

← Back to Original Article

Welcome to zee old ballgame

Parisian teenagers take in a Dodgers game on their U.S. tour arranged by French-Jew'rney.

July 28, 2011 | Chris Erskine

Fashionably great, the French kids pour down Aisle 2, top deck, at the bottom of the first inning. They ooh-la-la the purple mountains. They ooh-la-la the big green rug.

"Let's go, Dod-jeurs!" they holler.

"Take me out to zee ball game!" they sing.

They fall down a lot. They are teenagers.

It is part of the kismet of an old ballyard that you can be sitting there alone on a summer's night, wondering what you can do to further Franco-American relations — if anything — when in wander 25 French schoolkids to take in their very first American baseball game.

Thank you, God. You rule in mysterious ways, monsieur.

Turns out that the kids, ages 14 to 17, are staying at Whittier College, on a two-week visit. They are from Paris, all of them. Some are classmates; others met on this trip. This Dodgers game is the last sightseeing adventure of their American vacation.

And, oh, what a sight they turned out to be.

In most ways, in the ways that matter, they are like teenagers from Huntington Beach or Van Nuys. Cameras and phones always in hand ... digitally frantic. The girls are button-nosed, like deer. The boys superhumanly cool.

Typical teens. When they hadn't eaten for 15 or 20 minutes, the kids' blood sugar would drop and they'd become a little sleepy.

But when they were fed, and there was action on the field, they'd spring to life.

Selfless in ways even I don't pretend to understand, I treat them to pretzels and red licorice and ask them how they like our little city.

"I prefer New York," one of them says.

"Really?"

"I prefer Israel," says another. "My second favorite place in zee world is California. The first is Jerusalem."

So, maybe not so typical after all. They are all Parisians, sent over by French-Jew'rney, an organization that helps European teens experience American culture. Fairly well off, I assume from their pricey two-week vacation, though we never really discuss that.

What we discuss is baseball. Ever try to explain it to a foreigner?

"OK, that croissant down there, that's first base," I say.

"What's ay dou-BELL?"

"That's when they get two croissants."

"How do zay get zee points?"

"Not points, runs."

"What is zee NL?" one asks.

Unfortunately, we didn't have time to get into the nonwaiver trade deadline or the Rule 5 draft, all the stuff I'm a little fuzzy on anyway.

When they ask if the Dodgers are having a good year, I say "Yes, *tres bon*," then start to explain the little speed bumps along the way: divorce, bankruptcy, etc. But that gets tangled too. I end one sentence with a shrug, the way the French sometimes do.

"Baseball ... eez so boring," one of the girls says.

The French kids also don't much care for the American ballpark grub. Too much sugar. Too much fat.

In fact, they dislike the food so much, they spend only about three innings devouring it.

"I loooooovre Los Angeles," Lauren says.

"I like zee sunshine," says Julia (or maybe it was Emma).

"I want to move here," says Lea (or maybe it was Salome).

"Eeez expensive?" asks Lola.

"Very affordable," I say. "Almost free."

In the top of the third, I decide to sneak them from the top deck to the field level — don't ask me how — but let me just say that getting 25 French kids into an elevator is like taking 100 penguins to prom.

"Against who are they playing?" one asks when we settle into our new seats.

"The Rockies," I say.

"Zee Rockies are good, no?"

"Depends on the day of the week," I say.

When they discover the dance cam, things turn a little clubby and loud. The ushers don't let them stand on their seats, but that's OK. They cheer and laugh. They share their Red Vines. The girls flirt with the old guy selling souvenirs, who flirts right back.

A teenager squeals. Knowing the French, I figure someone either surrendered or fell in love.

I sense an international incident in the making, but it's all good. There's a lone chaperone, a French journalist who doesn't look much older than the kids. I don't know how she survived two weeks by herself. I hope she didn't lose anyone, but I'm not absolutely sure.

So, if you spot a couple of French kids wandering around Universal City or maybe the Santa Monica Pier, bait them with some good *fromage* and call the embassy immediately.

They are good kids — charming and disarming, curious and chatty — and I'm sure France would want them back, at least eventually.

If not, we'll probably keep 'em. They were a handful, sometimes. But they sure sang the heck out of "God Bless America."

Merci for that, you crazy kids. Go, Dod-jeurs!

chris.erskine@latimes.com twitter.com/erskinetimes