

BY ROD O'CONNOR
TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY JOSÉ M. OSORIO

THE BALLPARK VENDOR'S LIFE HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS, A TEMP LEARNS

DOG DAY AFTERNOON

“

If you're coming here to watch the ballgame, if you're coming here to lollygag, you're not going to make any money,” barked Bill Kalata, vendor manager for Sportservice, the company that handles concessions at U.S. Cellular Field.

My training session had barely begun, and I didn't like what I was hearing. Not because of the money—my earnings would be going to charity—but because watching the game was exactly the reason I'd volunteered to work as a vendor on this beautiful Sunday afternoon. (Plus, I'm a writer after all, and I figured I could find an editor who'd let me share my behind-the-scenes experience. It worked.)

“What about the hot dogs? Can I eat a hot dog whenever I want?” I asked Kalata, addressing yet another motivation for arriving at the ballpark two hours before the first pitch.

Kalata nodded yes, but said I'd have to drop off my bin in the commissary and chow down outside on one of the entry ramps, away from the general public. “You wanna give any hot dogs away for free, that's fine with me,” he continued. “But you have to pay for them.”

On the surface, hawking hot dogs seems the perfect summer job—roaming the stands, interacting with fans, unfettered access to encased meats—but as I soon discovered, selling wieners is very serious business.

According to the National Hot Dog and Sausage



Council, baseball fans will consume nearly 30 million hot dogs at ballparks this season. Somehow, the industry trade group translated that number into a distance, and it's the equivalent of rounding the bases 41,776 times. At Cellular Field alone, 850,000 hot dogs were sold in 2006.

Chicagoans consumed more than \$41 million worth of wieners last year—impressive, sure, but that only scored us the No. 5 spot in the nation, behind New York, L.A., Baltimore/Washington, and Philadelphia.

But the 38,000 White Sox fans filling the stadium for today's match-up with the Devil Rays didn't care about rankings; they were here to enjoy a day at the ballpark, perhaps the quintessential American summertime experience. Along with the other 137 vendors working today, it was my job to serve up that experience piping hot on a soft bun—and, hopefully, no ketchup.

Bridgeport was already buzzing at 11 a.m.

when I cut across Armour Square Park toward the stadium employee entrance. I was greeted by Kalata, 59, a no-nonsense type sporting a black mustache. Vendor manager since 1999, he assured me he could whip me into shape before game time.

I was whisked through the concrete tunnel inside U.S. Cellular to the uniform room, where I received a White Sox cap, a regulation yellow Sportservice polo shirt, a money apron, a vendor's belt for carrying my hot dog bin and a large button announcing the price of a Best's Kosher dog: \$4.50. Along the way, golf carts whizzed by carrying box after box of ballpark snacks. As I struggled to keep up with Kalata, I caught my first glimpse of the freshly cut, unbelievably green grass down one of the outfield ramps. So, this is what Game Day feels like.

Next up was the money room, where I was fronted \$50 worth of bills and coins so I could make change. Then I was brought back to the employee entrance where my fellow vendors were lined up by seniority to receive their day's assignment from the union steward, Mike LaPapa. That's right, vending is a union gig, although non-union workers can pay \$6 for a one-day license. Most vendors pay their dues to Local 1, the same outfit that represents area doormen, cemetery workers and window washers.

Another reason vending can be an ideal summer job is the flexibility: You simply show up whenever you want to work. The uniformed vendors waiting in line ranged from teenagers zoning out on Game Boys to relative newcomers like Matt Ozark, 47, a mortgage loan officer from Orland Park, who started selling during the 2005 World Series season.

"This is really a pretty good part-time job. I can decide today if I'm gonna be here or not, and it's not a problem," said Ozark. Along with several high school and college kids, the 305 vendors on staff include baseball-loving accountants, teachers and lawyers, who can make anywhere from \$50 to more than \$150 a game.

Cellular Field also boasts a handful of full-time vendors like Lloyd Rutsky, a tough-looking guy in his late 50s who's been vending for 43 years. I asked him for advice, and he immediately told me to take my sunglasses off. "You want to make eye contact with people," he explained, before asking what product I would be selling. "Hot dogs will probably die in the fifth inning," he said. "I haven't sold them for years. I sell beer."

As the last man in line, I would normally be lucky to be pushing the least desirable product—think cotton candy, or hot chocolate on a warm day—but through some maneuvering I'm allowed to move up the list and get my shot hawking that slender sausage most synonymous with baseball.

