on Friday told me that he saw "two large gulls at about 500 feet" as he neared landing on runway 22.

-Following normal procedure, the fuel truck used to gas up US Airways flight 1549 before its dramatic landing in the Hudson was immediately impounded by the Port Authority. The man who fueled the airplane was forced to submit to a drug test. There has been no suggestion that a fuel problem had anything to do with 1549's engine problems, but immediate scrutiny on everyone involved with a flight's preparation is normal. It's expected that the NTSB will test the fuel contained in the impounded truck and will have a discussion with anybody who had even a loose connection with preparing that flight for departure.

1-18-09 2010

With an outdoor temperature of 20 degrees Fahrenheit and a water temp just above freezing, it wasn't the greatest day to ditch a plane in the mighty Hudson. But anytime an airplane lands on anything but a runway and there isn't a full-blown catastrophe, it is flat-out amazing.

It's a miracle. A miracle times 155. Or as Governor David Paterson called it: "A Miracle on the Hudson."

At the time I write this, it has been reported that one or both of the engines powering US Airways flight 1549 ingested birds shortly after takeoff from LaGuardia Thursday afternoon. The plane bound for Charlotte (the key Eastern hub for the airline) took off from runway four over Rikers Island. It wasn't

long before the cockpit crew knew it had engine problems and passengers say they were told to brace for a hard landing. A left turn over the Bronx became a half-circle. With its landing gear up and a flat belly, the airplane was said to touch down in the drink at about 50th Street.

Why didn't it sink? It appears the back doors were kept closed and the sealed capsule stayed afloat with the main cabin door tilted upward.

The folks that operate the ferry boats (New York Waterway and Circle Line) that responded to the floating airplane deserve serious credit for an expedited rescue. Those ferry boats went from transportation provider to emergency responder in a flash. They saved the day and now you'd hope any questions about ferry service subsidies in this region take on a little more depth. People on the plane say boats were waiting for them when they stepped off that airplane. That's amazing.

-If indeed it was birds that caused this accident, expect the Port Authority to redouble efforts to eliminate, thin or move the rampant seagull population that congregates north and east of the airport. It's no easy task given the natural habitat that exists for birds in that area but there are tactics to discourage bird activity and they must be used to the fullest extent. You've heard several media reports indicate that it was a "flock of geese," that caused this accident. More likely, the bird type was sea gull.

The more shows they play, the better they get. Members of the great Brooklyn band Fan-Tan headlined the Mercury Lounge Wednesday night and it's clear they're on the rise.

It had been about a year since my last Fan-Tan show and you'd have to say top billing at the Merc indicates some kind of climb in status. This band really has it all. Front man Ryan Lee Dunlap (pictured above left) has a Gift. He sings like Roland Gift. His guitar is short-strapped for rapid strums and he moves around the stage with pivots full of pizzazz. Drummer Kuki Kooks (above right) alternates gentle with attack mode. On "Age of Discovery," Kooks unleashes a pretty awesome barrage at the half-way mark of the tune. He's forced to set a tone along with synth man Mike Walters since the band's songs are constructed with a lush dance-beat.

In the thirteen months since I saw tightly-spaced Fan-Tan shows in late 2007, there's no evidence of significant new output. No record deal. Only a couple of new tunes popped up recently on their MySpace page. But consistent efforts to play live here and back on Tobacco Road where it all started have made the band a tight, professional group. Fan-Tan has no trouble flipping on a switch that prompts some attending their live show to start flapping arms and doing a dance that feels better than it probably looks.

Bassist Sandee Kooks (Kuki's brother) stood stage left, a good distance from the center of activity. Like a lot of rock band bass players, Sandee Kooks (pictured above) seems intent on conducting business with minimal fanfare.

Admission was ten bucks. Fan-Tan went on about 11 and played for nearly an hour.

The band that preceded Fan-Tan on the bill was a big mismatch in terms of talent and style. Billed as

“Kickass Rock and Roll With a Southern Accent,” Madison South was unbearably bad. The blame is not with the band but the folks at “The Bowery Presents” who fill slots without regard for genre and the crowd they bring.

1-15-09 2000

Plenty of times I wish I could download (or is it upload?) the pictures I take in my mind as I go from here to there. Maybe that technology is coming.

It’s only on occasion that I’m toting my camera. There are all sorts of scenes that would make great pictures that pass me by.

A week ago Friday I was sitting at work and the sunrise became something special. It wasn’t simply the sun coming up in the East as it does every morning. This one was a mind-blower. I kicked myself for lacking the ability to record the image and then realized that I could try to snap a shot with my cell phone.

Cell phone pictures are usually crude misrepresentations of the actual subject – but in this case the low resolution and inferior technology didn’t get in the way.

Two things I should mention in loose connection with this theme.

First, when I was working the morning shift consistently, I became a serious sunrise appreciator. With an Eastern view, I’d see it come up every day. Most days, it was nothing special. But a couple of times a month, the sunrise would really make you stop and take it in for the short time it showed off.

While working this shift, I had a co-worker who went by the nickname A-Rod who shared my enthusiasm for a good sunrise. When a dazzler was in progress, we’d try to find one another to make sure the other was paying attention. It was fun to have a fellow sunrise appreciator to compare notes with.

A-Rod ended up suffering a severe back injury which is what happens to guys who throw big pieces of luggage around in tight confines. Shortly after he was forced to leave the job because of the permanence of his injury, I ended up getting knocked out of my morning shift. We lost track of each other. But whenever I see a good sunrise, I think about A-Rod and wonder if he’s seeing it somewhere.

