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LARGE SHADOW

BY STEVE GINSBURG

— PAGE 16 —



Small in physical stature, **Ken Rosenthal** has developed into one of baseball's most significant broadcast figures since leaving *The Baltimore Sun* 17 years ago

PHOTOGRAPHY—
KENYA ALLEN/PRESSEBOX

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ONE FAN'S OPINION

Orioles Need To Change Their Starting Pitching Philosophy

★ STAN "THE FAN" CHARLES

Watching the Orioles' 2017 starting rotation night after night and day after day has caused an emotional crisis for me. At 65 years old and now in my 34th consecutive season of Orioles fandom with no ring, I am wondering if I'll ever get to experience what I did back in the fall of 1983, when the Philadelphia Phillies' Garry Maddox lined a lazy, humpback liner into Cal Ripken Jr.'s glove and the O's were atop the baseball world.

Seriously, as much fun as the first five years of executive vice president of baseball operations Dan Duquette regime have been, the 2017 season has revealed a missing link: the team's philosophy on developing or acquiring high-end starting pitching. That task is an absolute necessity if a team is going to seriously contend for a World Series championship.

IF THE ORIOLES DON'T ESTABLISH A STARTING PITCHING PHILOSOPHY THAT WORKS, ALL OF THEIR OTHER GOOD EFFORTS MAY BE FOR NAUGHT.

At one time, the Orioles represented the gold standard for not just good starting pitching but great starting pitching. They're the organization that developed Milt Pappas, Steve Barber, Wally Bunker, Dave McNally, Jim Palmer, Dennis Martinez, Mike Flanagan and Mike Boddicker from the late 1950s through 1984. Since 1984, when Boddicker was the last O's starter to win 20 games, the club has developed only one great pitcher: Mike Mussina.

And if they didn't develop them, they traded for the likes of a Pat Dobson, Mike Cuellar, Scott McGregor or Scott Erickson to pass the baton to. Now the best they can trade for is Wade Miley.

Sure, there was Ben McDonald, Erik Bedard and Sidney Ponson, who all teased that they could be staff leaders. A few others not drafted by the club --

Jeremy Guthrie, Jose Mercedes and Rodrigo Lopez -- were adequate helpers

Chris Tillman has been a solid, reliable leader. They've had some bad luck with the recent starting prospects Dylan Bundy, Kevin Gausman and Hunter Harvey, with two of them missing a lot of development time due to injury.

The free-agent market hasn't been too positive an avenue past Jimmy Key in 1996-1997. There was the failed Sid Fernandez experiment years ago. Rich Hill flopped as an Andy MacPhail pick-up.

Duquette did have some good luck with Wei-Yin Chen, but he has struck out badly with his two biggest forays into modern high-stakes free agency with Ubaldo Jimenez and Yovani Gallardo. The talent at Triple-A that could help the starting staff is non-existent.

Recently, I did a quick exercise in order to ascertain if there was finally at least some cause for hope that a pipeline of starting pitching talent might exist. So I started to look at basic start-

ing pitching stats at Delmarva (Low-A), Frederick (High-A) and Bowie (Double-A) -- innings pitched, ERA, WHIP and strikeouts-to-walks ratio. The stats of the Orioles' starting pitching at these three levels was so abysmal that I quickly did the same exercise for the other four American League East teams, and what I found was staggering.

Without boring you with the names, let's just do the number of promising starting pitching prospects for those three levels of play. Let's face it, if the Orioles had any at Triple-A Norfolk, they'd have been in Baltimore weeks ago.

The Blue Jays have about 10 pitchers who reasonably can be projected anywhere from a No. 1- to a No. 4-caliber starting pitcher. The Tampa Bay Rays had 11 such prospects, and in fact used one of them -- Ethan Clark -- in the trade

that delivered them shortstop Adeiny Hechavarria from the Miami Marlins in June. The Boston Red Sox have 13 true starters percolating in their minor league system, and the New York Yankees have a whopping 15 that passed my rudimentary test.

The Orioles lagged far behind their AL East rivals with only four pitchers who look to be capable of advancing to even the next level next year.

You'd think for a team with so few starting pitching prospects in the minors, one shortcut might be to enter into the geographical area where you might be able to cheaply sign "live arms" -- Latin America. This would include the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Panama, Venezuela, Colombia and Cuba. Instead, the Orioles are essentially punting by trading away spending slots to other teams to try to get something rather than having the money simply go unspent.

On July 2, the Washington Nationals announced the 27 players they just signed from these countries (excluding Cuba), 12 of whom were pitchers.

Remember in 1999 when the Orioles played a game in Cuba and then had the National Cuban team play in Baltimore? You'd think with all the flak owner Peter Angelos took for his and the club's historic trip to Cuba and sitting with Fidel Castro that there would have been some gain for being the first American team to play on Cuban soil in nearly four decades.

Instead, the Orioles have signed just one Cuban player of any note -- Ariel Miranda in 2015. Don't get me started by mentioning outfielder Henry Urrutia, the Cuban outfielder who played a grand total of 34 games with the Orioles during two seasons in 2013 and 2015 and is now in the Boston minor league system.

With this season slipping away and complicated personnel decisions looming, O's fans have good reason to worry about the club slipping backward and becoming less relevant. If the Orioles don't establish a starting pitching philosophy that works, all of their other good efforts may be for naught. •

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Corin "Tiny" Adams playing with Panathinaikos in Greece

Morgan State Women's Basketball Star Corin 'Tiny' Adams In Midst Of International Odyssey

Former Morgan State women's basketball star Corin "Tiny" Adams, whose 2,058 career points with the Bears are the most among men and women at the school, completed her seventh season playing overseas this spring after a successful season with Panathinaikos Athens. The team finished third in Greece's A1 national women's basketball league during the 2016-17 season.

Primarily a pick-and-roll style point guard, the 5-foot-7 Adams averaged 11.5 points, 4.3 assists, 3.7 defensive rebounds and 3.1 steals per game with Panathinaikos this season.

For Adams, 28, it was a long, winding road to Greece, which she described as a "great experience" and said she "felt like a real, real pro for the first time" thanks, in part, to Panathinaikos' professional staff.

Playing overseas has presented unique opportunities for Adams, such as exploring Europe with her mother, Gwendolyn, during her teams' winter breaks and experiencing different cultures -- Adams proudly said she's eaten Caracois (Portuguese snail). She's now played in 15 different countries internationally, including 13 in Europe.

But playing overseas wasn't necessarily Adams' first choice. Hailing from Brooklyn, N.Y., Adams averaged 19.4 points and 4.1 rebounds per game and was named the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference Player of the Year during her senior year at Morgan State in 2009-10. She had hoped to parlay a terrific four-year college career into a shot at a WNBA roster. But that chance evaporated before it ever materialized, a harbinger of the challenges to come overseas.

"[My family] didn't really know how this process worked," Adams said. "We ended up signing with an agent, who at the time was doing great work. But a couple days before the draft, I found out she wasn't certified, and then the teams found out, so they started not to interact with her because she wasn't fully certified yet, so that kind of set me back from the WNBA. ... The San Antonio Stars verbally said they would've invited me to training camp if I didn't get drafted. But once all of that happened, that kind of just messed me up."

The next challenge for Adams was getting her foot in the door to play overseas. Adams quickly went through two more

agents that she "bumped heads with" when no opportunities overseas surfaced, and she began seeking tryouts on her own.

Beginning in the summer of 2010, Adams represented herself. She started her professional career in August 2010 in Puerto Rico, where she put together the statistics and film necessary to find her way to Portugal for her next stop.

Adams represented herself until 2013 when she conceded that teams in top international leagues weren't going to communicate with her directly. Beyond finding representation and opportunities to her liking, other challenges to playing internationally include getting a full paycheck and getting it in a timely manner, and adjusting to living situations that might not include hot water or a clothes dryer. Adams detailed her experience in her autobiography, "Tiny Setbacks, Major Comebacks: From Brooklyn To Europe." (Available on Amazon as a digital book).

"I just kind of wanted people to learn from my mistakes and avoid all of the heartbreak and stuff that I went through trying to play this professional basketball," Adams said, referring to other athletes who aspire to play overseas. "Becoming a pro, it's kind of hard because it's so many girls. If you say, 'Hey, I'm [a coach], and I want a point guard, you're going to get about 2,000 players sent to you. ... It's a tough thing to get into. But once you're in and you're performing well, everything can kind of work itself out."

Adams is still extremely well-regarded at Morgan State. Brittany Dodson, who played with Adams for three years with the Bears and is now an assistant coach with the program, said Adams is the "epitome" of the kind of person they want their players to become at Morgan State. Dodson also said she makes sure to let recruits know who Adams is and what she means to the university.

