

The ugly -- and, yes, slightly gross -- truth of stadium bathrooms

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INSIDE A WOMEN'S restroom on the southwest concourse of Atlanta's Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Scott Jenkins, the stadium's general manager, reaches down and, without hesitating, places his right hand on the floor. Uric acid, he says -- you know, the corrosive compound in our urine that often gets spilled by the gallon inside stadium bathrooms just like this one -- can eat through regular epoxy-based paint in practically no time at all. Which is why, before the \$1.6 billion MBS opened in 2017, Jenkins made sure every one of his bathroom floors was coated in the shiny, space-age, dual-system polymer under his fingertips right now. It's called MMA, or methyl methacrylate, and, judging by Jenkins' reaction, this is the first time anyone's ever bothered to ask about it. "Oh, I'm geeking out right now," he laughs. "I love potty talk."

When it comes to the home of Super Bowl LIII and the taboo, bizarre but often revealing world of stadium bathrooms, well, there's quite a lot to discuss.

In Atlanta, most visitors want to know more about the flower-petal retractable roof, the 360-degree, 1,100-foot halo video screen or the 1,260 beer taps. Nobody ever discusses the building's 30 percent increase over the Georgia Dome in female toilets (22 percent for the men), the swan-neck, stainless steel hands-free faucets that actually match the building's architecture or the drum-sized JBL ceiling speakers that give the toilets better sound than most of the nightclubs in Buckhead. It's a shame, really, since the ugly (and, yes, slightly gross) truth of the matter is that the stadium bathrooms will probably end up having a much greater impact on the overall fan experience at the Super Bowl, an event often plagued by ridiculously long lines at the loo.

"You add a restaurant or a walkway feature to the stadium, some people will use it, but everyone is going to use the restroom," Jenkins says. "So the functionality, the quantity, the aesthetics of your bathrooms is critical. It seems unremarkable to most people, but, trust me, you invite 70,000 people to your house and you get the bathrooms wrong -- you've got a huge problem."

Just ask the folks in Minneapolis. At the Super Bowl, where crowds produce -- wait for it -- about 8,000 gallons of urine and where more wastewater (nearly a million gallons) is used than what flows over Niagara Falls every second, the bathrooms are often a crowded, disgusting, leaky time bomb. Horrific conditions and outrageous lines at the bathroom have become as much a part of Super Bowl Sunday as lame commercials and Bill Belichick hoodies. "The restroom experience will make or break a fan's experience, especially at the Super Bowl," says Kathryn Anthony, an architecture professor at the University of Illinois and a board member of the American Restroom Association. "And, more often than not, my guess is it makes it more unpleasant."

Sure enough: During Super Bowl LII, even at the brand new billion-dollar U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, a building equipped with 979 toilets, while most female fans breezed in and out of the bathrooms, lines for the men's rooms snaked all the way across the concourse. The long waits meant male fans who spent upward of 30 minutes in line and paid \$5,000 for a ticket -- the going rate on the street -- were essentially forced to pay \$1,000 to pee. After decades of subtle but powerful gender discrimination in this part of stadiums, building codes now require teams to provide at least a 2-to-1 female-to-male toilet ratio. Which means, if sociologists are right, and public restrooms do, in fact, reflect our cultural values, then the contrast in bathroom lines at last year's Super Bowl might have also signaled a seismic shift in the evolving demographics, and power dynamics, of sports fandom.

And you thought stadium bathrooms were just a place to get rid of all that beer. Think again.

"That toilet seat," Anthony says, "is now just as important as your Super Bowl seat."

IN 2013, BEFORE a \$300 million renovation of Wrigley Field, the Chicago Cubs surveyed their fans to find out what elements of the grand old stadium were considered sacred and untouchable. "One thing that became

crystal clear was that we should not disturb or destroy the historic features of Wrigley Field that fans have come to know and love," says Julian Green, the team's vice president of communications.

