

STICK IT IN HIS EAR!

Give the kid the ball!" Yankee Stadium in September.

Ballplayers, nearing game time, loosen up along the foul lines. A sweet scene. From just behind the home-team dugout, two young boys scream one name: "Mattingly!"

"Turn your shirt around," their mother aggressively counsels the elder one, in a blue Yankees T-shirt with Mattingly's name across the back. "Maybe he'll see you." Indeed he does. As Mattingly lopes toward the dugout, dozens of witnesses catch the eye contact between the Yankee idol and this shrieking child. And then, as if in slow

motion, the warm-up ball is out of Mattingly's glove and in his throwing hand, lofted toward the kid, who, of course, also has a glove, as does his little brother, who is practically



singing now. That is, until some guy in the first row—the first row!—rises up in front of them both to snatch the thing with, yes, a manicured hand.

"Give the kid the ball!"

It would take six innings. Six innings of the older one sobbing, the younger one gaping, sadly. Six innings of their outraged parents consoling, commiserating, complaining to anyone who would listen. And there were lots of interested listeners.

"Assh---!" they cried, and "You oughta be ashamed!" and "Greedy pig! Give the kid the ball!" Also, "Give the kid the bat," after a hitter lost his grip, sending his

bat into the stands. And, when a brief rain delay ensued, "Give the kid the tarp!"

Nothing worked. Not threats. Not appeals to nearby

security men. Not even negotiations that seemed to rival Rabin and Arafat's. The one with the ball (and the neat cuticles) and an earring (he must have been, maybe, 30) never turned around once. It was left to a man further down the row, who seemed to be the thief's father, to carry on the verbal duel with the plaintive parents and the angry crowd.

And then, suddenly, it was over. Top of the seventh, a runner on first. Wordlessly, unceremoniously, the grown-up son with the ball turns around and simply hands it over. So little, too late. There may have been a smattering of applause.

"Give the kid the ball!"

It's a mysterious game. And only getting worse.

BARRY SINGER