The other thing I wanted to mention as long as I was talking about cameras and photos and seeing things that pass you by is a [web site](#) done by a guy who posts a single incredible photo each day. Joseph Holmes must carry a camera everywhere he goes. I’ve not seen a more compelling and proficient web site devoted to photographic content. The daily photos posted by Holmes elicit comments and questions from people all over the world. One skill beyond Holmes’ obvious technical mastery is his fearlessness to take pictures of people. It takes some moxie for someone with a camera to point it in the direction of strangers and many of Holmes’ greatest photos were taken without the prior consent of his subjects. (if and when you go to the Holmes site, click on the “previous” arrow to scroll back into his collection...you’ll be amazed)

1-13-09 0215

I was working during all four divisional contests this weekend but got a pretty good look at all but the Giants game. The Tennessee/Baltimore slugfest left me feeling sad for fans of the Titans. The Crumpler fumble was excruciating. As he rumbled toward the goal line in the fourth quarter, Crumpler was met by a double shot of defender with the worst of the physical violence coming from Ravens safety Jim Leonhard (Bart Scott was also in on the play). It was the viciousness of the legal Leonhard hit that caused the fumble. You hope Crumpler doesn't beat himself up too much about the turnover – as hurtful as it was to his team. The way he got whacked would make it hard to hold on to a golf ball, much less a football. Leonhard suffered a concussion on the play but not before he had a hand in all three Titans turnovers. Leonhard is listed at 5-8, 185. He plays like Gary Fencik and appears to be in a safety rotation that includes Ravens rookie Tom Zbikowski who is another punishing defender much discussed here over the last few years.

Leonhard (pronounced LEN-ard) is quite a story. A small guy from a small town, he walked on at Wisconsin, played in every game over a four-year period in Madison and became an All-American. No NFL team drafted him but he landed as a free agent in Buffalo in '05. Now, he's a game away from the Super Bowl.

-In a NFL season that will be remembered for bad officiating, it seems like there was scant attention paid to a couple of possible miscues that hurt the Titans. With 7:39 to go in the game and the Ravens up three, Flacco faced a 3rd and 10 from his own one-yard-line. After a couple of running plays intended to minimize risk, Flacco surprisingly went into shotgun formation. After receiving the snap, Flacco seemed to lose sight of where he was and appeared to step out of the end zone. He fired incomplete and the Ravens ended up punting. The Titans would end up scoring three on the ensuing drive to tie, but who knows how a safety would have changed the complexion of the game. I was watching the game with a co-worker who screamed at the TV – begging CBS for a replay to confirm what we thought our eyes saw. I never did see a replay.

Even more clear cut – and egregious – was a no call when the Ravens offense let the play clock expire with under three to go and the game tied. It was third and two. CBS had the play clock inset on the screen and at least a second and a half went by after it hit zero. Flacco took the snap and fired a 23-yard completion to Todd Heap. It was a crucial play on the game-winning drive that should never have been allowed. Why a play like that can't be challenged, who knows? The NBA allows refs to look at replays to determine if a basket was scored before time expires at the end of a game. Why can't the NFL let Fisher challenge a no-call on a clear-cut clock issue? It's one thing for a quarterback to receive the snap a split-second after the play clock hits zero, but this was way beyond the pale.

-About 45 minutes before the Steelers kicked off in Pittsburgh Sunday, an Airbus 319 painted with the team's logo landed at LaGuardia. US Airways operates the Steelers-themed airplane as part of its regularly scheduled service and the sight of it as I prepared to watch the game confused me as I tried to discern meaning from this coincidence.

-Whether you like the sport of kings or not, check out the [well-done piece](#) posted by our pal Jim Mulvihill who paid tribute over the weekend to legendary horse racing writer Joe Hirsch. Jim spent a lot of time with Hirsch during the 2001 Saratoga meet and carries great memories of that summer. Hirsch died at a Manhattan hospital Friday at the age of 80.

-Bruce Springsteen must have had a pretty good idea he was gonna take down a Golden Globe Sunday night for making the title tune contained in the acclaimed movie “The Wrestler.” It’s hard to believe The Boss would drag Patty out for a long awards night with Mickey Rourke unless he knew he was gonna win.

1-12-09 0130

A Thursday Wall Street Journal story examining sharp 2008 declines in the value of 401(k) accounts suggests a government “overhaul” of the retirement savings plan may be on the way. Reporter Eleanor Laise writes that the world-wide stock market plunge has “ignited a crisis of confidence” in the 401(k) and she gives voice to financial planning experts who say individual plan participants should be protected from themselves.

Laise cites data from the Employee Benefit Research Institute in advancing the notion that workers entering an era of vanishing company pensions (necessitating heavy reliance on the 401(k)) are getting burned by market swings. Perhaps the most startling fact is that workers aged 55 to 64 lost an average of 20-percent of their account’s value in 2008.

What the story fails to convey properly is that any government attempt to remove or reduce worker autonomy from how his/her 401(k) is constructed should be considered an intrusion – not a protection.

If the government and/or employer wants a safe, risk-resistant worker retirement fund that provides a guaranteed life-sustaining stipend at the end of a worker’s career, then make it happen. But don’t create/make available the 401(k) option to the American worker and then change the rules when the market tanks.

Tales of woe from people who got their ass kicked by a bum market are indeed sad. But you didn’t hear people moaning when the technology and banking sectors – or a range of Asian funds – were acting as multipliers on account balances.

At my place of employ, there was great anticipation building in mid-2008 when the company announced it was expanding the worker’s 401(k) investment options from a list of 93 mutual funds to a bonanza of choices that basically allowed the individual to buy into any listed equity or mutual fund with a value greater than \$1 a share. More choice, more control and yeah, greater risk. Those not interested in greater risk had the option of staying within the existing framework of the plan – or having the additional choice of getting into so-called “target date” funds dumbed-down for the hands-off investor.

