

# RAT PATROL

Venues not quite ready to look at what the cat dragged in

by LINDA DECKARD

**Y**ears ago, feral cats roamed Angel Stadium of Anaheim, Calif., keeping rats at bay. That changed when the Walt Disney Co. bought the Angels baseball team and took over stadium operation, but the memory lingers for Greg Stewart, executive director, Anaheim Convention Center. It surfaced bigtime last summer when the health department cited Angel Stadium for rat infestation and headlines happened.

"When we ran the stadium, we imported a couple of cats, and they helped keep the population down on rats," Smith recalled later. He suggested it is not unknown for cats to run onto baseball fields, but several calls later, *Venues Today* did not uncover any stadium operator who admitted to placing feral cats on the premises. That's for one simple reason: health departments frown on cats around food prep areas about as much as they do on rats.

However, working cats are making headlines elsewhere, including a story in the *Los Angeles Times* Dec. 29 that the Los Angeles Police Department is using feral felines at several stations plagued with a rodent problem, and in the *New York Times* Dec. 21 that delis and bodegas are "employing" cats despite health department fines of \$200 for a first offense. Oddly enough, the fine if the health department finds rats is also \$200 the first time.

There are even nonprofit groups now promoting the use of feral felines, including Voice for the Animals in Santa Monica, Calif., and Athens, Greece. Melya Kaplan, executive director, said VFTA is 10 years old and includes a Working Cat Program. One of her first clients was the Flower Mart in Los Angeles, where wild cats have been patrolling the one block covered area since 1999 and "not

one rat has been seen since," she said.

The Working Cat Program protocol involves a site visit, where VFTA volunteers attempt to determine where the rats are coming in, checking for uncovered food bins. They ask the operator to pick up all the poisons. Then they name one or two caretakers for the cats, pick the wildest, not-to-be-domesticated felines in captivity that are ready to work and install them in cages at the new location.

The cages are as big as dog runs, she said. The cats are provided with food, places to hide and litter boxes. After one month, they are acclimated to the new location and let loose. If they are not acclimated, they will not stay, she said. And forever more, they will use well-hidden litter boxes and they will stay well hidden themselves, she said.

Kaplan's plan is to introduce legislation in California next year that would legalize use of working cats in food facilities in the state, but she does not yet have a sponsor. She has had numerous discussions with proprietors who want to use cats, but upon checking local ordinances, have passed. They are usually told to use poison and if they say they are, it isn't working, they're told to use more poison, she said.


Smith did not have that hurdle when cats were introduced into Angel Stadium. It was the early 80s and the "program" was loosely organized, something related to a do-gooder who just let them go. By the time they were working cats and management discovered them, they had proven their worth. "And they can't be domesticated cats," Smith emphasized. "You don't want them eating the nachos; you want them eating rats."

Mark Entner, director of event sales and services, Orange County Fairgrounds, Costa Mesa, Calif., doesn't use the Working Cats



Program either, but the fairgrounds just naturally has feral cats. "People just drop them off. I don't know too much about it," he said, though he does know they have to discourage well-meaning neighbors who see the cats and want to come and feed them.

Aaron Haviland, director of operations, Dolphin Stadium, Miami, believes "the easiest way to keep your rat population under control is cleaning. We pressure wash after every game. We overstaff our housekeeping, where it is not an issue." His game day staff for football is in the 300-range in housekeeping alone.

Carl Adkins, general manager, Georgia Dome, Atlanta, employs one company to handle pest control for the entire 1.7 million square foot campus, which includes the stadium, on a weekly basis. He has the bill to prove it: \$41,000 a year. 

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