



Nats announce major changes to RFK

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By Michael Walsh / MLB.com

WASHINGTON -- Saying that there was no reason to wait until their new ballpark was opened in 2008 and that a decline in attendance this season was not the deciding factor, incoming Nationals president Stan Kasten announced major changes to occur at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium during the second half of the 2006 season.

On Monday at the ESPNZone in Washington D.C., the Nationals announced the "Grand Reopening Weekend" of RFK Stadium to take place during a series with the Chicago Cubs on July 21-23.

Starting with the changes in place for the series against the Cubs, Kasten announced a "Fan Fest" that will open on the Armory Mall two hours before each game of the series. Among the games and attractions will be an inflatable obstacle course, a batting cage and a dunk tank.

In keeping with the "Paint the Town Red" theme of the weekend, fans will be encouraged to wear red to the games against Chicago.

"But just in case they forget we're going to give them a hand," Kasten said.

The team will be holding a giveaway for fans for each of the three games, beginning with the first 40,000 fans to attend Friday night's game receiving a red Washington Nationals cap. Saturday, the first 40,000 through the gates will get a red Nationals T-shirt, and Sunday, 40,000 red Washington rally towels will be passed out to fans.

Saying that he wanted to enhance fans' experiences and draw more than just the traditional demographics to the Nationals, Kasten went through a number of what he called "permanent changes" designed to improve the Washington franchise's attendance numbers now.

The change most evident of the new ownership's desire to reach out to the community was the slashing of ticket prices. Kasten announced that 1,000 of the former \$11 seats in RFK will now be dropped to \$5, and 1,000 of the seats that used to cost \$5 will now be \$3. Both sections of seats are in the upper-seating bowl.

Other changes include stadium renovations designed to perk up the appearance of the 45-year-old former home of the Washington Redskins and Washington Senators.

The team will replant flower beds outside the stadium, place team-colored tennis-court netting around the main entrance to the park and place new "Washington Nationals" banners on the light poles around the stadium. Kasten said RFK will get a face-lift not only on the outside, but on the inside, thanks to the use of professional cleaners.

Kasten also noted changes to the food menus around RFK. First, the former Capitol View Terrace will be renamed the Terrace Food Court and will house themed food from local vendors.

Three new grills will be added to the 200 and 500 level sections, with the grill cart on the 200 level being revamped to feature new foods, including half smokes, bratwurst, white bratwurst and red hots.

The staff of Aramark and RFK will also be undergoing changes to improve fans' "doorstep to doorstep" experience. Aramark will not only expand the number of staffers it has on hand at Nationals' games, according to Kasten, but will send some of its more experienced workers to lend a hand.

Aramark will have a hand in improving the staffing of RFK from LRA Worldwide, a consulting firm that specializes in customer experience management. LRA will offer training sessions for all staff that interact with the fans at RFK.

"This is an opportunity to begin laying the foundation for a great ballpark atmosphere and create some awareness around what drives a fan-friendly service experience," said Steve Ethier, Nationals' director of ballpark operations.

Kasten said that the ability to make changes and try new things was a result of "not being married" to anything done previously in Washington.

"That's the good thing about being new," Kasten said. "We can experiment."

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