As the November 1 launch date for the new options approached, the company announced it was delaying implementation. It cited “market volatility” for the postponement.

Having watched my own 401(k) lose more than half its value in 2008 with big-name mutual funds, I’ve been anxious to participate in the proposed expanded plan allowing one to turn the account into a brokerage window. I’m not much interested in protection from the company or the government. In fact, I resent it. If one is allowed to watch one’s investments plummet in a bad market, one should be allowed to trade free and wide when the market is low. Big brother shouldn’t use “market volatility” as a reason to limit one’s ability to execute an investment strategy.

And more broadly speaking, don’t re-think the 401(k) concept nationally. Devise a separate “safe” plan implemented from scratch if necessary. But don’t change the rules mid-stream on a 401(k) plan that was designed to withstand lumps and bumps over three or four decades. Even the biggest sledge-hammer hit over the head of one’s 401(k) is a buy-low opportunity for a worker with a ways to go before he calls it quits. Let ‘em be.

-The line on Florida/Oklahoma swung wildly in the 24 hours before kickoff. Florida sat at a soft minus-3 for most of the last month but then big day-of-game money poured in on the Gators pushing the number up to near a touchdown (even higher than 7 on one off-shore book). A few hours before game-time an internet-fueled rumor with wide circulation had Percy Harvin re-injuring his ankle which brought the number back down to 5 and a half. The over-under number closed at 69, down from an open of 71.5.

1-8-09 2249

I sat down Wednesday afternoon to watch New York Governor David Patterson deliver his first state of the state speech hoping the governor would get the ball rolling on the big public transit funding proposal designed to stave off deep cuts in service and a giant fare increase.

If placement and time devoted to the subject within the speech is any indication of the priority the issue will be given by Patterson, then it’s not looking good for bus and subway riders.

It wasn’t until the 29 minute mark of the 62.5 minute address that Patterson brought up the Ravitch Commission proposal containing new funding mechanisms for public transit. Patterson spent all of 25 seconds discussing it. Rather than elaborate at length on the various reasons why a new infusion of public transit funding is important (as he did with discussing child obesity and affordability of higher education), Patterson simply said he hoped lawmakers would “negotiate and eventually pass” the Ravitch recommendations. His usage of the words “negotiate” and “eventually” may be viewed as troubling. “Negotiate” would suggest the possible watering-down of the Ravitch proposal – and “eventually” seems to lengthen the time frame beyond the looming deadline needed to stave off the MTA’s proposed doomsday plan.

Who knows? Maybe Patterson is trying to play it cool and plans to push the Ravitch plan behind the scenes. It just seemed like the governor failed to give the issue the attention it deserves.

That said, Patterson deserves credit for pulling off a speech of this kind given the fact that he's legally blind.

When he entered the chamber, Patterson (a longtime Albany pol) clearly knew where he was going and moved to the main Assembly podium below the Speaker's chair without assistance. He handed hard-bound copies of his speech to Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver and Senate Majority leader Malcolm Smith (seated behind him) and then proceeded to recite his remarks from memory.

Patterson isn't blind as the dark, black night. What appears before him is said to be something better than nothingness. But a teleprompter does him no good – nor do written notes or flash cards. He doesn't read Braille and there's no technological trick or crutch to help him through such occasions. Patterson is speaking purely from what's in his head. When you consider the amount of detail – the number of names, dollar figures and statistics he referenced in the speech – you can't help but be amazed at his feat.

He understandably got crossed up a few times during the speech, but regrouped quickly. He has a nervous tendency to repeatedly fold his hands together, release them, fold them back, release and so on while he speaks. It's a somewhat awkward looking display and distracts a bit from the delivery of his speech.

But having watched a lot of state of the states over the years (Spitzer, Pataki, Caperton, Edgar and Ashcroft), this one felt more like a talk with the citizenry than any other I've heard. If only he would have made public transit a bigger deal.

-Since the Times wouldn't reveal the price tag on its front-page advertising hole unveiled this week, you knew it was only a matter of time before the Post would disclose it. Citing "several ad buyers who asked to remain unnamed," the Post says the going rate for the 2.5-inch tall ad covering the full width of the bottom of the front page is \$75-thousand on weekdays and \$100K on Sunday.

-If you run into my Dad in the next couple days, ask him if you can see "his staples." While retrieving mail at the bottom of his driveway Tuesday night, he went down like a sack of potatoes. The frozen precip makes it slippery on suburban Chicago driveways this time of year. In this instance, my Dad's head took the brunt of the fall. A long, deep gash was closed up with staples and he's said to be neurologically unscathed. Must be some thickness in that skull?

1-7-09 2230

I did a serious double-take when I pulled the Times off the stack on the way into work Monday. A three-inch color strip below the fold at the bottom of the page looked like an advertisement. Impossible. The Times doesn't put ads on the front page. But there it was. It was an ad for the CBS television network underneath news stories about a rash of kidnappings in Mexico and a plunge in the US commercial real estate market.

Forever off-limits to display ads, the front page of the Times is now in play for advertisers. It's a desperate measure for desperate times.

Plummeting revenue has forced the business side of newspapers to do all sorts of things that make the editorial wing throw its hands in the air.

In the past six months, the Times has cut the width of its page and consolidated sections. Now the newspaper's globally positioned staff of reporters must share the front page with advertisements. It's still a great paper, but you're starting to get the feeling that you're watching it die a slow death.

And it's not just the economy that's killing the newspaper. On the same Times business page (B3) that carried a story about the newspaper's inclusion of a front-page display ad for the first time, there was a piece that said "Web Passes Papers as a News Source." The story cited a study by folks at the Pew Research Center which said that 40-percent of Americans get most of their news from the internet. 35-percent of respondents to the same study say they get their news primarily from newspapers.

