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A 'U.S.A.' HOLIDAY AT SHEA



SOLEMN SCOREBOARD: Red, white and blue ribbon marks Twin Towers replica atop scoreboard. N.Y. Post: Charles Wenzelberg

By ADAM MILLER
and CATHY BURKE

The national pastime returned to the Big Apple last night in a bittersweet combination of celebrity and solemnity.

Fans — clutching small flags, draped in giant ones, or chanting "U.S.A., U.S.A." — flocked to Shea for a combination tribute and rededication to baseball, braving heightened security and long lines with nary a grumble.

"I'm glad we got back to baseball," proclaimed Shirley McMillan, 33, of Staten Island, carrying a small flag and wearing a hat declaring "America: United We Stand."

"Now I can take my mind off the tragedy for a few hours each night."

The stadium, up until two days ago, had been used to store rescue equipment to aid in the aftermath of the Twin Towers terror attacks.

And though baseball returned with the game between the Mets and Atlanta Braves, there were signs everywhere that some things had changed for good.

The home dugout no longer has "2000 National League Champions" emblazoned. Now it reads: "God Bless America."

The Twin Towers replica on the scoreboard had a red-white-and-blue ribbon hanging over them.

Tears mixed with cheers.

"It's a very somber mood," said firefighter Ron Curaba, 43, of Ladder Co. 197 from East New York, Brooklyn, his voice thick with emotion.

"The pain is really unbearable right now," he said. "I just came from a funeral for one of our brothers. It's a pretty tough time for us all. We've lost so many."

Vic Clavie, of Mineola, L.I., lost his brother-in-law, firefighter Gerard Duffy, 53, of Ladder Co. 21 in Manhattan.

"The only reason I'm here is to pay homage to him," he said. "I'm a Yankee fan. But he was the biggest Mets fan. He would want me to be here. We're not going to let the terrorists terrorize America."

The pregame ceremony featured the singing of "God Bless America" by Diana Ross and an introduction of hero rescue workers from the NYPD, FDNY, EMS and Port Authority.

Yankee fanatic Mayor Giuliani also showed up, and there was a 21-gun salute from the U.S. Marine Corps honor guard, the National Anthem sung by salsa star Marc Anthony and "Amazing Grace" played by the NYPD pipers band.

Players knew the comeback would be tough.

"Most of us are really excited to get back home," first baseman Todd Zeile said earlier. "It's going to be a great opportunity for us to pay tribute."

Manager Bobby Valentine, his coaching staff and the 31 uniformed players said they'd donate last night's salaries to benefit the widows and children of city uniformed workers.

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