Dodson first met Adams when Dodson visited Morgan State as a recruit in 2007. Adams, who was a freshman at the time, challenged her to a pick-up game, which "was definitely a cool experience [on] my first college visit." That was a preview of what was to come when Dodson attended Morgan State, as Adams led hours-long pick-up sessions, was in the gym at odd hours, pushed her teammates in practice and still managed to do well in the classroom.

"I just had a great lead to follow. Like, this is how they do it

here, and most of that was attributed to Tiny," Dodson said. "They had a very strong core group that came in with her. They kind of really changed the whole dynamic of the program -- winning seasons and everything. But Tiny was definitely the major part, I believe, in perpetuating the growth of Morgan in general."

-- LUKE JACKSON

New Podcast Highlights Golden Age Of Baltimore Soccer

When her father tucked her in while growing up, Baltimore soccer standout Ali Andrzejewski would ask him to repeat the same bedtime story.

Gary Andrzejewski would recount the tale of the Dundalk High School boys' soccer team upsetting perennial power Patterson Park, 1-0, in 1972. Ali's father played goalie and stopped 27 shots that day. Dundalk scored the winning goal on a breakaway, and it was the only shot on goal they could muster the entire game. The family story fueled Ali's drive to excel on the field and sparked a love for the history of Baltimore soccer.

"It's the soccer story that I grew up on," Ali Andrzejewski, 32, said. "My father's passion for the game brushed off on me. The soccer culture in the city back then was similar to what you see in other countries. We had players on the world's stage, guys like Baltimore's Sonny Askew, who played with Pele, and [Franz] Beckenbauer."

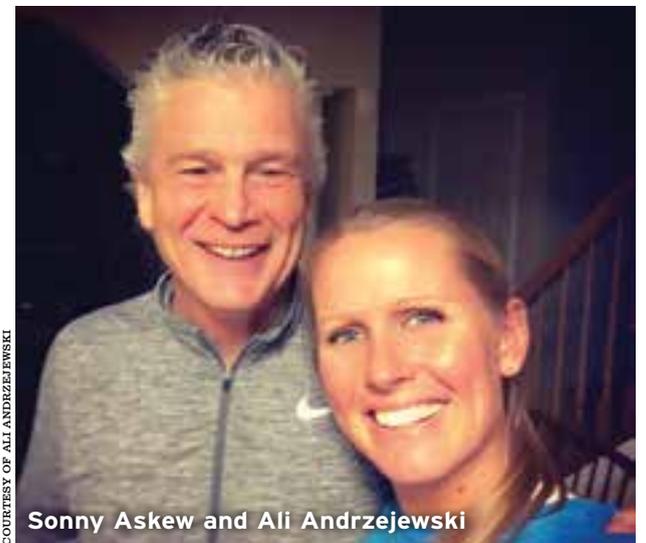
In an effort to share that history and reconnect with those legendary players, Andrzejewski has launched BMore Soccer Connections, a podcast series available on iTunes featuring in-depth interviews with Baltimore soccer legends such as UMBC head coach Pete Caringi, local player Pete Eibner and professionals Charlie Myers and Askew.

One of the most celebrated soccer players in Maryland history, Andrzejewski led McDonogh to prominence and was a two-time collegiate All-American at the University of Maryland and Loyola University. She played for the U.S. Women's National team in 22 countries and professionally for the Washington Freedom. She was elected into the Maryland Soccer Hall of Fame in 2016.

She said she started the podcast because she thought something was missing in Baltimore youth soccer.

"Baltimore youth soccer has become so competitive within our own community," Andrzejewski said. "The rivalries are intense and the camaraderie is gone. There's too much emphasis on winning. We just need to let the kids play. Those guys back in the '70s played hard, but they were 'buds' after the game was over. They would do anything for each other."

Andrzejewski's podcasts cover what she refers to as the "golden age" of Baltimore soccer, when the Sunday games at Patterson Park were played for neighborhood bragging rights. Players such as Caringi and others would end up at Calvert Hall, Archbishop Curley and Patterson Park. University of Baltimore and Loyola College won Division II national championships in 1975 and 1976, respectively.



Sonny Askew and Ali Andrzejewski

"Division II back then wasn't like what it is today," Meyers said on his BMore Soccer Connections podcast. "Loyola could have beaten Maryland back then."

Andrzejewski established Champions Soccer Training 11 years ago with a focus on the soccer player as an individual first. She started playing soccer in the Lutherville-Timonium recreation council and moved on to Bethesda Soccer Club. In addition to training players in Baltimore, she has organized many trips to Nicaragua and Belize to bring soccer equipment and train players there.

"We teach life skills and having a positive attitude," she said. "We value our players as people. I want to know what else they like to do besides soccer. We encourage them to do well in school. We want them to see the possibilities."

A new season of BMore Soccer Connections will begin in the fall.

"I just turn on the mic and let them tell their stories," Andrzejewski said. "They last more than an hour. Sometimes, they get choked up talking about coaches and games. I'm not trying to become a journalist. We all love this game and there is so much more to do for it."

-- DEAN SMITH

Retirement-Age Athletes Relish Playing Pickleball

Have you ever heard of pickleball?

It's the sport popular among adults around retirement age that's sweeping across Howard County and the Baltimore area. Similar to tennis or badminton, pickleball is played with a racquet and plastic ball with holes on a smaller, tennis-like court.

Because of the sport's growing popularity in recent years, the Howard County Department of Recreation & Parks opened the first dedicated outdoor pickleball courts in the county at Atholton Park in Columbia, Md., in May.

"We first started back in the summer of 2014," said Howard County Recreation and Parks recreation services coordinator Amanda Bartell. "We offered a free play day to see what the interest level was, and then we moved forward with the program we offer now -- Pickleball for All -- and it is essentially a timeframe where anyone can come and play."

The response from the community was immediate, and the Howard County Pickleball Association was formed in 2016. That group, already 140 members strong, has had no trouble attracting new members.

"It only took me a little while of playing before I decided that I wanted to play as much as I possibly could because it really is fun," said Howard County Pickleball Association president Duane St. Clair. "... Pickleball, because of the pace you play it at and the way it's played, it really kind of hooks people. I've seen a number of people in our first year that have come out to try pickleball, and now every time we play I see them. They had the same reaction, too -- once they tried it, they kind of got hooked on it."

Better known in other parts of the country, pickleball made its way to the Baltimore area with returning snowbirds who first experienced the sport when traveling south for the winter. As a result, the typical age of the competitive player runs older, but the sport appeals to groups of all ages who have had the chance to learn and play.

Older players enjoy it because it requires less movement than sports such as tennis and racquetball but still gives participants an opportunity to stay active. The pace can easily be adjusted to age, mobility and skill level.

"Most people playing pickleball play doubles, and that's probably because a lot of people playing are retirement age, but you find a lot of younger people playing singles, which is a very fast-paced game," St. Clair said. "Unlike tennis, where you can get fairly long rallies, singles pickleball is usually just a couple of hits. You are playing on a smaller court, but there is just too much of the court to cover that easily."

With the popularity of the sport quickly rising, groups such as Howard County Recreation and Parks, the Columbia Association and others that manage tennis courts and similar



Pickleball in Howard County

facilities find themselves rushing to respond to requests for more opportunities to play pickleball.

Competition from tennis and other racquet sports leagues and events means that prime pickleball court time can be difficult to find at the limited indoor and outdoor facilities in the area that are properly sized and lined for the game.

"We began pushing for the outdoor courts because they are pickleball specific and we will be using them for pickleball programs, and we don't have to compete with anyone else for that space," Bartell said. "I am constantly in communication with the Meadowbrook Athletic Complex and the North Laurel Community Center to see if any space opens up so that we can utilize that for pickleball play as well."

Moving forward, Howard County Recreation and Parks is organizing the first pickleball tournament in the county at the Meadowbrook Athletic Complex in August, and Bartell said they are also planning to partner with county schools to introduce the sport to kids in the fall.

"It really is something you can play your entire life," said St. Clair, who also has plans to help bring the sport to Howard County schools.

Individuals interested in learning to play pickleball or finding a place to play in Howard County can visit the Howard County Pickleball Association website at howardcountypickleball.org. The USA Pickleball Association also offers opportunities to learn about the sport nationwide at usapa.org.

