

August 5, 2001----

BROOKLYN, N.Y.--The fans of the Brooklyn Cyclones, professional baseball's newest minor league team, have taken a liking to 19-year-old third baseman Joe Jiannetti. Maybe its because his name spins off the tongue like a roller coaster.

Wheeeeeee--as in Jiannetti.

The Cyclones play on Coney Island.

Coney Island is America's grittiest playground. Truth and fiction have always been the fast-talking pitch of the amusement park, and the truth is Coney Island is on a major comeback. The Cyclones are part of the game plan.

The Class A affiliate of the New York Mets is named after the wooden Cyclone roller coaster, which appears in the distance over the 19-foot left-field fence. The Cyclone opened in 1927 and is registered as a National Historic Landmark.

An advertisement on the center-field wall says "Hit the Sign--all fans ride the Wonder Wheel Ferris wheel free." Coney Island's famed Parachute Jump stands near the boardwalk behind the right-field corner.

If you sit in the right-field bleachers and chant "Let's go, Joey!" with the working-class crowd, you can smell the salt from the Atlantic Ocean. And if you move down to the grandstands, you are brushed back by the spicy aroma of Nathan's Famous hot dogs.

After the game, the bravest fans adjourn to Ruby's Tavern on the 12th Street boardwalk. Tattooed regulars dance to a dimly lit jukebox that plays the Doors, Tito Puente and Ronnie Hawkins. Who do you love? A sea of street people float through the steamy crowd, including one fortysomething African-American woman who wears tight hip-huggers and a halter top while sucking on a pacifier.

Ruby Jacobs died last April at the age of 74. He owned the seaside bar with his brother Phil, who died in November at 84.

They are buried together at a cemetery near the Belmont racetrack. Ruby's tombstone reads: "*Coney Island the Elixir of Life.*"

And the Cyclones are a melting pot for the spirit of Coney Island.

A graduate of Daytona Beach Community College, Jiannetti was promoted in mid-July from the Mets rookie league team in Kingsport, Tenn. Matt Gahan, the 25-year-

old starting pitcher, is from Agonellaban, Australia. Reserve infielder Vladimir Hernandez is from Havana, Cuba, where he attended Ho Chi Minh High School. Starting right fielder John Toner hails from St. Joseph, Mich.

Between the 1820s and 1850s, Coney Island was a destination for New York's rich and famous. The trip by boat or steamer from Manhattan was too expensive for the working class. However, by the end of 19th century, group excursion fares made Coney Island a destination point for the masses, whose factories and unions held daylong events at the beach.

When the subway system hit Coney Island in 1920, the joint really started to jump. Paradise by the sea became known as "The Nickel Empire" because of the 5-cent subway fare. "It is blatant, it is cheap," said author Reginald Wright Kaufman. "It is the apotheosis of the ridiculous. But it is something more; it is like Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone Park. To not have seen it is not to have seen your own country."

It is still like that.

Today, there are 150 rides at Coney Island, one sideshow (Sideshow by the Seashore) and a dozen snack bars and restaurants. Promises are made on the boardwalk and the ballpark--there's no other baseball field in America with an outfield sign that promotes "The Riviera--Only ONE WEDDING at a time." The Riviera banquet hall is a challenge to the nearby Gargiulo's Restaurant which books several weddings a day. Both Coney Island establishments date back to the early 1900s.

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Baseball and Brooklyn were married circa 1849 when the "Trolley Dodgers" became the borough's first professional team. The club was named for the trolley cars that ran like lightning through Brooklyn. The Brooklyn Dodgers played their last National League game on Sept. 26, 1957, at Ebbets Field before moving to Los Angeles. Only 6,702 fans attended that game.

When the Cyclones play the Abner Doubledays on a mid-July Saturday night at the new \$39 million KeySpan Park on Coney Island, a sellout of 7,885 fans are on hand.

It's a tough crowd, devoid of tourists and full of Brooklynites. Morrin Davis is a slightly timid 19-year-old outfielder for the Doubledays. He does not pose much of a threat. He has struck out 41 times in 98 at bats and bats last in the order.

Brooklyn is winning 6-3 with one out in the ninth inning. A bunch of fans down the first base line chant "MORON! MORON!" Another young fan yells, "HEY . . . Da doctor slapped ya mother . . ." Davis looks away. And he strikes out swinging.

Davis walks back to the dugout.
His head is bowed in the merry shadow of the Cyclone.

These are the ups and downs of minor league ball.

"This is good for Coney Island," says "Uncle Mike" Stoffo, a 42-year-old carpenter who lives a couple of blocks away from the ballpark. He is sitting in the bleachers with his 6-year-old niece, Alessandra Stoffo, on his lap. Uncle Mike has lived in Brooklyn all his life.