The top choices were easy to guess: the iconic ivy, the hand-operated scoreboard and the brick backstops. But the final part of the stadium that fans insisted on being preserved puzzles the team to this day. "One of those historic features," Green says, "was the urinal troughs."

Although they are nearly extinct now, decades ago most older stadiums (and prisons) featured the medieval restroom relic known as the urinal trough. The urinal itself was patented in 1866 by New York inventor Andrew Rankin and made famous in 1917 by dadaist Marcel Duchamp, whose "Fountain" sculpture is considered one of the most influential works in art history. But the urinal trough? That has been around since the beginning of time. The apparatus is a large, communal urinal that offers an egalitarian, and highly efficient, method of elimination while forcing men to pee like cattle -- shoulder-to-shoulder, with zero privacy, and often while facing each other's junk. Few things evoke our deep, strange, love-hate relationship with stadium bathrooms like the urinal trough: a toilet-trigger that has launched a million cases of paruresis, shy bladder syndrome, and inspired a million more U-S-A! chants.

But most places, like the Carrier Dome in Syracuse, New York, have openly celebrated the removal of their last urinal trough. (For historic reference, there's the grainy YouTube video from 2011 showing a person, incorrectly ID'd as a Cubbies fan, using a urinal trough as a Slip 'n Slide.) The request by Cubs fans was so rare, in fact, that the team had to have new troughs custom fabricated -- because no one actually makes them anymore.

"When people come here to watch nine innings of baseball, they don't want to spend three innings waiting to use the restroom," Green says. "There's some nostalgia with them, too. I don't claim to be a social scientist as it relates to male camaraderie in the restroom. But I do think there's a sense of, if you go to any sports stadium, the men's rooms do become sort of a communal space."

With one World Series win in the past century, public humiliation might just be permanently imbedded in the Cubbies' collective consciousness. Or, perhaps, Cubs fans just understand and appreciate the bizarre bonding that is part of the shared scatological experience of surviving a stadium bathroom. If you've been to a major sporting event, chances are you have a bathroom story to share: either a recommendation (the Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati, featuring bathrooms with nursing stations for moms, is one of the few sports facilities to make Cintas' America's Best Restroom Hall of Fame) or a warning (if you're at a Raiders game, hold it). Stadium toilets are, after all, a very public place often crowded with inebriated strangers where we must perform an act that, since childhood, has been deeply ingrained in our psyche as private and shameful. The self-consciousness and shame can be so crippling that public bathrooms in Japan are often equipped with The Sound Princess, a device that broadcasts the sound of flushing toilets to mask any natural noises. No wonder, then, that the confluence of so many Freudian taboos in such a small, strange space, escalated by the anxiety and aggression we already feel while supporting our beloved sports teams, inspires an almost never-ending stream of hysterical behavior.

One of the few remaining highlights in Buffalo each fall are the seemingly annual reports of Bills fans having sex in the decrepit restrooms at Ralph Wilson Stadium. In 2017, New York Mets fan Tom McDonald honored the dying wish of his childhood friend Roy Riegel, a plumber, by flushing Riegel's ashes, one spoonful at a time, down the toilets in at least 16 major league ballparks. McDonald and Riegel grew up Mets fans in Queens. "For Roy, this is the perfect tribute to a plumber, a baseball fan and just a brilliant, wild guy," McDonald told The New York Times. Often, while committing his friend to the Citi Field sewer, McDonald uses the facilities as well. "I always flush in between, though," he says.

IN 1988, WHILE, of course, waiting in line to use the bathroom, Sandra Rawls, then an assistant professor of interior design, wondered about the power structures and social orders reflected in our public restrooms. Women typically take longer in the bathroom. What Rawls wanted to figure out was exactly how much longer, and why.