- MATT WILSON

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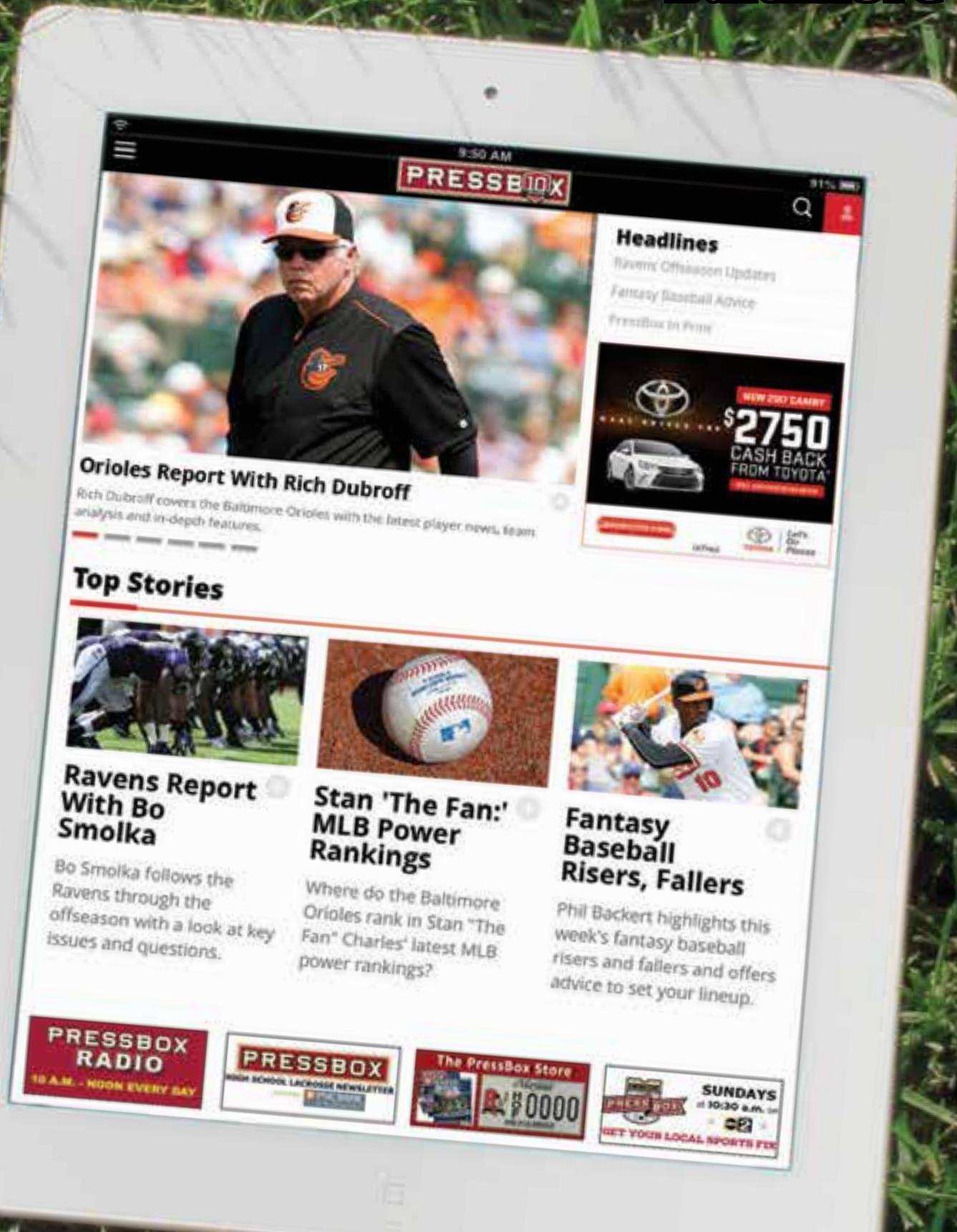
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10 Questions With Orioles Closer Zach Britton

• By Kevin Eck



Zach Britton

Q1 *Who was your favorite athlete when you were a kid?*
I enjoyed watching Tom Glavine pitch. A [fellow] left-handed pitcher, and the Braves were my favorite team.

Q2 *If you weren't playing baseball, what would you be doing for a living?*
It's hard to say. I feel like there'd have been a lot of things I'd have done differently. I was focused on baseball from such a young age. My dad builds homes, so maybe something like that. My brother's a police officer, so there's so many paths I could've taken.

Q3 *What is your all-time favorite movie?*
So many good baseball movies, but "The Sandlot" was one I really liked when I was coming up.

Q4 *What's your favorite thing about Baltimore?*
I enjoy the people around the area. Growing up on the West Coast, it's just a different feel from out there. The people here have been great, and it's felt like a second home because I've played for all the minor league affiliates in Maryland.

Q5 *What's your favorite thing to do during the offseason?*
I have two young kids now, so basically being at home and being a dad.

Q6 *What's your favorite "cheat" food?*
My kid's cereal. Every now and then we give him French Toast Crunch, and I find myself eating it when it's supposed to be for him. That's one of the perks of having a young kid.

Q7 *Do you have any hidden talents?*
I've always been a semi-good drawer. I haven't really done it much, but I've always enjoyed doing it when I've had some spare time.

Q8 *What's the best advice you were ever given?*
I can't remember the guy's name, but when I was in the minors he came in and talked to us about how hard it is to get drafted, how hard it is to get to the big leagues, and to never take the opportunity for granted. Especially being in the big leagues for a while now, you can take it for granted because you don't realize that the average career is really short. "Enjoy it while you're in it but never take it for granted" was good advice I got and it kind of stuck with me when I was at a young age.

Q9 *What's something that everyone's obsessed with but you just don't get?*
I would say reality TV shows. My wife will watch some of these shows, like "Keeping Up with the Kardashians," and I just don't get how people get into it. There are even some guys [on the team] who watch shows like "The Bachelor." I just don't get the hype with reality TV shows.

Q10 *What is the most annoying or dumbest question you've ever been asked by a member of the media?*
Our media's been pretty good here. I think after one of my first blown saves in 2014, it was obviously a brutal loss, and somebody came up to me and said, "So, how do you feel?" "Oh, I feel awesome." I always tell [media members] to bring something better to the table than the "how do you feel?" question after a bad game. It gets under my skin. After a good game, you don't care if they ask it. •

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ORIOLES REPORT



KENYA ALLEN/PRESSBOX

Brad Brach

Brad Brach Has Become A Rock In Orioles' Bullpen

★ RICH DUBROFF

You may be forgiven if you don't remember how the Baltimore Orioles acquired Brad Brach.

The San Diego Padres traded the right-handed reliever to Baltimore in November 2013 in exchange for minor league pitcher Devin Jones.

Brach had bounced between the Padres and Triple-A Tucson for three seasons, not really distinguishing himself in the major leagues.

During those three seasons for San Diego, Brach was 3-6 with a 3.70 ERA. He struck out more than 10 batters per nine innings but walked half as many. He needed a change.

Brach was traded closer to his New Jersey roots and to a team he already liked.

"I grew up a Mets fan, but my second-favorite team was the Orioles because I hated the Yankees," Brach said. "For me, it was exciting just to get to come back to the East Coast, get closer to family and friends. I knew coming here I'd have an opportunity because they were winning, and that was the thing."

During Brach's three years with the Padres, they never won more than 76 games.

Brach, who was drafted by San Diego in the 42nd round, was impressive during his first spring training with the Orioles in 2014, but he started the season at Triple-A Norfolk. He had two initial stints with the Orioles in May and June, mostly as a long reliever.

By early June, he had accumulated 10 appearances with the Orioles and posted a 5.40 ERA. Later that month, he returned to the majors and never left.

"It was awesome," Brach said. "When I made it the last time and came up and kind of found myself in a little bit different situations, I wasn't necessarily pitching long relief like I was the first few times. When I came up, I found myself pitching the sixth, seventh inning of games, and we were winning a lot."

The Orioles' 2014 pitching staff was strong. Five starters -- right-handers Kevin Gausman, Miguel Gonzalez, Bud Norris and Chris Tillman and left-hander Wei-Yin Chen -- all had ERAs of 3.65 or lower.

Brach joined a bullpen that featured newly anointed left-handed closer Zach Britton and right-hander Darren O'Day, who both had ERAs well below 2.00.

Five weeks after Brach rejoined the team for good, the Orioles made the bullpen even better when they acquired left-handed reliever Andrew Miller.

"It was something special. You could just tell the team was on a good roll and that we had a good bit of everything," Brach said. "We were pitching well; we had a good bullpen, and we could hit. It was one of those things where we were a real special team. As you're going through, you kind of realize that team was going to do something good that year."

Brach was seemingly in the right place at the right time. He won seven of his eight decisions with the Orioles and had a 3.18 ERA.