-The Bernie Madoff story is understandably big news for CNBC, but the cable channel devoted to coverage of financial markets lost sight of its prime mission Monday with less-than-newsworthy segments of live pictures showing the investment adviser traveling to and from a court hearing. Using a camera deployed by a news helicopter hovering over Manhattan, CNBC devoted good portions of the afternoon to tracking Madoiff's movements. It had all the news value of a car chase on a California freeway, except in this case people are cheering against the crook rather than for him. For now, Madoff is confined to his city apartment as a condition of his \$10 million bail. The hearing on Monday was his first court appearance since he got arrested for a massive stock fraud scheme that sucked a lot of people dry. Prosecutors claimed Monday that Madoff has attempted to shelter certain valuables from seizure post-arrest. For that reason, the feds want Madoff tossed in jail until he's tried. A US Magistrate judge is expected to rule on the government request after gaining more information in the next few days. White collar crooks usually stay out of the clink pending trial and I'd expect Madoff will get that privilege. Flight risk shouldn't be a concern when you consider his every move is watched and his Manhattan apartment is surrounded by federal agents and photogs. It seems impossible that Madoff would be able to get on a plane or a train without somebody strangling him first. And at the rate CNBC is going, you'd be able to see that too.

1-6-08 0135

I guess nothing disgraced Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich pulls at this point should surprise you, but his appointment of Roland Burris to fill the senate seat he's accused of auctioning for cash rocked me pretty good. It was shocking because I thought no credible or upstanding public servant would discuss – much less accept such an appointment. Burris is embarrassing himself and he's tainting an otherwise non-descript (albeit felony-free) political legacy. Burris says he won't cause a scene, yet he's enlisted a lawyer to wage a fight for membership in a legislative body that wants to keep him out. Especially disgusting is the racial element at play here. Blagojevich inserted Congressman Bobby Rush into his twisted script by asking Rush to speak at the news conference introducing Burris, a 71-year-old

African-American. On cue, Rush played the race card to make an already incredibly awkward and cynical procedural taunt by the governor even more so. Rush said leaders in the US Senate thinking about blocking the appointment should not “hang and lynch the appointee as you try and castigate the appointer.”

The laws and rules covering all of this may end up favoring Blagojevich and Burris, but it’s as clear as day that the appointment should not be made by a governor who is on tape saying he wanted to cash in on it. Burris should understand and respect the notion that the Obama senate seat vacancy should be filled by either the people of Illinois – or the current lieutenant governor once Blago is removed from office via impeachment. The hands of Burris are just as dirty as Blagojevich if he presses forward with efforts to enter the senate chamber as if he were a legitimate member. He’s not.

-On my New Year’s Day flight back to New York, the captain made a PA announcement just before takeoff which included the basic facts of the journey. It was a fine announcement. There was advanced warning of a bumpy climb-out, a flight time estimate that was shorter than usual because of a strong tailwind, and a cheery, confident edge in the captain’s voice. It made me feel good until the pilot recited an error commonly made by even the most seasoned travelers and/or aviation employees. He said the flight’s destination was “LaGuardia International Airport.” Problem is, the actual name of the airport does not include “International.” It’s “LaGuardia Airport.” That’s it. Yeah, there are several daily flights to Canada, non-stops to the Bahamas and seasonal once-a-week round-trips to other spots in the Caribbean, but LaGuardia is not an international airport either in practice – or in name. US Customs has a limited presence at LaGuardia and the airport’s gates aren’t set up to accommodate customs clearance requirements. Passengers flying into LaGuardia from out of the country are pre-cleared by US Customs at the origin. One entity that perhaps deserves most blame for perpetuating the LaGuardia “International” error is The Weather Channel. When the nationally-distributed TV channel updates airport delay and weather information, it uses the erroneous airport name in all of its graphics.

-Headline writers for the New York tabloids have condensed the last name of Steve Spagnuolo, who is making a lot of back pages these days. With multiple NFL teams including the Jets courting Spagnuolo to fill their head coach position, the tabloids have gone with the nickname “SPAGS” to make it fit within a narrow space on the page.

-Indy would have won the game Saturday if it converted on 3rd and two at its own nine-yard line with two and a half to go. Manning and Dungy usually convert 3rd and twos as easy as they cut butter but they botched this critical play with an empty backfield that left the QB exposed. From San Diego’s perspective, everybody is crediting the great runner Darren Sproles for winning the game. But the true player of the game was the Chargers punter. Mike Scifres had a huge punt with under three to go. As he has much of his career spanning five seasons, Scifres launched it high, got a gentle landing and had the ball roll out of play at the one-yard line. Scifres’ five previous punts forced Indy to start at their own 9, 7, 3, 19 and 10-yard lines respectively. Amazing! All six of his punts inside the 20!

1-4-09 0135

I brought in 2009 with family in a modern log cabin on the outskirts of Oxford, Wisconsin. My folks had

the place built on the remote lakeside parcel nine years ago with the idea that it would be their place to get away from it all. It's built in such a way that it could easily be a permanent residence if one decided he or she could live the rural life.

Like some New Yorkers who flock to the tip of Long Island, the Jersey Shore or remote places in upstate New York, Chicagoans have a long tradition of getting away to Wisconsin or Michigan.

My folks stay at the cabin about a hundred days a year for stretches of up to a week or so at a time. Both of my brothers bring their families there for short stays. The drive from Chicago is about three hours.

I flew into Madison on Tuesday morning via Cleveland. The flights were empty and my youngest brother picked me at the Madison airport which is a very friendly facility to the air traveler.

On Tuesday night, I had the once in a blue moon pleasure of sitting at the same table of fun with both of my brothers. Jim Beam cocktails and cold Old Style nicely complemented Tombstone pizza and Johnsonville brats.

