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 infes-
tation and headlines happened.

“When we ran the stadium, we imported
a couple of cats, and they helped keep the pop-
ulation 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
everwhere, 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 com-
ing 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
celines 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 ac-
climated, 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 ordi-
nances, have passed. They are usually told to
use poison and if they say they are, it isn’t work-
ing, 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 natu-
really 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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