It seemed whenever there was a big comeback win, Brach was always the pitcher of record. That continued into the postseason, when Brach won the second game of the American League Division Series against the Detroit Tigers after pinch-hitter Delmon Young hit a three-run double in the eighth to put the Orioles ahead.

After pitching well for the Orioles in 2014, Brach fulfilled a goal the following season.

"I always liked to think I had confidence in myself that

I could get to that level, but, realistically, just wanted to just stick with someone and not necessarily have a role, but stick with a team and stay up an entire year," Brach said. "In '15, I was able to get that opportunity. I didn't get off to the best start, but I was able to turn it around, and I think from there, it was the turning point in my career, just being able to stay in the big leagues for an entire season."

In 2015, Brach was 5-3 with a 2.72 ERA and picked up his first save.

"It gave me a lot of confidence in 2016," Brach said.

Last year, when O'Day missed half the season with injuries, Brach moved into higher-leverage situations and blossomed. During the season's first half, he was 6-1 with a 0.91 ERA and was rewarded with an All-Star selection.

He got to experience his first All-Star game back in San Diego.

"It was incredible. Kind of like a whirlwind because there's a lot going on," Brach said. "I didn't know where I needed to be and what I needed to do. When you get there, you get an itinerary, and especially having to fly across the country, everything was going like crazy when I first got there. It was awesome getting to go back to San Diego, especially in that stadium where I started my career."

Brach and Britton were both on the AL team, and even though Brach didn't get to pitch, the days were special.

"I flew out my entire family and my wife Jenae's entire family," he said. "It was kind of nice to have everybody there because you never know if you're going to get that opportunity again. When I got to stand on the line there and hear my name announced with all the other guys, you look across the field and it's the best players in the game, it's an extremely humbling experience."

This season, when Britton was injured, Brach took over the closer's role, and for a time in June, he became the undisputed bullpen leader when O'Day was down, too.

"Injuries are just part of the game. For me, it was unfortunate Darren and Zach got hurt," Brach said. "I saw it as an opportunity, and I just didn't want to waste it because you never know how many of them you'll get in the game."

The opportunities Brach has gained from his baseball career also led him to his wife.

As a minor-leaguer, Brach was playing in Nashville, Tenn., and one night he and a friend decided to bar-hop.

"We started at the corner and kind of popped our head in each one," Brach recalled. "We walked past this one, and it looked like a dump. It was called Paradise Park. We heard a girl singing, and we were kind of like, 'Let's go check it out.' We were just going to pop in for a couple of songs, and we ended up staying the rest of the night."

Brach instantly fell for the singer -- country music recording artist Jenae Cherry.

"I just asked her to lunch the next day and somehow she said yes," Brach said. "We kind of kept in contact from there. I kind of made a deal with her before I left Nashville: If I get called up to the major leagues, will you fly out to San Diego for a series? At the time she told me she thought it was like if she ever became Carrie Underwood, she'd get me backstage passes. She thought it was like way off -- that there was no way that was going to happen. It ended up happening. She came out and saw a series before the end of the year."

The Brachs have been married since November 2013. Jenae has performed before Orioles games, and last year her song, "Don't Miss the Magic," was played after Orioles wins.

Despite the ups and downs he experienced early in his career, Brach has found his place in the Orioles' bullpen.

"When you're down in the bullpen, instead of just wasting time talking about nonsense, you can sit down there and you can learn a lot," Brach said. "Definitely take the opportunities and talk about baseball, too. The nonsense is the fun part, too. That's the part you always remember, especially when you're done playing; the fun times are what you always remember." •

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CONNOLLY'S CORNER

At A Crossroads, No Easy Answer To Which Path Orioles Should Take

★ DAN CONNOLLY



I'm always careful of being too dramatic when it comes to writing about a particular baseball season, because each is unique and each has its ebbs and flows.

Oftentimes, we have thought one thing was going to happen, and suddenly the opposite occurred.

Remember when the Orioles were going to have to prepare for life without reliever Darren O'Day and first baseman Chris Davis? And then, in the winter of 2015-16, the Orioles found a way to pay for both.

That's why I hesitate to type these words: But I believe they've already been handwritten on the warehouse wall, anyway.

These Orioles are at a crossroads this month.

Decisions made during the days leading up to the July 31 non-waiver trade deadline may have a profound impact on this organization for years. Even calculated inaction may cause some serious ripples.

The deal is this: The Orioles have several key players who will be free agents at the end of 2018. Although the team would love to keep everyone together and battle for a World Series championship this season and next, a rotation in tatters during the first half of 2017 makes those dreams rather unrealistic.

If pitching is, indeed, the key to MLB titles, these current Orioles aren't in position to make a real run. Heading into this season, the hope was that they could compete if right-handers Kevin Gausman and Dylan Bundy took the next step forward, veteran Chris Tillman remained his steady self and left-hander Wade Miley and/or enigmatic Ubaldo Jimenez could be consistently solid.

Bundy lunged ahead -- despite his struggles in late June/early July. Nothing else went as planned -- unless you count Miley and Jimenez being maddeningly inconsistent.

Tillman dealt with shoulder discomfort all spring and into the season and was limited to 11 first-half starts, and he struggled to keep his ERA under 8.00. Gausman, who took over Opening Day duties from Tillman, had a disastrous first half, posting a 5.85 ERA and allowing 128 hits and 43 walks in 97 innings.

All of that combined produced an American League-worst 5.07 ERA and a horrendous 5.75 rotation ERA, the worst in the AL and second-highest in the majors.

So, yeah, the rotation inspires no post-season feelings at this point.

But given that most AL teams are flawed and that there are two wild-card spots available for the taking, the Orioles could spin a

disappointing first half into the belief that they hit rock bottom and still are within striking distance of the postseason.

And, the reality is, once you get to the playoffs, anything can happen. It's not like these Orioles couldn't get hot for a month -- they went 22-10 to begin the season, remember.

That's what is being weighed in the warehouse. Do you hold out hope that a healthier roster and a rotation that could be better suddenly converge for a second-half surge?

Or do you assume the second half is as half-empty as the first, cut your losses and look to improve the rotation for the future?

If that's the path, the Orioles must be willing to make some exceptionally difficult decisions. The first is what to do with 25-year-old third baseman Manny Machado, one of the most dynamic young players in the game.

Machado is a free agent after the 2018 season. He'll land a huge contract and, though it's impossible now to predict what Machado and Washington Nationals star Bryce Harper might command on the open market, the \$400 million figure has been tossed around in relation to each. And that would be well beyond Davis' franchise-record, \$161 million deal signed in 2016.

The sense is the Orioles wouldn't -- maybe couldn't -- go \$400 million for one player. So, if they can't re-sign Machado, perhaps the smartest thing to do is trade him now, while a team would have him under control for a season-and-a-third.

He didn't have his best first half, hitting .230, well below his .278 career average. But he still had 18 homers, 47 RBIs and played spectacular defense. He could land the Orioles several high-ceiling prospects, something they desperately need, especially from a pitching standpoint. The only current Orioles pitching prospect that is above Double-A is lefty Chris Lee, who has had major

trouble at Triple-A Norfolk.

Machado is obviously the linchpin for a rebuilding effort, but the Orioles certainly could get an impressive return by dealing relievers Zach Britton and Brad Brach this month. Plenty of contenders are looking for relief help, and Britton and Brach, both All-Stars in 2016, can stabilize a bullpen. Like Machado, they are free agents after the 2018 season.

The last of the Orioles' four top trade chips is second baseman Jonathan Schoop, who was the club's lone All-Star in 2017. He is under team control through 2019.

Besides that quartet, the Orioles don't have any players who would absolutely bring back blue-chip prospects in a deal. All the other possibilities are either unproven (Bundy, Gausman, outfielder/first baseman Trey Mancini), or have contracts or contract stipulations (Davis, designated hitter/outfielder Mark Trumbo, O'Day, center fielder Adam Jones) that would limit their values and/or suitors in the trade market.

The Orioles possibly could deal away some of their lesser players -- Seth Smith, Wellington Castillo, Hyun Soo Kim -- but the return would be minimal.

There really isn't an obvious answer to this dilemma for the Orioles. Do they hope against evidence that they are more like the 22-10 team that started the first half than the 20-36 one that ended it and go out and get rotation help, as inconsequential as it may end up being?

Do they close their eyes, let the trade deadline pass and hope that doing nothing was the right call? Or do they swallow hard and trade current stars for potential future ones?

Everyone seems to have a different opinion. And no one is 100 percent sure which plan is right.