LaPapa handed me my purple assignment card, and as I reported to the left-field commissary, Kalata imparted more advice.

"You go all the way down the aisle, and then you turn around and vend all the way up," he said. "You don't want to vend down for two reasons: One, you're gonna have people turning around wondering who in the hell's yelling 'hot dogs.' And by the time you get down there, you might not have any product left" to sell before heading back up to the commissary for a refill.

I even repeated it back to him: "Go down and vend up."

I gave my purple card to Nancy Vranc, the friendly woman perched in the cash cage, and she provided a receipt that I brought to the food counter in

exchange for a 22-pound, stainless-steel bin filled with 25 hot dogs.

The bin wasn't heavy, but it was awkward. And as the temperature outside crept past 80 degrees, I didn't appreciate the small Sterno heater inside toasting my midsection. I adjusted the vending belt and ventured into the concourse.

Fifteen minutes before game time, and the ballpark was packed. It was Memorial Day weekend and the first really nice day of the summer—and the fans dressed the part. There were shirtless guys who definitely shouldn't have been, and plenty of women in their 20s flaunting short-shorts and halter tops. Also, a noticeable family contingent—moms and dads holding hands with pint-sized Sox fans decked out in silver and black.

As the national anthem started, I removed my cap and looked around. I was no longer just a fan; I was a hot dog guy. After the last patriotic bar faded, the loudspeakers fired up "Thunderstruck" by AC/DC, the White Sox pre-game anthem. The stadium was seriously rocking, and I followed the lead of the other hot dog vendors by banging the lid of my steel bin up and down with the clapping of the crowd.

Then it was showtime. "Hot dawg! Who's ready for a hot dawg?" I yelled as, contrary to Rutsky's advice, I started selling while moving down the aisle of section 147. It felt strange at first, but soon my call effortlessly blended with the cacophony of other hawkers—"Beer here!" . . . "Cracker Jacks!" . . . "Who needs a Lemon Chill?"

I kept my sunglasses on part of the time but, this time heeding Rutsky's words, I tried to make eye contact with prospective customers. Finally, a 30-ish looking guy called out: "Over here, Bud!" and I dug into the bin and handed his 5-year-old son what I imagined was his first-ever ballpark hot dog. His dad then passed me a \$10 bill and told me to keep the change, netting me my very first tip. I gave the kid a double thumbs-up, and he returned the favor.

A few rows away, two retiree couples having the time of their lives bought four more dogs. While I stood there chatting, I didn't realize I was blocking the view for perhaps an entire section across the aisle. "Very important part of the game here! Big part of the game!" yelled some loudmouth. But being the professional that I am, I tuned out this distraction and took my time recounting my customers' change for a third time.

I was also very generous with the condiment packets, which they appreciated.

So far, I felt pretty good about my performance. But Kalata, who had been watching the whole time, disagreed.

"I see things you're doing wrong already," he said. "You're taking too long, and you don't want to sell any hot dogs going down; you want to sell them coming up. And it looks like you're on a death walk . . . Smile."

I sold my first load of 25 dogs in just over half an hour. But by the time I returned to the commissary to refill my bin, my back was killing me and I was sweating like Babe Ruth after an all-night bender.

My second load didn't sell as briskly as the first. My patience was also growing thin.

When two kids flagged me down in the concourse and made me walk to their seats in the front row for one measly hot dog, I basically forced them to take three more. ("C'mon, only one hot dog? Doesn't your friend here want a hot dog? I'm not leaving until you buy another hot dog.") When they asked if I could break a \$100 bill, I just gave them the dogs for free to get rid of them. What were teenagers doing with a \$100 bill, anyway?

The worst part was, it was already the third inning and I had no idea what was going on in the game. I decided to make my way behind home plate for a closer look and arrived just in time for a White Sox rally. When Joe Crede singled in two go-ahead runs, I jumped up and down with the crowd, banging wildly on my hot dog bin. This was more like it.

Across the aisle I noticed Lloyd Rutsky, the veteran beer vendor. "Have you seen any of the game?" he yelled over the noise. "The only reason I do this is to watch the game."

After one more inning trudging the aisles, I had enough. I ditched the bin and apron and caught the rest of the game in the manner to which I was accustomed: as a fan. After cashing out, I was given a printout with my earnings: \$28.01 for selling 50 kosher wieners. Plus, I made \$5.50 in tips, just enough for a cold beer.

I scanned the crowd looking for Rutsky. "Yo, beer man!" I yelled. □

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