You may know the story on Tombstone and Johnsonville. They're two Wisconsin companies that make products which have grown in popularity beyond the Midwest. I can't get either the pizza or the brat at my neighborhood grocery stores in Queens and so they taste all that much better when I get back this direction. There is no better frozen pizza - and no better encased sausage than the Tombstone and Johnsonville respectively.

Wednesday morning, the temperature fell below zero degrees Fahrenheit and even a bright cloudless sky failed to lift the high temp beyond single digits in the afternoon.

On New Year's Eve, we took a drive over to Thal Acres Links and Lanes in Westfield, WI. The place looks like a small textile factory from the outside. On the inside, it's a classic Wisconsin bowling alley with eight lanes, a full bar and updated wall tallies from the daily leagues that compete there. My brother and his wife have made it an annual tradition of stopping at Thal Acres on New Year's Eve to roll a couple of games. My bro's wife is due with their second in eleven weeks yet she was knocking down pins left and right.

She made fajitas for New Year's Eve dinner. A crackling fireplace kept the chill away and promoted a relaxing vibe that led to snoozeville before the clock struck midnight. What better way to say goodbye to 2008 than to sleep through the final hour of it.

There's no live television signal at the cabin, but I brought along the satellite radio and it really added to the fun. The "E Street Radio" channel is guaranteed solid with an endless rotation of never-before-heard live variations of many Bruce tunes.

I work the early shift Friday morning, so I came back late Thursday. I left Madison on a 350 PM departure to Cleveland for a connecting flight to LaGuardia that got in about 840 PM.

The family aspect of the getaway was nice - and there's much to be said for the peace and quiet of a landscape that is dominated by wide open space and so few people making noise. To go from one population density extreme to the other - and back - is a nice jolt to the system.

1-1-09 2255

TSR jumps on a bird early this morning for a little getaway to the land of cheese. My folks own a log cabin in rural Wisconsin that's truly in the middle of nowhere. There's no TV and it's really quiet. My youngest brother, his wife and my niece will be there and it'll be a relaxing way to ring in the new year.

Happy New Year everybody. Talk to you in a few days...

12-30-08 0100

The US senate seat vacancy here in New York hasn't caused the level of commotion the one in Illinois has, but we've had our share of excitement surrounding how the position will be filled. It all got ratcheted up over the weekend when Caroline Kennedy formally stepped out of her private, mostly protected life of privilege to explain why she wants the job.

New York Governor David Patterson has the final say on who will fill the seat left by Hillary's promotion to head the State Department. The governor has said he'll wait until Hillary's nomination is confirmed before announcing his choice. So what you have now is a handful of hopefuls who want the job with a non-traditional campaign of positioning and posturing by various forces in state party politics. Other than Kennedy, nobody has publicly campaigned for the job to this point - and the only reason Kennedy stepped out this weekend is because critics were taking aim at her qualifications.

Logically, experienced US House members like Jerrold Nadler, Carolyn Maloney, Brian Higgins and Nydia Velazquez would top any candidate list because of their Congressional chops. They'd know their way around.

But for some reason, and without any discouragement by Patterson, the two people who seem to be getting all the attention in this process is Kennedy and Andy Cuomo.

Andy Cuomo is the feisty state attorney general who ran a horrible campaign for governor in 2002 and led HUD for a stretch during the Bill Clinton years. He seems to have polished his act and his appointment to the senate may remove a potential rival if Patterson seeks re-election.

Kennedy is the wildcard and her entry into all of this has filled some of the post-Obama campaign void in these parts as her candidacy is debated. Kennedy raised her trial balloon a few weeks ago, and among the first critics to emerge was Queens Congressman Gary Ackerman. Ackerman is a blowhard providing cover for the congressmen and women who want the job, but his comments got a lot of attention. Ackerman criticized Kennedy's legitimacy by comparing her to both Jennifer Lopez and Sarah Palin.

It was at that point I began to shift my support away from an entrenched member of the current Washington cast to Kennedy. Ackerman's demeaning shot at Kennedy has me cheering for her. Her performance on Dominic Carter's NY1 show which aired over the weekend was impressive. Yeah, she's missed a few primary elections as a voter – and that's a problem. But the fact that she hasn't written big checks to the democratic party shouldn't be considered a black mark, nor should the fact that Mayor Mike likes her.

There's no doubt what you're gonna get from Kennedy if she gets the job. She's gonna be a Kennedy of the Ted variety. She'll be more a true democrat than most democrats. She'd definitely be more of a democrat than the other showboating clown that represents this state in the US Senate. She unequivocally opposes the death penalty. No exceptions. She backed Obama from the get-go when a lot of people in this state rubber-stamped Hillary's candidacy for president.

I don't know. The more I saw her and read of her Q and A's this weekend, the more I like. She got snippy with the Times and put zero conditions on her sit-down with Carter. And hey, if it doesn't work out, she only has the seat for two years at which time the public will decide whether she ought to stay. She seems down to earth, low-flash and workmanlike in her approach. I hope she gets it.

-Congrats to Chad and the Fins. Yeah, it was an easy sked that made the extreme turnaround possible, but that new Wildcat offense consistently confused opponents as much as it entertained football fans. Credit ex-Jet assistant Dan Henning and rookie head coach Tony Sparano for implementing it. And how 'bout Anthony Fasano. Every time I looked up at a TV this season, it seemed like Fasano was making a big catch.

-If Jets owner Woody Johnson does the right thing and parts ways with the Man-Genius, we'd love to see Ohio State coach Jim Tressel get a shot at the job.