That is what we can safely call -- drama aside -- a crossroads. •

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UPON FURTHER REVIEW

Change To Strike Rule Would Help Solve Multiple Problems For Baseball

★ JIM HENNEMAN

Prior to this season, baseball's two hottest topics were length of the game and the shift, and how they impacted the game, both on and off the field. As if that wasn't enough, this year we've added the "Foul Ball Curse" to the conversation.

In this space a month ago, I offered what initially was a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that adopting an old sandlot "four fouls and out" rule would speed up the game. The reaction provided enough positive vibes to double-down this month and go for a trifecta: a revised foul ball plan to speed up the game and beat the shift.

Since the 21st is the only century in the history of baseball in which the strike rule hasn't been changed, maybe this is as good a time as any for baseball to prove it's not as behind the times as many would have us believe. It's not generally known, for instance, but foul balls didn't count as strikes in the 19th century. It wasn't until 1903, when the American League adopted a rule the National League instituted two years earlier, that foul balls became strikes. Before that they were nothing more than an exercise in futility, which is about the only thing they have in common today.

But there are still discrepancies in how the "foul strike" rule is interpreted. And it is here where baseball could consider a bold move that would provide a three-pronged attack on the hot-button topics. As the rule now stands, foul balls count only for the first two strikes, with one exception.

As long as the batter is taking a full

swing, any foul balls on the third strike are no different than they were back in the 19th century, when some dude named Roy Thomas is reputed to have fouled off 22 straight pitches, no doubt leading to the rule change. If you can foul off that many now, go at it -- no miss, no strike, you get credit for a quality at-bat, running up the pitch count and prolonging the game.

On the other hand, a batter deemed to have been attempting a bunt is saddled with a one-and-done "foul strike" on the third attempt, presumably because that's easier than hitting, though some might wonder about that.

So here's this month's proposition: Make all foul balls equal, put the swingers and the bunters under the same restrictions -- and after the second strike, make it three fouls and out. The bonus to a rule like this, in addition to helping speed up the game, is the added weapon it provides to combat the shift, something that's been an ongoing concern the past few years.

Just about every team using analytic alignments exaggerate them to great lengths once a hitter has two strikes. Given the added advantage of attempting a two-strike bunt could encourage more "little ball" -- and help keep the defense honest.

It's a suggestion, not necessarily a solution, but given the fact that commissioner Rob Manfred's primary concern is improving pace of play; that research has shown foul balls account for roughly 17.5 percent of pitches thrown; and that the shift is dominating baseball strategy, I'm guessing the "Foul Ball Curse" is high on Manfred's list of items to be addressed.

In the 19th century, foul balls didn't count. In the 21st century they are being

counted ... too often.

I'm not sure what happened to MLB's revolving interleague schedule, but it seems strange that the last time the Chicago Cubs were in Baltimore, the Boston Red Sox were still trying to break the "Curse of the Bambino." In theory every team in baseball faces every other once every three years, which would seem to make six years between trips the norm.

But the only other time the Cubs had ever been to Camden Yards before their July 14-16 series this year, Andy MacPhail was still running the show -- in Chicago. That was in 2003, when the Red Sox were a year away from breaking the 86-year jinx that is now so far back in the rear-view mirror their fans forget it ever happened. The Orioles were in the sixth year of what would become an agonizing 14-year losing streak. Sammy Sosa was still "The Man" in the Windy City, and the Cubs were en route to a division championship -- one that would only produce more heartache and prolong a World Series drought that would last more than a century.

I can't quite figure out why it took so long for them to get back to OPACY, (probably has something to do with five-team divisions), especially given the fact that the St. Louis Cardinals seem to show up regularly. But to have the Cubs in town as defending World Series champions may be the biggest perk in the second half of the Orioles' home schedule.

My feelings weren't any different than most others when talk started about Orioles third baseman Manny Machado or Washington Nationals right fielder Bryce Harper, or both, lining up to become base-

ball's first \$400-million player. Even over 10 years, it all seemed somewhat premature, not to mention extravagant at \$40 million per.

Then somebody pointed out that those max contracts the NBA hands out like hall passes are worth \$210 million each (at the top end), for five years -- or \$42 million annually. Exactly how does that salary cap work?

Do you sometimes get the impression that "fastball command" is the answer to every postgame baseball question? It pretty much sounds like the explanation for everything that happens on either side of the ball.

Even though we hear it every night, somehow or other I don't think all of the Orioles' pitching problems can be attributed to "fastball command." It would be nice if it was that simple, but even though a lot of fastballs ended up in places they didn't belong, I think it can be attributed to more than command, or lack thereof.

Judging by the way the New York Yankees and Orioles have played once they got out of intradivision play, it makes you wonder if the AL East is really as deep -- and as strong -- as the occupants would have you believe.

When a pitcher unexplainably spins as much out of control as Orioles left-hander Wade Miley did during the first half of this season it usually means one of two things: either something's hurting or he's developed the kind of phobia that affected the careers of some players, like Steve Blass (the Pirates' dominant World Series Game 7 winner against the O's in 1971), and second basemen Steve Sax and Chuck Knoblauch.

Miley's last start seemed to provide enough evidence that he's not hurting, and while his control -- "fastball command" if you prefer -- wasn't exactly spot on, there was enough progress for manager Buck Showalter to believe he hadn't been affected by the phobia, which at one point seemed to have invaded the clubhouse.

★
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With the 2017 Major League Baseball Hall of Fame induction ceremony taking place July 30, The 15 this month selects the 15 best players not in the Hall of Fame (active players and players not yet eligible for the ballot excluded, of course). This list does not include players who have been banned from baseball or have been linked to PED use. As for the criteria, I placed more emphasis on the “eye test” and traditional statistics than sabermetrics. When it comes to WAR, I’m with Bruce Springsteen: “What is it good for? Absolutely nothing.” I also gave more weight to players who were among the elite during their prime years than to those who were very good (but not necessarily great) during a longer period. Players are listed in alphabetical order.



BEST PLAYERS NOT IN THE BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

[01] **DICK ALLEN**

The polarizing Allen arguably was the best hitter in the majors from 1964 -- when he won the National League Rookie of the Year Award -- to 1974. During that span, the first baseman/third baseman/outfielder hit at least 32 home runs six times, and as many as 40. Allen led the league in homers twice, RBIs once, on-base percentage twice, slugging percentage three times and OPS four times. The 1972 American League MVP, Allen's career slash line is .292/.378/.534.

[02] **ALBERT BELLE**

Sure, it's easy to dismiss the mercurial Belle as a Hall of Fame candidate due to his severe anger management issues and a perceived lack of hustle at times, but his eye-popping statistics are not so easily dismissed. From 1991 to 2000, the outfielder/designated hitter hit 30 or more home runs eight times (including 50 in 1995, 48 in 1996 and 49 in 1998) and had nine straight seasons of 100-plus RBIs. Belle, who retired at 33 due to an arthritic hip, finished with a .295 career average, 381 home runs and 1,239 RBIs.

[03] **STEVE GARVEY**

The first baseman with the massive forearms and matinee idol looks was the best player on Los Angeles Dodgers teams that were perennial contenders and played in four World Series (winning one). Garvey, a .294 lifetime hitter, won the 1974 NL MVP Award (he finished in the top six in voting four other times) and won four Gold Gloves. He led the league in hits twice and batted better than .300 seven times. Garvey hit .338 in 222 postseason at-bats and was named National League Championship Series MVP twice.

[04] **VLADIMIR GUERRERO**

Vlad The Impaler was nearly a first-ballot Hall of Famer this year, as he gained 71.7 percent of the required 75 percent of the vote, so his stay on a list of this type figures to be short. The 2004 AL MVP with the Anaheim Angels, Guerrero hit better than .300 13 times, had 30-plus home runs eight times and 100-plus RBIs 10 times. The right fielder/designated hitter has a .318/.379/.553 career slash line, with 449 home runs and 1,496 RBIs.

[05] **TREVOR HOFFMAN**

The longtime San Diego Padres closer just missed making the 2017 Hall of Fame class, falling one-percentage-point short in his second year on the ballot. How good was Hoffman? Well, the NL Reliever of the Year Award is named after him, so that should tell you

something. He has 601 career saves, second only to New York Yankees great Mariano Rivera. Hoffman had nine seasons of 40 or more saves and placed in the top six in NL Cy Young Award voting four times.

[06] **EDGAR MARTINEZ**

It's mind-boggling the former Seattle Mariners star still isn't in Cooperstown after eight years on the ballot. Apparently, a significant amount of voters just can't get over that Martinez spent most of his career as a designated hitter. Martinez won two batting titles, batted better than .300 10 times, led the league in on-base percentage three times and led the league in RBIs once. He has a .312 career average, and his .418 career OBP ranks 20th all-time.

