

A Funny Old Ballpark

W.M. Akers



Have you ever seen a baseball stadium with a hill in it? In Nashville, Tennessee, there used to be a ballpark called Sulphur Dell. It was one of the strangest ballparks in history.

In most ballparks, the right field fence is about 310 feet from home plate. In Sulphur Dell, it was only 262 feet—which made it very easy to hit home runs, if you hit the ball to just the right spot. That's pretty odd, but not half as weird as the hill in the outfield. It sloped up in front of the right field fence, until it got to about twenty-two feet high!

Skip Nipper, a historian who writes about Sulphur Dell in his book *Baseball in Nashville*, called the stadium "quirky." He likes to tell a story about a player named Phil Weintraub, who had some trouble with the outfield hill in 1934.

"A hard line drive came his way," said Nipper, "and he ran down the hill and reached down to catch the ball and missed it. It went between his legs. He turned around, went up the hill to catch it, and once again it went between his legs. When he finally got it, he threw it over the third baseman's head."

In baseball, when a player makes a mistake, he's charged with an "error." It's pretty bad if a player makes more than one error in a game, but on that play, Phil Weintraub made three!

A lot of great players came through Sulphur Dell, including Bill Dickey, Honus Wagner, and the sultan of swat himself: Babe Ruth. When Ruth came to town, the whole city was excited. The state Senate even made a special resolution, allowing them to leave the Capitol early so they could all go to the game. Back then, you couldn't watch players on TV, and they didn't want to miss their chance to see Babe Ruth. Ruth was in the outfield when he played there in 1934, Nipper said, and "almost broke one of his legs" running on it.

But even though the ballplayers didn't like hills, the people of Nashville loved their ballpark. They called it "the Dell." Nipper started going to games at the Dell when he was a child. His father would take him, and so would his grandfather.

"My dad would take me and my cousin or my brother," he said, "and we would sit on the first base side, so we could see that right field hill. And my grandfather would not let us go to the concession stand until the seventh-inning stretch. He wanted us to watch the game."

One of the greatest games ever played at the Dell was on July 11, 1916. A pitcher named Tom Rogers was on the mound for the Tennessee Volunteers. They called him Shotgun Rogers, because he threw the ball so fast. That night, he pitched better than he ever had. He did something that's only happened a few dozen times in all of baseball history: he threw a perfect game. That means that, in nine innings of play, nobody on the opposing team got a hit. Nobody got a walk. Nobody even got to first base!

By 1963, the old ballpark wasn't so popular anymore. They stopped playing baseball there, and eventually tore it down. But in 1978, a new team came to town: the Nashville Sounds. They built themselves a brand new ballpark called Greer Stadium. A lot of famous players have played there: Don Mattingly, Ryan Braun, Rick Ankiel—even Michael Jordan, when he was playing baseball.

Sulphur Dell had been around for almost 100 years when they tore it down. Greer Stadium probably won't last that long. The city wants to build a brand new ballpark for the Sounds. One of the places they're thinking about building it is right beside the state Capitol, on a spot of land called Sulphur Dell.

Where does Skip Nipper think they should build the new stadium? He doesn't care.

"I'm a baseball fan," he said. "I'm going to go wherever they play."

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What was Sulphur Dell?

- A a baseball
- B a historian
- C a ballpark
- D a meeting place for state senators

2. What does this passage describe?

- A This passage describes the career of baseball stars like Babe Ruth, Don Mattingly, and Ryan Braun.
- B This passage describes a strange old ballpark and some of the things that happened there.
- C This passage describes the reasons that some people want to build a new ballpark next to the state Capitol in Tennessee.
- D This passage describes the different players on the Nashville Sounds.

3. Sulphur Dell was a strange ballpark.

What evidence from the passage supports this statement?

- A "In most ballparks, the right field fence is about 310 feet from home plate. In Sulphur Dell, it was only 262 feet—which made it very easy to hit home runs, if you hit the ball to just the right spot."
- B "The city wants to build a brand new ballpark for the Sounds. One of the places they're thinking about building it is right beside the state Capitol, on a spot of land called Sulphur Dell."
- C "One of the greatest games ever played at the Dell was on July 11, 1916. A pitcher named Tom Rogers was on the mound for the Tennessee Volunteers."
- D "A lot of great players came through Sulphur Dell, including Bill Dickey, Honus Wagner, and the sultan of swat himself: Babe Ruth. When Ruth came to town, the whole city was excited."

4. Based on the information in the passage, how did baseball fans feel about Sulphur Dell?

- A Baseball fans hated Sulphur Dell and almost never went to games there.
- B Baseball fans loved Sulphur Dell and were excited about going to games there.
- C Baseball fans did not care much about Sulphur Dell one way or the other.
- D Baseball fans did not like Sulphur Dell at first but started liking it more in the 1960s.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A what watching a baseball game at Sulphur Dell was like for Skip Nipper
- B what it means for a pitcher to throw a perfect game
- C what made Sulphur Dell a strange and special ballpark
- D how the right field fence in Sulphur Dell made it easy to hit home runs

6. Read the following sentence: "By 1963, the old **ballpark** wasn't so popular anymore. They stopped playing baseball there, and eventually tore it down.'

What does the word **ballpark** mean?

- A a hill in the outfield of a baseball stadium
- B a fence that is about 310 feet from home plate
- C a baseball game in which no player gets a hit
- D a place where baseball is played

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentence below.

Sulphur Dell was eventually torn down _____ it had once been popular and loved by baseball fans.

- A although
- B because
- C before
- D especially

8. According to the passage, what was weird about the outfield at Sulphur Dell?

9. Describe the trouble Phil Weintraub had with the outfield hill in 1934.

10. Was Sulphur Dell a good place or a bad place for baseball games? Explain your answer using evidence from the story.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 870

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8. According to the passage, what was weird about the outfield at Sulphur Dell?

Suggested answer: There was a hill in the outfield.

9. Describe the trouble Phil Weintraub had with the outfield hill in 1934.

Suggested answer: Students may respond that the outfield hill caused Weintraub to make three errors on one play. They may also get more specific, describing the three errors Weintraub made—missing the ball on its way down, letting it roll down the hill between his legs, and throwing it over the third baseman's head.

10. Was Sulphur Dell a good place or a bad place for baseball games? Explain your answer using evidence from the story.

Suggested answer: Answers may vary, provided that they are supported by the passage. Students may argue that Sulphur Dell was a good place for a baseball game, citing such reasons as the ease of hitting home runs and the multitude of baseball greats who played there. Those arguing that Sulphur Dell was a bad place for a baseball game might cite such reasons as the difficulties the outfield caused players like Phil Weintraub and Babe Ruth.