-It almost seemed unsportsmanlike for Tom Coughlin to call two "ice-the-kicker" timeouts at end of Giants/Vikes. While it's admirable that Coughlin and his team played it mostly straight-up despite wrapping up the one-seed a week ago, it seemed excessive given the Giants' circumstances to try and freeze a kicker from fifty.

-The Post's great hockey writer Larry Brooks wrote a column Sunday saying that exiled winger Sean Avery belongs back in a Rangers uniform. "It's clear that there's only one team and one team only for which Avery can play; one city and one city only big enough for him to live," said Brooks. I have been thinking the exact same thing for the last two weeks. Bring Avery back. His six-game suspension by the league and the quick hook out of Dallas that followed was a farce when you consider his actions. The guy's style of play is exactly what the Rangers need right now and his presence would get the Blueshirts back on track.

12-29-08 0150

Striking bakery workers in the Bronx are asking the public to leave the popular Stella D'oro brand cookies and biscotti on the store shelf. About 140 union cookie makers at the Stella plant at 237th and Broadway have been on the picket line since mid-August.

Replacement workers – or “scabs” if you will – have kept the place going since the labor dispute started.

A lot is at stake. The 136 employees represented by The Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Union (BCTGM) have manned the plant since the early 60's working under a pretty standard contract that provided a decent hourly wage and benefit package.

Workers say things changed when the company switched ownership. The labor-friendly Kraft (Nabisco) sold Stella to the private investment firm Brynwood Partners in January 2006. At the time, Brynwood said it hoped to “grow and invigorate” the Stella D'oro business which it refers to currently on its web site as an “underperformer.”

Brynwood isn't a baker – or a company with a long history of food or snack production. It's a private equity firm that snaps up “underperforming and/or undervalued” companies. Among the companies in its “portfolio” are Genie (maker of garage door openers), DeMet's Candy (producer of Turtles candies among others) and G & T Conveyor (manufacturer and installer of airport baggage carousels).

When the contract (negotiated by Kraft) covering the workers at Stella D'oro expired on July 31, 2008, Brynwood put forward a new contract proposal that chopped away at the wage scale, holidays and vacation going forward. Brynwood also proposed a hefty health care insurance cost burden for union workers.

Workers everywhere – union or otherwise – are getting forced into a corner as companies seek to operate more efficiently through cuts in labor costs. Many work groups – including the one I have long been a member of – have little or no say about the terms of their employment. Those that do often don't have the gumption to resist those terms by using the strike as a bargaining tool.

But here you have a work group that has decided to take a bold approach. The union says it sensed that Brynwood was preparing for a showdown by readying replacement workers. The union says negotiations (along with Brynwood's contract proposal) indicated this was anything but good faith bargaining on a new contract.

So instead of taking it up the you-know-what and signing off on a new owner's plan to “invigorate” the company, union workers went on strike a couple weeks after its contract expired. They risk a lot. Out of work for more than four months now, the workers face an uncertain outcome that could end badly. If Brynwood can continue to muddle through the production and sale of cookies with replacement workers while breaking the spirit of the rightful body and soul of that plant, it will join the long list of companies that have successfully walked all over organized labor.

But if an active public rallies in support of these union workers, then perhaps the suits from Brynwood

will go back to the table with a greater appreciation of the long history of this work group and the labor/management balance that's been achieved to date.

Union workers have set up a web site that includes pictures of them on the picket line:

<http://www.stelladorostrike2008.com/>

It should be noted that Brynwood Partners also has a web site of its own. It's a fancy one. Included on that site is a contact page which makes it easy to reach out to those who likely have some measure of control over the fate of the union workers standing in the cold this holiday season.

<http://www.brynwoodpartners.com/contact.htm>

Until I learned of this story, I often had Stella D'oro biscotti with my coffee at work. No more. Not if and until these workers win their noble battle.

12-28-08 0155

Train service to Belmont Park will be eliminated entirely except for Belmont Stakes Day under the proposed service cuts recently announced by the MTA.

Like all the other specified proposed services cuts and fare increases planned for the subway/train/bus grid operated by the MTA, only a massive funding increase approved by the state legislature would stop the MTA plan and keep things as is.

With most horse racing venues already suffering from a sharp decline in on-track attendance, eliminating the train to Belmont would almost certainly keep more people away.

Yeah, there are a couple of city bus routes that can get you to Belmont. But the LIRR link to the track has long been a crucial pipeline connecting horseplayers in New York City to the crown jewel of this region's thoroughbred racing schedule.

On weekday afternoons, guys with ties cut out early from their jobs in Manhattan and can be seen on that train to Belmont scouring the Daily Racing Form for betting angles. On the weekends, the ridership to and from Belmont includes lots of young people of both genders. Visitors from out-of-town staying in Manhattan are among those who also rely on the service.

If the Ravitch proposal to stave off service cuts fails, perhaps the New York Racing Association can work to subsidize the service and stop this plan to eliminate the train to the track. Losing the link seems to me would be as close to a death blow to on-track attendance at Belmont as any economic challenges that face it.

-I heard the excellent ESPN studio host John Buccigross recently proclaim Evgeni Malkin the

front-runner for NHL MVP honors. I love Boochie, but man, Alex Ovechkin is the MVP of this league right now. He's Wayne Gretzky with muscle. He's the most dominant game-changer by far and he's hands-down the best and most exciting player.

12-24-08 2239

Since the regular days off from the job fall on Tue/Wed/Thu, it's just luck that I don't have to work the Christmas holiday. All the flights are packed, so I'll stick it out here in the big city and try to take it easy. I'll watch the Irish play Hawaii on the tube with a glass of nog on Christmas Eve and maybe catch a movie at some point. But there will be little in the way of traditional Christmas activity. I'll miss the family, but I'll enjoy not getting involved with the travel pressure-cooker that comes with such trips.