Rawls began collecting data across Virginia on restroom habits at airports, shopping malls and arenas. After interviewing hundreds of subjects, she discovered that women generally required 180 seconds to use the restroom compared to 84 seconds for men. In the past, the discrepancy was either ignored, laughed off or blamed on excessive primping. Instead, Rawls found that they were serious issues, such as clothing restrictions, security, bags, pregnancy, menstruation and the increased frequency (compared to men) of having to accompany small children. Rawls' groundbreaking research exposed the way bathrooms were being used as a form of gender discrimination, especially in sports stadiums.

Based on Rawls' study, moving forward, bathroom equality -- or Potty Parity, as the cause became known -- would be based on bathroom speed, not space. To achieve it, women demanded twice as many fixtures as men. And in March 1989, the state of Virginia's new building code doubled the number of restrooms for women in museums, libraries and stadiums. New York and other states quickly followed suit. "If the facilities are inequitable in a stadium then the message is clear," Anthony says. "(A) you don't belong here; (B) you're a second-class citizen; and (C) we don't really care, this is a man's space."

The next year, Denise Wells, a 33-year-old legal secretary and law school student, decided to skip the line at a George Strait concert in a Houston arena and slip into the nearly empty men's room. But an off-duty cop grabbed her, issued her a \$200 citation for using the wrong bathroom and escorted her out of the arena. "I was mortified," Wells says now. "I mean, if my mom had still been alive that would have killed her. But the public reaction to it, it didn't take long to realize there was a cause there that needed, well, exposing."

After Wells chose to fight the ticket in court and her story ran above the fold in The Houston Post under the headline "All Dressed Up and Nowhere to Go," she received support from all over the world. The inequity in stadium bathrooms had struck a chord with female fans. A jury, made up of four women and two men, took 23 minutes to reach the "not guilty" verdict that turned Wells into a folk hero and earned her an appearance on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. A few years later she was invited to the state capitol by Texas Gov. Ann Richards to witness the state's new Potty Parity law she inspired.

To this day, Wells still gets recognized for her bathroom stance. The last time she attended a Texans game at NRG Stadium -- where, Wells says, "the facilities are amazing and really fast" -- her friends insisted that all Houston sports teams should put up plaques in their restrooms in her honor.

To this day, trying to solve the equitable division of stadium bathrooms remains a flush point in sports. In 2010, after the Yankees and Mets added almost 1,500 new toilets for fans and the Giants and Jets opened a new stadium featuring 1,350 fixtures, all with the required 2-1 ratio of females to males, Anthony categorized it as the greatest "splash" ever for potty parity. In general, as the percentage of female fans at sporting events continues to rise, the rule of thumb for most stadium architects and construction companies is to install one urinal for every 80 male spectators, one full stall for every 225 men, and one toilet stall for every 60 female fans.

That formula, however, doesn't always match the crowds, especially when the split is greater than 60-40, like it was at the Super Bowl in Minneapolis last year. As a result, stadiums in Nashville, Chicago, New Jersey and Edmonton have all had to tweak their fixtures, adding back more urinals, not to mention more police to prevent fans from fighting over stalls or just commandeering and converting female bathrooms.

The simplest solution to our stadium bathroom problem is already contained in the 2018 international plumbing code: more gender-neutral single-user toilet rooms. This requires stall partitions that go all the way to the ground and a more relaxed, European attitude regarding our society's strict binary approach to bathrooms. To do that, though, our desire to not miss Brandon Graham's strip-sack of Tom Brady in the Super Bowl would have to be greater than our puritanical hysteria about sharing bathroom space.

For the time being, places like Jerry's World (aka AT&T Stadium) in Arlington, Texas, are using dynamic signage on bathrooms that allows them to shift the gender assignment based on the makeup of the crowd. For a Saturday night Taylor Swift concert, for example, AT&T Stadium staff can flip dozens of men's rooms to accommodate the singer's female-heavy crowd and then flip them back for a Cowboys game the next day.

