

Fan Appreciation

SPORTs Biz: Padres Improve Petco's Roster Of Amenities, Options

By [Mike Allen](#)

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Upgrades this year to Petco Park, home to the San Diego Padres and seemingly always getting tweaked in places, may be the most extensive in the ballpark's history — all geared toward making the experience in the stands a more enjoyable complement to the action on the field.

With the team's home opener set for March 30 against the Los Angeles Dodgers, some of the changes are overdue and some others are more about items that the Padres wanted to improve as part of the team owner's philosophy, said Padres CEO Mike Dee, who was hired late last year.

"The ownership group we have has made it clear it will invest in the ball club on the field. ... And it's also investing in Petco Park, both in the maintenance that had been deferred and in new amenities," Dee said.

Also new are ticket-buying options that bear the business community in mind.

Of course, the main concern for most Friar fans is upgrading a roster that finished with an unimpressive 76-86 record. In that respect, the franchise's new owners, headed by Chairman Ron Fowler, appear to be delivering on their promise to invest profits in players. This year's payroll increased to about \$85 million, up from \$66 million last year, according to a few published reports. Whether that translates into more wins is anybody's guess, but given the improvements the Padres have made to their home, fans should enjoy themselves a bit more.

Closest to the Field

And many fans will be able to enjoy themselves in new seats.

The Padres carved out a few new areas in the ballpark, which turns 10 years old this season, to accommodate three new luxury suites, bringing the total to 75. The best of the group has to be an eight-seat section previously occupied by photographers called the On-Deck Suite set between the Lexus on-field seating area and the visiting team's dugout.

"These are the closest seats to the field in all of Major League Baseball," Dee said. "You're literally five feet away from the visiting team's manager."

Meanwhile, on the Western Metal Supply Building's third floor is the Foul Pole Suite that abuts that corner and has 12 seats. Also at the restored factory building is The Rail, a group of 30 barstools that were formerly filled by fans who had to wait in a line inside the Hall of Fame Grill.

Dee described The Rail as Petco's version of the Green Monster seats in left field at Boston's Fenway Park.

And what about those wonderful seats that used to be available on a first-come basis?

"We're moving that area upstairs to the rooftop, where it'll probably accommodate twice as many people," Dee said. "We made both areas better."

While the Padres didn't reveal prices for the new suites, saying it depends on the number of games booked and what other seats a buyer may want, suffice it to say it's not going to be cheap. According to the team's website, the highest-priced premium seat for opening night against the Dodgers is \$199.

Bringing Business to the Ballpark

Recognizing that many businesses like to combine work and play at baseball games and that not all businesses can afford to lease a luxury box for 81 home games, the Padres created a new Premium Plus Plan that emphasizes a customer-centric approach.

In the past, Dee said, the team sales staff would offer a brochure showing the types of suites or other seats available, take orders and deliver selected tickets.

But, he asked, what if a business wants only 20 games in a box and an additional 10 in the new On-Deck Suite or in some other part of the ballpark? That's the kind of request the new sales team will focus on, he said.

"It's more of a 'you tell me what your budget is' and we'll come back to you and try to meet what your needs are," Dee said.

Scott Minto, director of San Diego State University's sport MBA program, said the Padres are smart in their approach to catering to the business community since that segment likely generates a considerable portion of their revenue.

New Venues for Brew and Food

To help give the Padres advice on where they might improve the Petco experiences, the team held focus groups involving some 500 participants. Armed with this input, the Padres and their partner, Delaware North Cos., are providing several new stands and expanding others.

Among the new offerings are two draft beer stations, one by Stone Brewing Co. and the other by Ballast Point Brewing & Spirits; a new Rimel's Rooftop Grill; a new Seaside Market; Randy

Jones Grill Carts; Baked Bear, a stand where customers can tailor their own ice cream sandwich; and three new locations for Ryan Bros. Coffee.

Adding to those are an expanded Phil's BBQ stand inside the ballpark and an expanded Hodad's Burgers.

The Padres and really all other sports teams have learned they better listen to fans and make the necessary changes if they want to succeed, Minto said.

"It's more important than ever to listen to the consumers," he said. "Now, if someone doesn't like something, they'll use Twitter, and if they've got a lot of followers, it could cost them. ... If they don't listen to them, they may have a major problem on their hands."

Better Sights and Sounds

Fans, meanwhile, will be able to hear the Padres — or at least their announcements — much clearer thanks to a new Daktronics Sound audio system that was installed throughout the facility.

For those who prefer lounging in the Park at the Park, there's a new video board that's increases the old board's size by 50 percent and projects a sharper image. Replacing Petco's outmoded scoreboard is on the team's to-do list, likely for next season, Dee said.

In line with the technological upgrades, Petco was among the first ballparks in the league that received an iBeacon geo-fencing system that enables smartphone users to receive messages such as team lineups or coupons for various concession stands. So far, the wireless technology works only with Apple devices.

The technology upgrades and the new concessions the team is introducing are all part a strategy to get more folks coming back to the ballpark for multiple games, Minto said, noting that baseball isn't as popular as it once was, particularly among younger fans.

"Major League Baseball, of all the major sports, is struggling among the younger demographic. The games are long and sometimes go way into the night," he said. "You're going to need all these kind of things to help bring people back to the ballpark."