-MSNBC's live coverage of Monday afternoon's NTSB briefing on the weekend plane crash at Denver International didn't last very long. Since NTSB board member Robert Sumwalt was dry and clinical in his description of what the government's probe had yielded so far – and what the timetable of the investigation would be – MSNBC quickly lost patience and cut out of the news conference just a few minutes after it started. I flipped over to CNN – which also bailed about the same time. To get the sum and substance, I relied on the web sites of the few newspapers with reporters in Denver covering the story. While it's still not clear what caused the incident, several details emerged Monday after a 48-hour post-crash period with little significant official information. Published photographs show open aircraft doors on the charred right side of the airplane, but the NTSB says evacuation of passengers was conducted entirely through doors on the left side of the aircraft. The NTSB says firefighters opened the right-side doors to extinguish the fire but that the cabin crew directed passengers down slides on the left to avoid the flames. The Denver Post reported that the captain of the flight suffered a back injury in the crash and has not yet been interviewed by investigators. Sumwalt said he wanted to “be respectful of the captain's mental condition” as a way of explaining the length of time that's passed without getting the captain's official account. But it seems to be unfair in its implication. Both the NTSB and Continental are protecting the identity of both pilots at this stage. Why not protect them further by not making comments that suggest psychological impact.

The union representing the flight attendants on board said two of the three were injured. One suffered smoke inhalation and a neck injury – the other hurt a foot and ankle.

With a busy, snowy travel day expected Tuesday, Denver's airport operator re-opened runway 34 right Monday night. It means that planes will resume takeoffs on the same strip used by the plane that crashed – and it also means that some passengers launching in planes from 34R will see the broken-down Continental jet as they look out the window. The runway is considered vital on a day with heavy traffic and even more so because it is in close proximity to the de-icing pad.

It's not clear how long the totaled airplane will stay at its spot beyond the end of 34R, but the NTSB made it sound like it would be removed no earlier than Wednesday.

12-23-08 0130

When you spend every day of your work-week as one of 43-thousand people supporting the safe movement of 2500 daily departures, you can't help but feel anxiety when an airplane that's painted with your company's colors ends up in flames. Thank goodness everybody got out with their life and you hope that those who were hurt – or traumatized by the experience – can recover fully someday.

You're starting to hear aviation experts speculate on cause, but the wobbly general terms they speak do little to shed light on what happened. A story on the Wall Street Journal web site Sunday had the headline: "Brake Problem Suspected in Crash." That headline and story is somewhat misleading (not to mention incomplete in its early assessment) from the standpoint that brakes would not have been necessary on departure had the airplane done what it should have. The two working pilots in the cockpit likely made a quick-thinking decision to abandon their ascent based on a serious problem that revealed itself as the plane raced down the runway. It's also possible the problem that revealed itself gave the cockpit crew no option or available course of action. The main cause of the crash is likely something the cockpit crew knows or has a strong feeling about, but it could take a while before that information trickles out.

Without more data about wind speed/direction and the speed/position of the airplane if/when the brakes were applied, it seems hard to say much about the effectiveness of the brakes in this instance. A few passengers have been quoted as saying it felt as if the plane briefly left the ground before it came down.

There are a few things that are more certain. It was bitterly cold with a strong west wind when the plane was cleared for takeoff. The final resting place of the burning plane was just a couple hundred yards from a fire/rescue station. The fact nobody perished given the reported extent of the fire indicates an effective evacuation. Typically, it's the cabin crew that orchestrates the evacuation – so it will be interesting to hear accounts of how that went down.

Beyond that, it's hard to really say a whole lot until the NTSB, Continental, or an aviation writer with good sources reveals a specific cause.

If it's speculation that you're into, the place to go for that is airliners.net. The web site includes a forum with contributions from a broad cross-section of people in the US aviation industry including pilots. Hundreds of messages have been posted on this subject with many of them offering insightful analysis.

The airplane pictured above is the same model type as the one that crashed. It's a Boeing 737-500 and it has a passenger capacity of 114. At about 15 years old, the airplane is not considered in any way outdated, although Continental is moving to phase them out of the fleet. The photo above was taken Friday when ground crews in New York were forced to spray fluid on the plane to remove and repel frozen precipitation.

-On the "Rapid Fire" segment of the FOX pre-game show Sunday, Kurt Menifee asked the four-man panel of chuckling hams whether Bills coach Dick Jaaron should be fired at season's end. Nobody seemed interested in the question, but Mike Strahan decided to chime in. "They started 5-1. They're now 6-8. I mean, it's not looking good," he said. Terry Bradshaw then jumped in. He blamed Buffalo's week 14 loss to Miami in Toronto for all of the team's problems. "Goin' to Canada screwed 'em all up. I think it's bad

karma up there in Buffalo now. Oh Canada!” he said. Nobody on the panel mentioned that Fox Sports reported earlier in the week that Jauron was quietly given a three-year extension mid-season. Unless the extension has some kind of one-sided nullification option, you wonder if Buffalo would want to pay a fired coach for three years. At the same time, the money likely isn’t a huge sum (terms undisclosed) and fans in Buffalo are howling for a coaching change – especially after the brutal way the week 15 loss to the Jets ended.

-I would favor an exemption in the NFL’s “excessive celebration” rule for players who do “snow angels” after scoring a touchdown. Wes Welker’s snow angel seemed perfectly appropriate after he scored a second quarter touchdown against Arizona Sunday, but he was flagged and the Pats lost fifteen yards on the ensuing kickoff. As it stands now, players are allowed to spike the ball, dunk it, and jump into the stands. They’re allowed to dance. Why not let ‘em do a snow angel?

12-21-08 2100

My neighborhood’s newly-elected state senator Hiram Monserrate is in a big pot of hot water after being charged with a brutal attack on his girlfriend. It’s a murky he-said, she-said set of claims further complicated by the victim’s reluctance to assist investigators.

