

Every year, they board a bus bound for magic

By Tony Chamberlain
Globe Staff

WESTPORT, Conn. — The bus sits idling in the early morning across the street from Marjorie's Place, waiting for the New York train. At 8:45, out of the station, they come in a bunch wearing Red Sox caps, Red Sox jackets, carrying bats and gloves.

"When the last one is aboard," Henry Berry stands in front and says, "Gentlemen, are we all here?" Then in a theatrical announcement to the bus driver: "Take us to Fenway Park."

A roar of approval.
They are the BLOHARDS, and this is the day they escape duty and the women who take care of them, and head for the "lyrical little bandbox" on Lansdowne Street, Boston, just as they have been doing for 20 years.

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Globe staff photo/John Thomsen

Henry Berry (holding bat) leads his horde of BLOHARDS, a group of confirmed Red Sox fans from New York, into Fenway. Or: "You remember that playoff game with the Yankees in '76, and Bucky Dent ...

... if these are their duties — Williams, Tom Yawkey, Yaz — then their religion consists of a kind of endless dialogue about the past.
"Do you remember those last two games of the '48 season? Oh, they were horrible. Why in heaven's name did McCarthy pitch his first game in that last game? Little may have loved his bourbon but he was sure pitching a great game."

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"A few years ago, one of the guys died a couple of weeks before the trip," says one member, George Bolton, to explain a BLOHARDS ethic. "Our feeling was, poor timing, I mean what's the point of being all year if you're going to miss Opening Day?"

BLOHARDS stands for Benevolent Loyal Order Honorable Ancient Red Sox Diehard Sufferers, a group of confirmed Red Sox fans who, by some measure, have been planted in New York. Every year they board the bus for Opening Day at Fenway Park, and twice yearly when the Sox are in the Apple, they hold luncheons with speakers the likes of Roger Clemens, Jim Rice and Ken Cokernan.

They are men like Jim Powers, a publishing sales executive originally from Uxbridge; and Berry, in advertising sales with Kenesewick; and Dan Nerney, one of the foremost yachting photographers in the world.

Erstwhile respectable sorts, many of whom live in the Connecticut countryside, who range in age from 40 to 70, but who grow very young this one day a year. "That's it," says BLOHARDS founder Powers. "I was just thinking as I was putting on my red socks this morning, here I am 60 years old getting all excited just like a little kid."

Red socks, baseball caps (genuine blue cotton or the red ones from 1976, but none of the phony plastic mesh types), jackets and sweaters, the more Sox touches one can wear, the better.
Nerney, 48, wears a full uniform shirt with No. 9 on the back and brings his Ted Williams Liguiville Slugger along on the bus. He once met Williams, says Nerney, whose photographic career has brought

"I have the last bottle of Pickwick Ale in existence," Bolton remembers with a sigh. "It comes from 1974 or something. I've been keeping it to open on the day the Red Sox win a world championship."

"That night, I had the bottle out. With one strike to go, I had the opener on the cap ... — here the moment is almost too painful for Bolton to remember — and the ball goes through Buckner's legs and my Pickwick Ale goes back to the refrigerator, way in the back."

But, as befits any religion, there is forgiveness here, which will be evident during the game. When Buckner comes to bat, the BLOHARDS lead the cheer. Even when Buckner, forgetting perhaps that he is rolling on square wheels these days, gets thrown out trying to stretch a single, the BLOHARDS give him a big cheer for the tough effort.

"Being a Red Sox fan is like loving a bad woman," says Bolton. "You know no matter how nice you treat her or what you do for her, you're going to get beat up in the end. You know that but you love her anyway."

They roll on up the Mass. Pike. Guys get out statistics books to end arguments, or start them. And then it happens:

Like the magical city of Brigadoon, Fenway Park appears once again to the BLOHARDS, and they give a gusty cheer. The Grass is green, the sun shines bright and the old organ thumps in the spring air.

And the BLOHARDS, wearing their hats and red socks and eating hot dogs, finally have made it to the day they live for all year long: when the magic of Fenway Park comes together with memories like Williams and DiMaggio and Ruth, letting them escape to 6 years old one more time.