[07] **DON MATTINGLY**

Chronic back problems sapped him of his power in the second half of his career, but Donnie Baseball was the sport's best player from 1984-1989. During that span, the former Yankees captain won a batting title and an RBI title and led the league in hits twice and doubles three times. He hit better than .300 every one of those years, knocked in more than 100 runs in five of them and hit 30 or more home runs three times. Mattingly won the AL MVP Award in 1985, was the runner-up in 1986 and won nine Gold Gloves at first base.

[08] **FRED MCGRUFF**

Playing in the steroid era, McGriff -- who is presumed to have been clean -- never put up the absurd offensive statistics of some of his peers, but the first baseman still has a Hall of Fame-worthy resume. He hit 30-plus homers 10 times, leading the league twice. McGriff also knocked in 100 or more runs eight times. For his career, he hit .284 with 493 home runs and 1,550 RBIs.

[09] **JACK MORRIS**

If you deem Morris not Hall of Fame-worthy because of his 3.90 ERA, you clearly don't know Jack. The right-hander was the winningest pitcher of the 1980s, a three-time 20-game winner, and he finished in the top five in wins eight times, leading the league twice. Morris was the MVP of the 1991 World Series with the Twins, and he also helped the 1984 Detroit Tigers and 1992 Toronto Blue Jays win World Series titles. His career record is 254-186 (.577) with 2,478 strikeouts.

[10] **THURMAN MUNSON**

The hard-nosed Munson, who died in a plane crash in 1979 at 32, was instrumental in the Yankees winning back-to-back World Series titles and three straight AL pennants in the late 1970s. Munson won the 1976 AL MVP Award and was the 1970 AL Rookie of the Year. He batted better than .300 five times in his 11 seasons, knocked in 100-plus runs three times, had a .292 career average and won three Gold Gloves. Munson's slash line in 16 World Series games is .373/.417/.493.

[11] **MIKE MUSSINA**

The former Orioles and Yankees right-hander won 20 games in a season just once (in his final season in 2008), but there's no denying he was one of the best starting pitchers of his generation. Mussina placed in the top six in AL Cy Young Award voting nine times and won seven Gold Gloves. His career record (270-153, .6382) is nearly identical to that of Orioles Hall of Famer Jim Palmer (268-152, .6380). Mussina's career strikeout-to-walk ratio of 3.58-1 ranks second among pitchers with at least 3,000 innings pitched.

[12] **TONY OLIVA**

The Twins right fielder arguably was the best hitter in baseball from 1964-1971 before he was hampered by knee injuries. Oliva won three batting titles and led the league in hits five times, doubles four times and slugging percentage once. He hit 20-plus homers five times, knocked in 100-plus runs twice and batted better than .300 six times. The 1964 AL Rookie of the Year, he placed in the top 10 in AL MVP voting five times, including two runner-up finishes.

[13] **DAVE PARKER**

The Cobra won two batting titles, batted better than .300 six times and won the 1978 NL MVP Award. In addition to being one of the most-feared hitters of his era, the right fielder had a powerful arm and won three Gold Gloves. Parker's career was derailed in the early 1980s by drug, weight and injury issues, but he got back on track a few years later, posting career-highs of 34 home runs and 125 RBIs with the 1985 Cincinnati Reds to finish second in NL MVP voting.

[14] **CURT SCHILLING**

The controversial right-hander was a three-time 20-game winner, won 15-or-more games eight times and has a 216-146 (.597) career record. He led the league in wins twice, strikeouts twice and complete games four times. In the postseason, he went 11-2 with a 2.23 ERA, including a 4-1 mark with a 2.06 ERA in the World Series. Schilling has three World Series rings and was the MVP of the 2001 series.

[15] **LARRY WALKER**

Sure, Walker's numbers were inflated by playing most of his career at Coors Field in Colorado, but that shouldn't disqualify him from induction into the Hall of Fame. In addition to winning three batting titles, a home run title and twice leading the league in on-base percentage, slugging percentage and OPS, the right fielder won seven Gold Gloves and was an excellent baserunner. Walker, the 1997 NL MVP Award winner, has a career slash line of .313/.400/.565. •

[BY KEVIN ECK | PRESSBOX IS AVAILABLE EVERY MONTH ON THE 15TH]

LARGE SHADOW

— BY STEVE GINSBURG —



WITH HIS YOUTHFUL APPEARANCE AND ANIMATED DEMEANOR,

Ken Rosenthal scurries around the Orioles' clubhouse looking more like a batboy than one of Major League Baseball's most influential broadcasters.

When the diminutive former *Baltimore Sun* reporter interviews a player on the field, his neck is craning upward at such an angle it's as if he's holding a microphone to one of the stone carvings at Mount Rushmore.

And those around-the-table panel discussions on the MLB Network? He's aided by an extra seat cushion. Or two.

But make no mistake, the affable, 54-year-old Rosenthal is one of the heavyweights of the industry, having left the *Sun* to search for another challenge before finding his unlikely niche in front of a television camera.

"I feel very, very fortunate to achieve what I have," Rosenthal said. "I never wanted to be more than a beat guy on a major sport at a major paper. My dad, figuring I would never make enough money, would tell me early in my career, 'Maybe one day you'll be on TV.'

"I would laugh at him and say, 'No chance.'"

The 5-foot-4, bow tie-wearing Rosenthal is now a ubiquitous figure for the baseball fan, whether he's in the dugout interviewing players during Fox broadcasts or debating the future of New York Mets pitcher Matt Harvey on MLB Network.

But Rosenthal would have never acquired his much-envied seat on the sideline if he had taken the advice of former *Newsday* sports editor Dick Sandler. Rosenthal, at the time a senior at the University of Pennsylvania, had interned at Long Island's *Newsday* two summers before and was seeking career advice.

Unlike fellow intern Tom Verducci, who already was showing the talent that would allow him to eventually write for *Sports Illustrated* and become a field reporter for TBS, Rosenthal wasn't that developed yet and he knew it; he was just looking for some career guidance.

"You should go to law school," Sandler quipped.

Some aspiring writers would be angry or hurt. Rosenthal was both. But Sandler's abruptness also hardened his resolve to make it in the business.

"It bothered me," Rosenthal said of Sandler's counseling. "But I didn't listen to it, even for a little bit. I didn't believe it. But it taught me something. You don't tell people, 'No.' You don't tell people they can't do it. They have to find out for themselves. And I try not to ever tell people that. Because you know what? You don't know.

"Look, maybe I wasn't the best writer. And maybe I wasn't the best reporter. But I had a lot of desire. And I guess that's what he couldn't see. And he wouldn't have seen that. I was an intern. It's not like I saw him every day."

WORK ETHIC AND DESIRE

Rosenthal, a New York native, said grit and ambition can go a long way.

"We see that same thing in all walks of life," he said. "People who, maybe, exceed what they should have accomplished because of work ethic or desire. Sometimes when young people ask me for advice, I have a hard time. I don't know what to tell them. The business is so different than when I entered it. But I never tell them, 'Don't do it.'"

After eschewing Sandler's advice to give up on his dream, Rosenthal worked for the *York Daily Record* in Pennsylvania and the *Courier-Post* in Cherry Hill, N.J., before joining the *Baltimore Sun* in 1987. Eventually becoming a columnist, many people remember Rosenthal for going toe-to-toe with Orioles owner Peter Angelos.

But, Rosenthal said, that's what a columnist does.

"Was I too harsh at times? Of course I was," he said. "But, when you're a columnist, you take your shots. Sometimes, maybe you go too far. Sometimes, you don't go far enough. But that's the job. The job is not to sit there and cheerlead. The job is to write informed opinions about what's going on."

The Orioles went through a rough stretch during Rosenthal's years at the *Sun*, and the hands-on owner was often the target of criticism.

"I never hated him or anything like that," Rosenthal said of Angelos. "I disliked the way he ran the team. I left the newspaper 17 years ago. And to this day, people say about me, 'He was out to get the Orioles.' But you know what? The fan bases of just about every team think the same thing about me."

AGGRESSIVE AND FEARLESS

Longtime *Sun* columnist Peter Schmuck said Rosenthal was "very aggressive. He was fearless. And people expected him to be the guy that went after Angelos, the guy that would trade blows with him."

Schmuck said, "It's tough to be in battle all the time," and he sensed Rosenthal fled Baltimore, in part, because of the contention with the Orioles owner.

Former Orioles catcher Rick Dempsey, now a television broadcaster for the club, said Rosenthal "was a hard worker, always coming into the locker room looking for a story." He said he did not recall him being particularly hard on the team.

