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Thugs are speaking for L.A.

Fans shouldn't have to risk their lives to cheer for rival teams.

Sandy Banks

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I am not a baseball fan. I have visited Dodger Stadium maybe three times in my 30 years in Los Angeles.

But you don't have to bleed Dodger blue to be horrified by the beating inflicted on a San Francisco Giants fan who dared wear his team apparel to the baseball park.

And you don't have to know a strike from a ball to recognize that it's time for a public conversation about just what is going on in Chavez Ravine.

Here's the text message my daughter sent from the stands in Game 2 of last week's opening series: "Omg ma i'm horrified by the fans here. they give la a horrible name. They are acting like animals!!"

She was sitting near a twentysomething trio, two women and a man, who spent the entire game taunting a baby-faced young fellow a few rows away. His offense? Wearing a Giants jersey.

Most of the insults they hurled are unprintable here — from Holocaust references to sexual slurs. "This is why people get killed," one of them yelled, when the young man stood to cheer a Giants hit. "I hope you get shot in the parking lot."

This was the day after Giants fan Bryan Stow was severely beaten in that lot.

It helps me understand why Stow, a 42-year-old paramedic, texted a family member during the game that he was scared inside the stadium.

We can label the name-calling, the threats, the brutal beating isolated incidents in an overheated, age-old rivalry. But are they really?

The violence has spotlighted an open secret: a thug-like mentality and uncivil stadium culture that has been spiraling for years toward violence.

Search YouTube for Dodger Stadium fights and hundreds of clips pop up: Dodger fans brawling in the stands while the crowd sings "God Bless America." A father, with kids in tow, accosted in the parking lot. Gang bangers squaring off in the dark, amid trash-talking cheers from onlookers.

Nobody tries to break up the fights. Security guards rarely show up. In one particularly dispiriting scene, a middle-aged guy in a Dodgers jersey implores a stranger with a cellphone camera to stop filming the pugilists and focus on the players.

"C'mon, there's still a game going on," he shouts. "Go Dodgers! Go Dodgers!" But the fight goes

on and the camera keeps rolling.

We've got a problem in our stadium when the brawling in the stands is considered more entertaining than the game on the field.

It takes only a few clowns to sour a sporting event. Last spring it was the small bands of roving thugs, who smashed store windows, assaulted fans and set fire to cars near Staples Center when the Lakers won the championship.

But the problems at Dodger Stadium reflect more than celebration-gone-bad. As dozens of readers [told Times columnist T.J. Simers](#), there is a strong perception, at least, that an escalating aura of violence has warped the game day experience.

How did we go from booing opposing players to stomping rival fans in the parking lot?

Some blame the changing fan base, which they describe as younger and more Latino, heavy on shaved heads and neck tattoos. That can, of course, be code for stereotyping. An ugly "blame the Mexicans" mantra hijacks too much of our regional discourse.

But it is clear that some local Latino street gangs have appropriated the Dodgers' emblems and logos. "You don't want to stereotype every young man wearing Dodgers gear," Los Angeles Police Det. Jorge Martinez told me. "But we do see it in the [gang] photos."

Gang members sport Dodger caps for the same reason they wear tattoos of their area codes, he said. It's a way of proclaiming their turf to outsiders, of "representing Los Angeles, 'where I'm from.' "

Is the stadium overrun with gangsters? Not by a long shot, said Martinez, who grew up in the neighborhood and loved stadium visits as a kid. "But these gang members, they do go to the games, they drink, they come out into the parking lot. The extension of the gang element brings that violence. They react to the rivalry."

Make that *overreact*.

Wear the wrong colors and you're a target. We're no longer all baseball fans, rooting for our favorite teams. It's open season on visitors, as if Crips were wearing the gang's signature blue in a Bloods neighborhood.

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Old-timers remember when the Raiders attracted that sort of outlaw crowd to their football games at the Coliseum. Hoodlums tend to be drawn to a team with an outsize rogue persona. The Dodgers seem to have tapped that vein. I've heard critics blame everything from the lack of parking-lot security to the swagger of former teammate Manny Ramirez.

Los Angeles Police Chief Charlie Beck and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa have promised a more

prominent LAPD presence at Dodger games. But they know we can't police our way out of this problem.

Arresting Stow's attackers would be a good start, but not nearly enough, Beck said. We can't take back the stadium from thugs masquerading as fans until we "collectively challenge incremental misbehavior," he said. "Confront somebody.... Tell an usher."

That's easier said than done, of course. Villaraigosa was at a game three years ago when a brawl broke out right next to him — among big burly guys with bald heads and tattoos. It was scary, he admitted. "I think a lot of people have experienced that.... It's not just about being safe, but feeling safe in the stadium."

Stow's family has made it clear they don't blame L.A. fans, said the mayor. "But this hurts. We have to ask ourselves: All those people watching [in the parking lot] and we could do nothing about it?"

He said he hopes this becomes a "teachable moment." I'm not sure what the lesson might be.

My 13-year-old nephew visited from the Bay Area last weekend just so he could catch a game. It was his first visit to Dodger Stadium, and he brushed off our grownup fears and proudly donned his Giants jersey.

He's a regular at San Francisco games but was rattled by the venom here. A woman in the row behind him spilled a beer on his mother. He was booed on his trip to the concession stand. "They ran out of Dodger dogs but not beer," he noted.

The Giants lost. But he recognized the upside: "At least I didn't get beat up."

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