He looks out of his wraparound sunglasses, over his right shoulder, and says, "My mother and father rode on that Parachute ride over there. That closed down in the '50s. And now Brooklyn is coming back. People are starting to respect the boroughs more. Manhattan got too expensive and people started moving out to the boroughs."

In fact, the Smith Street restaurant strip in Brooklyn is one of the hottest areas of New York. There is zero vacancy along the 14-block boulevard, which features French bistros, a sushi bar, art galleries and an Asian fusion restaurant.

Stuffy baseball people like Roger Kahn, who wrote "The Boys of Summer," the epic about the Brooklyn Dodgers, have vowed to have nothing to do with the Cyclones. Get over it. The Dodgers have been gone for 44 years. Such a highbrow stance against minor league ball goes against the very underdog nature of the Brooklyn Dodgers and Coney Island.

"The major thing I had to make sure everybody understood is that we're not the Brooklyn Dodgers," says Jeffrey Wilpon, executive vice president and chief executive officer of the Brooklyn Baseball Co. "We're not a championship major league team that the Brooklyn Dodgers were. We're a minor league short-season team where kids will be trying their hardest because they'll never know if this is the last night they will get to play this game."

In 1983 Wilpon was a catcher in the same New York-Penn League where his Cyclones play. After one season playing for the Jamestown Expos, the Brooklyn native retired to pursue a career in business.

"The people in Brooklyn love baseball," continues Wilpon, 39. "They absolutely die for baseball. Our crowd is not a high-class, snotty group. These are family people who are high-class baseball fans."

More than 15 million people are expected to visit Coney Island this season (which technically ends around Labor Day). "The ballpark is clearly changing demographics," says Dick Zigun, president and founder of the not-for-profit Coney Island USA. "You see a lot more middle-class families and baseball caps walking around. But rather than put numbers of people in the neighborhood, it has sent a media message across the country that things are changing around Coney Island."

It's not just hype that things will be better."

The first place Cyclones lead the New York-Penn League in attendance, drawing 7,668 fans per game (for perspective, Mahoning Valley is second in the league with 5,358 fans a game.) More than 7,000 people entered a name-the-team contest during the winter.

For grins, here are some runner-up choices: "The Hot Dogs," "The Bums" and my favorite, "The Honeymooners," just for the notion of a Ralph & Ed Night.

Of course the wiseguy regulars in the bleachers have come up with their own names, based on the popular Brooklyn Dodger moniker of "Da Bums." With deep Brooklynspeak, there are now "Da 'Clones," and "Da Psychos," among those we can print.

New York Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani led the push for KeySpan Park, named after a utility company. The city is building a new \$200 million subway terminal at the Coney Island Stillwell Avenue stop. A Brooklyn native, Giuliani was on hand opening night and shook the hand of catcher Michael Jacobs, who hit the game-winning sacrifice fly for the Cyclones.

Howard Johnson is the Cyclones batting coach. Besides having the quintessential road name, the 40-year-old native of Clearwater, Fla., played his final year with the Chicago Cubs, closing out his career by hitting a mighty .195. His best year was with the Mets in 1991, when he became only the third player in major league history to hit 30 home runs and steal 30 bases in a season.

Johnson played nine years in New York. He doesn't see a need for sophisticated fans to be educated on the small-town charms of minor league ball. "They've actually embraced it," Johnson says, puffing on a cigar before the game. "They love the closeness of the ballpark, having the access of the players. And they love the atmosphere of this whole area."

While playing for the Mets, Johnson says, he drove by Coney Island, but never bothered to take in the funky amusement park. "I was told not to stop there," he says with a laugh. "But it has gotten a lot better. Now I take the subway here. I encourage our players to take a walk down the boardwalk and take in the sights.

"But don't look anybody in the eye."

Johnson made minor league stops at Birmingham, Ala., and Evansville, Ind., before breaking into the big leagues in 1982 with the Detroit Tigers. "The biggest difference between now and then are the ballparks," Johnson says. "They're so much nicer now. It was unheard of to have a place like this. And games sell out at this level. We never had that."

There is nothing not to like about KeySpan Park. Fans enter the bleachers from a

rear boardwalk entrance. The ornate stadium seats blend the logos of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Mets. The stadium's neon ambience blends in with the amusement park.

For example, the field lights are encompassed by neon hula-hoop rings of blue, green, red and yellow. Carnival-like neon lights underscore the concession stands. "People have told me coming in and out of LaGuardia or Kennedy airports at night, you see those rings lit up when we have a game," Wilpon says. "It's become an icon. The fact this has put Coney Island on the map is what gives me the greatest pleasure. This has given people a sense of pride again for their community."

CONEY ISLAND can be reached by taking the F, N, Q, Q Diamond and W subway lines to the termination point Stillwell Avenue Station.