But, Dempsey said when he was interviewing for a job to manage the Orioles -- after his 21-year big league playing career ended -- Rosenthal wrote "something to the effect that, 'Do we want a manager here with the Orioles that will run around the tarp during a rain delay?'" The reference was to Dempsey's affinity for entertaining restless fans with an impression of Babe Ruth calling a home run shot and then circling the bases before sliding into home with a huge splash and a roaring, appreciative crowd.

"As a player, I was always accommodating to Ken whenever he needed something,"

Dempsey said. "And then, when he wrote that, I thought that was a little unfair. I got a little bit upset with him at the time. But through the years, I really just let it go.

"I have no ill will against him at all. But I don't know if I'd ever give him another interview," he added with a smile.

Tim Kurkjian, a former *Sun* writer who now works for ESPN covering baseball, said Rosenthal was "edgy in every way" at the newspaper.

"But that's ultimately what we pay columnists to be -- to have a strong opinion," Kurkjian said. "And he always did. He was fearless, which I think is part of being a great columnist. You can't be afraid. You have to say what you think. And then you have to show up the next day to face the music. And as far as I can tell, he did all of that."

HE'S NO 'RAH-RAH' GUY

Rosenthal also questioned whether Orioles legend Cal Ripken Jr. should have taken a seat after he broke the consecutive

he said. "The paper let me do it. But they didn't play the stories that much. They were focused on the Ravens, Orioles and Terps, which is understandable. That's what the readers want. I get it.

"But at the same time, if you're writing about the same things for the next 20 or 30 years, I don't know," he added, his voice trailing off.

Rosenthal also said the newspaper had let several of his well-respected colleagues go, and he wondered if he would also, ultimately, meet the same fate. So he left the newspaper in 2000 for the *Sporting News* and eventually landed at Fox in 2005, where he is one of the network's most visible broadcasters.

The print-to-television shift had its rough spots, but few people are surprised Rosenthal, a five-time winner of Maryland Sportswriter of the Year while at the *Sun*, rose to the top.

"He works harder than everyone else, and that's the reason he's there," Kurkjian said. "He didn't get there by any short cut. And here he is, still working the phones,



games played streak and was fighting a variety of injuries.

"The job is not to sit there and be the rah-rah guy," Rosenthal said. "And a lot of people in Baltimore have a hard time with it. And especially because I wasn't from Baltimore. But, for the most part, the questions I asked were fair. If you looked at my work, column by column, could you find a couple that went maybe too far? Sure. But that's still the job.

"I have tremendous respect and admiration for Cal. Did every column reflect that? No. But probably 90 percent of them did. And, of course, all of those are forgotten."

Rosenthal covered the University of Maryland, the Ravens and the Orioles for the *Sun* -- a dream job for a sportswriter -- but it wasn't until he traveled to the Paralympic Games in Raleigh, N.C., that he started to get the itch to move on.

"I thought it was a cool thing to do,"

working stories harder than anyone every single day. That's why everybody likes him. No one is surprised where he is. He does it the right way. It's his work ethic."

ENTER THE BOW TIE

Despite his unmatched stamina for working a story, in 2011, Rosenthal's bosses at Fox decided he needed a shtick for television. Enter the bow tie.

"The National League Championship Series just ended," Rosenthal said. "The Giants had beaten the Phillies, and one of the guys at the Fox truck says, 'Hey, are you ready to wear the bow tie?' I said, 'What bow tie? What are you talking about?'"

"The head of Fox Sports at the time, David Hill, wanted me to wear a bow tie so I would stand out. As a reporter, you want to stand out through what

you're writing. Television is different."

He wore the bow tie for the opening game of the World Series, and when he asked his direct boss if he should wear it for Game 2, he was told, rather delicately, "It would be a good idea."

"I hated it," Rosenthal said. "I hated what it stood for. It was humiliating, in my mind."

That offseason, former NFL linebacker Dhani Jones contacted Rosenthal and asked



if he would represent Bow-Tie Cause, which designs bow ties for different charities.

"I said, 'No. I don't want to wear a bow tie every game,'" Rosenthal said. "But then I thought about it, and knowing they were going to make me wear it again, I decided this might be a way to do it on my terms and do it for a good reason."

Rosenthal concedes, "David Hill was right. It's become part of my identity, and

when I don't wear a bow tie, people always ask where it is. And the charities we've been able to raise awareness for, that part is great."

However, Rosenthal does admit, "I do not think the bow tie is a good look for a short person. In my opinion, a long tie gives an appearance of length. You might ask why this crosses my mind. Hey, when you're short, this stuff crosses your mind."

For the record, he will not wear a bow tie to a wedding and, yes, his wife Lisa agrees it's not a good look on him. His height (or lack thereof) is something he cannot control, though he is quick to point out, "I'm not 5-foot-4. I'm 5-foot-4 and a half."

"People talk about it all the time," Rosenthal said. "I'll be interviewing [6-foot-5 Giants pitcher] Madison Bumgarner, for example, during the World Series. It looks ridiculous. But I'll never stand on a box. But you know what? People know I'm short. It would look crazy if I was eye-to-eye with Bumgarner."

"People can say what they want. But yes, I'm short. I've been short my whole life." *The Sun's* Schmuck said he still laughs

when he sees Rosenthal looking straight up when interviewing a particularly tall player.

"All of us love and respect Kenny, but when he's standing there trying to interview [6-foot-10] Randy Johnson after the game, I'm thinking he needs a stepstool," Schmuck said. "It's just funny. But that's part of it. Kenny has never been a guy you couldn't joke around with. He's not sensitive. He's self-deprecating. And people like that in a person."

Rosenthal dispels the popular notion he saw the decline of the newspaper industry on the horizon and decided to give television a shot.

"Oh, wow, I'm not that smart," he said. "I just wanted to try something else. Plain and simple."

Schmuck said there's no way he could be resentful of his friend's success.

"It would be a natural response to be envious or jealous because he's done so well," he said. "But he's such a good guy. And you can see how good he is at it. But he doesn't engender that. You're just happy that it's happened that way for him."

Ken Rosenthal has covered the World Series, the Super Bowl, the Olympics and many other blue-chip events on the sporting landscape, but nothing, he says, will ever match the excitement of being at Camden Yards Sept. 6, 1995.

2,131: 'NOTHING ELSE IS EVEN CLOSE'

The game Ripken eclipsed Lou Gehrig's hallowed record for consecutive games

played "was easily the most special," Rosenthal said.

"The magnitude of the game was something," he said. "The President (Bill Clinton) and the Vice President (Al Gore) were there. Joe DiMaggio was there. It was a huge national event."

But Rosenthal said there was another reason the game was stressful. In those pre-internet days, he knew scores of national baseball writers would descend on Baltimore for the record-breaker and look at the *Sun's* coverage.

"The press box was packed, and I knew my peers would be looking at my story the following day," he said. "I felt a lot of pressure because of that. That means a lot to me. I was very nervous."

Rosenthal said he needed to capture what the record meant for not only baseball but for the country. He said so much happened that night, including Ripken's memorable victory lap when he high-fived the fans, the story was "almost easy to write."

"This is the most memorable part about it," he said. "My wife had been watching at home on TV. Everybody was watching it. It was a big, big deal. She said, 'You have to write about so much negative stuff in your job -- so much crap -- that this is a positive thing. I'm really, really happy you got to cover this.' And I feel that way to this day."

"It's the No. 1 event I've ever covered, and nothing else is even close." •

— PHOTOGRAPHY —

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MARYLAND GAMING

Beloved Maryland Horse Ben's Cat Retires After Storied Racing Career

★ **BILL ORDINE**



Maybe it's something in our Maryland water, but it appears the state has a tendency to produce iron-like athletes. Of course, just about every fan in the Free State has pride and admiration for the most prominent athlete known for longevity and dedication -- Orioles Hall of Famer Cal Ripken Jr., who holds the major league baseball record at 2,632 consecutive games played.

However, another Maryland athlete who was also made of stern, enduring stuff has just ended his own long, legendary career.

Ben's Cat, a Maryland-bred thoroughbred who is easily the state's most beloved horse, has retired following what turned out to be his farewell race in June.

The 11-year-old dark bay gelding, who looked almost black in a certain light, defied the calendar and convention by bursting from the starting gate 63 times and then strolling

to the winner's circle after 32 of those starts. His first win was in his first race at Pimlico Race Course in 2010.

Overall, the horse known alternately as "Ben" or "The Cat" was 32-9-7, meaning that his bettors cashed winning tickets more than half the time he ran. Of his 32 triumphs, 26 were in stakes races, and he earned \$2.6 million in purse money.