But this much we know based on the widespread coverage of the case and the police statements in connection with Monserrate’s arrest:

Early Friday morning, the 41-year-old Monserrate and his 30-year-old girlfriend Karla Giraldo appeared together at Long Island Jewish Medical Center. Giraldo had a nasty gash near her left eye. Twenty stitches were needed to close it up. At first, Giraldo told medical personnel that Monserrate deliberately inflicted the damage to her face with a broken glass. But when cops showed up at the hospital to arrest the veteran Queens politician and former cop, several news reports indicate that Giraldo retracted her original claim and said the whole thing was accidental when she realized Monserrate was in trouble.

Domestic violence law in these parts seems to acknowledge the tendency of victims to withdraw from pursuit of punishment for their abusers. So, fair or not in this instance, Monserrate was arrested and later charged with felony assault despite the withdrawal of Giraldo’s original claim of abuse.

Proving the case in court may be tough without the victim’s assistance, but Newsday reported exclusively that a surveillance video taken at Monserrate’s apartment building in Jackson Heights shows hostility and feuding in the hallway before the two went to the hospital. An unnamed source who Newsday says saw the video says the footage shows Monserrate dragging Giraldo away from another apartment as she sought help after the alleged assault.

It should be noted (as it has in all of the news stories) that Monserrate took Giraldo to an emergency room 12 miles away rather than the ER at Elmhurst Hospital which is just a few blocks from his apartment.

It’s possible that Monserrate may have chosen Long Island-Jewish because of its quality of care (or lack

thereof at Elmhurst) but cynics will say he was looking to cover up the incident by seeking medical assistance out of the neighborhood.

As a resident of Monserrate's state senate district and a former supporter of the popular city councilman, I'll wait to pass judgment on the current case. But two prior incidents involving Monserrate made me unwilling to support his quest to serve in the state legislature.

(1). He has helped channel hundreds of thousands of dollars in city council slush fund money to a shadowy community organization called "Libre." The Times has reported that Libre can't break down in detail how the tax-payer money steered to it by Monserrate is spent. It has been alleged that among the non-profit's unofficial functions was to aid Monserrate's campaign efforts.

(2). When the Queens Democratic Party machine cut a deal earlier this year to push out incumbent state senator John Sabini to clear the way for uncontested entry into the senate for Monserrate, the first move he made after officially gaining the senate seat was to withhold support for the senate's majority leader, a democrat. Rather than promote a new, unified democratic majority – something any freshman lawmaker should do – Monserrate briefly held out in an effort to extract terms from the democratic leadership. He did the same thing with his opposition to the Willets Point development. He opposed it until he could extract a deal – and then he supported it. Lawmakers should take positions on principle – not engage in games of push and pull.

With the thickening cloud of wrongdoing hovering over him, it's time for Monserrate to put his political career on hold. At least until the assault charge is settled one way or another, Monserrate should not begin his job as state senator. And unless he's cleared entirely of the heinous injury to his companion, it's time for Monserrate to step away from public office completely.

-Word came down late Saturday night that a Continental Airlines 737 bound for Houston crashed on takeoff from Denver International. All of the cable television news networks were locked into recorded, undated programming several hours after the incident and the top news radio station in Denver carried only cursory reports a solid five hours after the crash. The newscast we heard on KOA-AM Denver via the web at 11 PM Mountain time recited only the basic facts as reported by the AP and used a snippet of a recorded interview of a passenger obtained by a local TV station. KOA's conservative talk show host Sean Rima came out of the 11 PM news and said with an irreverent chuckle that the crash was "freakin' unbelievable" before taking his program into a long riff with callers about a proposed congressional pay raise. So much for the idea of covering the breaking local story. MSNBC will spend 30 minutes showing live footage of an airplane making an emergency landing without incident during the light of a weekday, but if far more significant news unfolds on a Saturday night, forget about it. My quest for information on the story was only minimally assisted by regularly updated AP dispatches and I was glad to get the fairly quick news that there were no fatalities. There was a time when local radio stations in cities and towns far smaller than Denver went to work immediately to blanket significant breaking news stories. Sadly, it seems like that time is gone.

Few bands bring it live like Oasis does and Wednesday night's show at Madison Square Garden again delivered a rock and roll blast of greatness. They're cool. They're tight. Their sound is layered and beautiful. You either seem to love 'em or hate 'em. I was indifferent until I saw them play Radio City in 2001. I've been hooked ever since; always hoping the next record is coming soon and waiting for the next tour.

This show was in support of the new record "Dig Out Your Soul." Oasis played for an hour forty-five and sprinkled six new songs into the setlist. The disc's first song – and perhaps the best song – "Bag it Up" was not among the songs that made the cut.

The band's previous stops on this North American stretch of dates were met with thousands of empty seats.

Large arenas in Detroit and Minneapolis had just five or six grand in the house. Not so at MSG. The place was totally packed except for closed-off sections behind the stage. Me and the Heckler sat on the aisle in section 309. The crowd of old and young stood and sang throughout. My regular Oasis running buddy Roberta was nowhere to be found but has the valid excuse of living in another state raising a newborn son with her husband.

Drummer Chris Sharrock has replaced Zak Starkey but otherwise the band's lineup is the same as it's been for as long as we've been seeing Oasis.

We stopped at several pubs in the six-block radius of the Garden before the show – and all of them were packed with Oasis fans prepping for the gig. The band's music blared from jukeboxes in all of these taverns. It made for a feeling that Oasis fans had taken over Manhattan.

Surprisingly, there was no meaningful security screening on the way into MSG which made me wish I had brought my camera.

12-18-08 1955