OF COURSE, THERE are extreme solutions for those who just don't want to wait, such as Stadium Pal and Stadium Gal, portable urinal kits with a plastic bladder and catheter, that are designed to be worn on the inner calf. Fans in Rio de Janeiro's Maracana Stadium used to just relieve themselves on the stadium's ramps, until someone discovered the urine was corroding the concrete and slowly dissolving the stadium's steel girders. Now anti-urine units police the ramp. For the rest of us, technology to the rescue: Arenas in Indianapolis, Buffalo, Miami and elsewhere are experimenting with a phone app created by a company called WaitTime, which allows fans to use their phones to check crowd volume at restrooms before leaving their seats.

Mercedes-Benz Stadium is also experimenting with a stall signaling device called Peep No More. It's similar to the signs that appear by the bathrooms on airplanes, taking the guesswork out of searching for a vacant stall and increasing traffic flow by up to 50 percent. In the stadium bathroom world, traffic flow -- referred to as "throughput" -- is everything. Jenkins, the stadium GM, even sees it as the key to finally conquering the great Super Bowl stall.

But there will always be lines at halftime, he says, there's just no way to avoid it (other than installing 70,000 stalls) -- and the intermission rush can present problems other than wait times. At Alltel Stadium in 2005, Super Bowl sewage backed up during the game and began flooding the lower part of the stadium, including the Jaguars' team offices. (Insert your own Blake Bortles joke here.) To prevent a repeat of the Jacksonville poonami, weeks before Mercedes-Benz Stadium opened last summer, Jenkins conducted what he calls The Big Flush. Every available Falcons employee was given a walkie-talkie and assigned a restroom inside the stadium and on Jenkins' signal -- "OK, go!" -- they simulated Super Bowl halftime by repeatedly flushing all the toilets for 10-15 minutes. On average, a football stadium urinal is used 160 times per game. On Super Bowl Sunday in Atlanta, that could mean more than 100,000 flushes in four hours. "Good plumbers," Jenkins says, "are worth their weight in gold."

With the possible leakage situation in check, Jenkins' new mission was spreading out the demand and making the bathrooms convenient and quick to use at all times of the game. To that end, he has been tweaking and perfecting his bathrooms since the design phase -- especially after MBS decided to install 1,260 taps and sell \$5 domestic beers while also offering free refills on soda. Jenkins had to make sure the stadium could handle what he delicately described as "the ripple effect downstream." Because, he explains, "You don't really buy beer, you just rent it, right?"

So he maintains a massive spreadsheet listing every single bathroom fixture in MBS, and nothing escapes his notice -- not the crumbs he spots on a carpet outside a suite while giving a tour, or the stadium's soap dispensers, purposefully located over the sink to ensure that any errant cleanser goes down the drain, not on the floor. Jenkins installed mirrors in the women's restrooms, but not above the sinks, where research has shown they cause people to linger. He's added sturdier hardware on the stall doors and stainless steel shelves above every urinal for cups, and especially phones. New York Magazine's Science of Us says that nearly half of all fans will place a call while using the restroom during a game, 10 percent will complete an online purchase and 8 percent will actually consume food while on the can -- a quirk that seems slightly less disgusting inside Mercedes-Benz Stadium, where many bathrooms feature a fully stocked janitor's closet. After games, this allows a crew of 15-20 restroom associates to clean and disinfect every toilet in the stadium in less than seven hours using ionized water instead of traditional chemicals.

Finally, at owner Arthur Blank's insistence, the Falcons have also covered every available bathroom wall with 50-inch TVs to keep fans connected to the game at all times. But it's the color palette that remains the most distinctive trait of the Mercedes-Benz bathrooms. The immaculate gray speckled floors, shiny steel and deep red fixtures, black metallic speakers and unique gunmetal gray walls have transformed the typically institutional feel of the stadium bathroom into something you'd expect to see in an elegant restaurant or upscale hotel.

Which might mean the biggest problem at this year's Super Bowl won't be getting fans into the bathrooms at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

It will be getting them to leave.