

# Tailgating a tradition in Milwaukee

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By John Sahly / MLB.com

MILWAUKEE -- With summer kicking off, the Brewers hovering around .500 and a series this week against the best team in baseball with Detroit, the increased weekday crowds at Miller Park meant one thing -- more tailgating.

But there's something different, something unique about tailgating in Milwaukee.

It's not a fad. It's not a trend. It's a tradition that holds as a rite of passage.

Take a walk down an aisle of any one of the half-dozen parking lots filled to capacity with tailgaters: grills in all shapes and sizes -- some looking like they could hold enough food to feed most of the city -- music blasting, any one of a number of Brewers jerseys and shirts on people of all ages, races and sizes.

It's a culture not fully grasped unless seen in person. You don't breathe oxygen. You breathe the local trinity of bratwurst, beer and Brewers.

"I can't think of a time when we came here that we didn't tailgate," said Joe Nolan from Waukesha, Wis., who was setting up his tailgate for an estimated 50 people.

And everyone has a memory that stands out.

"Too many beers and not enough restrooms," joked Pete Reynolds from Racine, Wis., who tailgated this week with his wife, sister-in-law and two young sons.

The culture goes further, though. Some people come to Miller Park just for the tailgating. No tickets to the game. No seventh-inning stretch. No chance to watch the sausage race. They come just for everything that encompasses tailgating.

On Monday, no group personified this culture better than a party of six friends and co-workers from an insurance company in Racine.

Long after the game began, and 15 others from the company outing took their seats in the ballpark, this group of six remained three football fields from the game. The loudest cheers of the night inside the ballpark barely reached their parking lot dice game.

"Don't get me wrong, we like the game," Mike Walton said. "But we love coming here to tailgate and we enjoy each others company."

So why do so many people fight traffic and pay the parking fee instead of simply cooking out at someone's home?

"It's just something Wisconsinites do," Jessica Barnett said.

And it's something this group had down pat.

Hours after the flames from the grill went out, the group still talked at length about the events of the day's tailgate.

Since the parking lots open three hours before the game, something has to be done to pass the time besides the usual sausage and suds. Some people play catch, others listen to music and talk about the banged-up Brewers pitching staff.

This group ran their own sausage race.

They didn't dress up in the awkward-looking costumes that have become so famous over the years. Creativity was the name of the game on this day.

Attaching the axles and wheels from toy cars to cooked bratwursts, the group raced their respective sausages down a homemade ramp.

The owner of each "car" planted their own flag to their sausage. Jennie Fuhrman's flag featured the picture of the hot dog from the Brewers sausage race. She also added a spoiler using a Frito.

"You've got to work with what you've got," Fuhrman said.

Fuhrman won the race and received two prizes: A Brewers coaster/picture frame and a picture of an obscure racecar driver.

Fuhrman was also half-jokingly accused of cheating in the race by pushing her "car" down the ramp and was referred to as "The Cheater" for a portion of the evening. All in good fun, though, as the group shared a willingness to eat, drink and talk with anyone nearby, a tailgate mentality that's a staple in Milwaukee.

Even players and coaches have gotten into the act.

"It's a great tradition and I don't know a lot of other places that do it like they do here, other than Minnesota back in the 1970s and 80s," said former Brewer Gorman Thomas. "It's part of the gameday tradition here."

Thomas would know. In his playing days with the Brewers he and manager George Bamberger frequently stopped by tailgates at County Stadium before and after games.

"I'd pick one that looked like it was calm and just interact with the fans," Thomas said. "I'd stop in before the game and have a cup of coffee and on the way out a brat and maybe a beer."

With alcoholic beverages so popular at the tailgates, it's hard to believe that last year the drinking on the park premises almost came to a halt.

Ordinance 106-2.1, passed in 1980, says it shall be unlawful for anyone to drink alcohol in public parking lots or parking structures. The fine is \$50 to \$250. Last summer, the ordinance was pointed out to a Milwaukee alderman by a police sergeant. Thankfully for most, the ordinance was quickly adjusted to fit tailgating under a "special event" -- fitting words for such a tradition.

The custom could have ended when Milwaukee County Stadium closed its doors in 2000, much like when the Minnesota Twins left their suburban home at Metropolitan Stadium for the downtown Hubert H. Humphrey Metrodome in the early 80s.

During the planning stages of Miller Park, one of the additional reasons to keep the park at virtually the same location was to keep the tailgating culture alive.

"It's arguably the single thing that makes the Miller Park experience so unique to anywhere in baseball," said Brewers vice president of communications Tyler Barnes. "When you build a stadium downtown it's hard to tailgate because the parking is too spread out or you're parking on decks."

Instead, the culture continued in the surrounding parking lots this week. With a stereo playing music, one could only associate with the waning hours of a night spent in a southern bar, drowning out the stadium noise, Walton cracked open a beer and the group went over a story from long ago about the band playing at that particular moment.

A few minutes later, the crisp opening of another round of drinks permeated through the music with the cheers of a go-ahead home run by Prince Fielder. Another chapter in Brewers tailgating closed hours later with a Brewers loss to the Tigers, with only a new chapter to begin again the next day.

*This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.*

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