He was owned and trained by King Leatherbury, now 84, who credited Ben's Cat with making him a Hall of Fame trainer. Leatherbury has used the word "salvation" to describe what Ben's Cat meant to the trainer's career so late in the game.

Now, Ben's Cat is in retirement at a farm near Versailles, Ky., where Chris Welker has assumed his stewardship. She had been trying to convince Leatherbury for more than two years to let her take care of Ben's Cat when his racing days were finished.

"I first noticed Ben when he started having success and started winning stakes races. Frankly, he was beating horses that he should not have been beating," Welker said. "At first,

it was, 'Wow, this a pretty good horse,' and then it was, 'Wow! This is a pretty amazing horse.'"

Ben's Cat specialized in sprints and was a superstar on Laurel Park's world-class turf course. He owned the Mister Diz Stakes, which has been run from five to six furlongs, winning it six straight years from 2010 through 2015. He finished first in the Jim McKay Turf Sprint at Pimlico five times, the most recent in a breathtaking late burst to the wire in 2016.

In fact, that was a trademark move for Ben's Cat, firing in the last few strides to pull off still another photo-finish win.

While some might contend Ben's Cat didn't have the pedigree of some of his competitors, his own sire (Parker's Storm Cat) was fathered by Storm Cat, considered the game's top stallion for a time (his stud fees were in the hundreds of thousands of dollars). And several generations before that, Ben's Cat's ancestral line included Canadian wonder-horse Northern Dancer and probably the greatest racing thoroughbred of all time,

Secretariat.

As a 2-year-old, Ben's Cat suffered a broken pelvis that delayed his racing career until he was 4. Amazingly, he went on to campaign for eight years -- an eternity in horse racing.

"That was a pretty serious injury he had as a 2-year-old," Welker said. "He was like a little kid who had to overcome adversity, and he's been such an overachiever his entire career."

Ben's Cat ran for the final time in the Mister Diz Stakes at Laurel Park June 24, and despite making one more charge from the far outside, he wound up finishing back in the pack in a race won by Phlash Phelps.

"Sometimes with retired horses, you need to give them a career. But Ben has had a career, a great career," Welker said. "... For a racehorse, 11 is old, but for non-racing horses, it's not so old. He has a lot of good years left."

As special as it is when human athletes have long careers that allow fans to develop special attachments, it is far more rare among four-legged athletes. One of the problems that horseracing faces is that the stars of the sport run as 3-year-olds in the Triple Crown races, compete for perhaps another year, and then stand at stud, gone from the spotlight.

"Good horses, all the time they come up, but they don't last," Leatherbury said after Ben's Cat won the Jim McKay Turf Sprint last year. "Fans can have a favorite horse, and a year or two later, they're gone. And here, he just goes and goes and goes."

In the imagination of racing fans, that's how Ben's Cat will always be remembered, perpetually sprinting to the finish line, and getting there first. •



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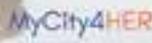
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Chesapeake Bayhawks Looking To Build Stadium, Athletic Complex

★ ED WALDMAN



ark Burdett says it's time to turn up the heat.

The president of the Chesapeake Bayhawks has been beating the drums for his Major League Lacrosse franchise's proposal to build a 10,000-seat stadium and 20-field lacrosse complex on the grounds of the former Crownsville Hospital Center in Anne Arundel County.

The Bayhawks, who have been an MLL member since the league's inception in 2001, currently play at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium, and the new development project is a chance, Burdett said, for the county he grew up in and still lives in to keep its only professional sports team, while addressing a critical need for recreational fields.

"What better way to revitalize and/or regenerate a fallowed property than with youth fields and athletics?" Burdett said.

The Crownsville Hospital Center was shuttered in 2004 after nearly a century of caring for the mentally ill. The 1,200-acre facility, founded in 1910 as the Hospital for the Negro Insane, costs the state about \$1.2 million a year to maintain.

Bayhawks owner Brendan Kelly -- another son of Anne Arundel County -- and Burdett want to use 90 acres of the Crownsville property to develop the stadium, 20 soccer-sized fields (with lights), and a three-story building that would contain locker rooms, an event facility and office space.

A stadium that size, which Burdett said would be constructed to look more like an amphitheater, could also be used for high school sports, NCAA and high school playoff games, high school graduations and professional soccer.

The total cost of the project, including infrastructure, would be in the neighborhood of \$135 million -- \$40 million for the stadium, \$30 million for the fields and between \$50 million and \$65 million for "abatement and reconstituting the property," Burdett said.

"We have not met with anybody who is against this," he said. "There's a leader of the community association that represents 35 community associations in the Crownsville area that is completely in support of the project. They obviously don't want apartments or strip centers or anything like that on the property because of traffic and because they don't want the congestion and they don't want

the view, for lack of a better term. But green grass and kids playing sports, I think everybody can get their arms around that, and Anne Arundel County is underserved in that capacity in a pretty significant way.

"That's why we're a little frustrated with [Steven R. Schuh, the Anne Arundel] County Executive for not seeing the value of this and not jumping in with both feet and saying, 'I'm all in. I'm not going to support this, I'm going to lead this.'"

"Now we're carrying the banner ourselves, and too many times we get classified as developers. We're not developers. We're not in this to build apartments or strip centers. We're in this to build an amphitheater and youth fields. That's the message. We're doing everything we can to get the right green lights in place to move forward."

A spokesman for Schuh said in an email the County Executive "is very supportive of the concept of having a lacrosse facility and stadium in Anne Arundel County and is disappointed by recent comments made by Bayhawks officials suggesting otherwise."

However, the spokesperson, Owen P. McEvoy, said the county also needs to take into account the impact the facility would have on the residents of the Generals Highway Corridor in Crownsville.

"A project like this must address the traffic management issues of the surrounding areas," McEvoy wrote, also noting the property is owned by the state and not the county.

But the lack of enthusiasm has Burdett and the Bayhawks scratching their collective heads.

"We just think that as members of the Anne Arundel County community, this would be a huge miss for Anne Arundel County," said Burdett, who played lacrosse as a 1976 graduate of the Severn School in Severna Park and then at the University of Maryland. "For Anne Arundel County to lose the only professional sports team it has -- or will ever have -- is just ridiculous.

"We're getting a little boisterous, maybe."

Burdett said the Bayhawks are looking to have the Maryland Stadium Authority float a bond to pay for the stadium, and that the team would pay the bond off over 40 years, "just like the Ravens are doing" for M&T Bank Stadium.

Terry Hasseltine, a vice president with the stadium authority, said his organization is in the preliminary phase of a study on the Crownsville site that was requested, and will be at least partially

paid for, by the Bayhawks.

"We are engaging all of the parties to make sure that no stone is unturned as we analyze the site for a potential stadium and for mixed-use opportunities," Hasseltine said.

Burdett, who was named president of the Bayhawks in January, was an executive with the Ravens for 12 years before leaving to become general manager of WUSA, Channel 9, in Washington, D.C. He said the team's dream timeline would see a groundbreaking for the stadium in 2018 and an opening in 2019.

The Bayhawks, he said, can sustain operating losses until then. But not much longer.

"The business of Major League Lacrosse, running a team, renting [Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium], paying a payroll, we're in the red," he said. "And as a business, we can't sustain losses for perpetuity. We just can't.

"So we have to decide now, are we in for Crownsville, are we going to Port

Covington, or are we going to join D.C. United in Northern Virginia and be part of their new complex and academy at George Mason University? Because all of those options are on the table and green-lighted."

And while those options have their positives, Burdett said the Bayhawks have built their business in Anne Arundel County and want to stay and have a place they can call their own -- and control.

"When we go to a place like Prince George's County or Northern Virginia or Port Covington, we're giving up control," Burdett said. "Meaning we'd have partners. And those partners would have access and usage and shared resources. We're not afraid of giving up control because in some cases that's a compromise we have to have in order to run a business in the black, but if you don't have to give up control, you would be better off.

"If it's our stadium and our field complex, and we run it for the good of our organization and for the good of the community versus if we go to Port Covington, we'd have to work with Under Armour. Great partner, great concept, but we'd have to share. And that might be good and it might not be good. All of those details have to be worked out.

"They are a super brand, and to be associated with a super brand would only be a good thing. But it would be a damn shame if we had to play a game at 1 o'clock in the afternoon because there was an NFL combine going on in our stadium. That could happen." •

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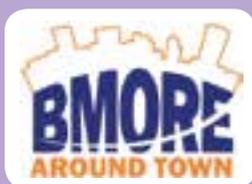
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RAVENS REPORT

Five Storylines To Watch At Ravens Training Camp

★ **BO SMOLKA**

The Ravens organization has spent countless hours during the past six months trying to improve its roster, aggressively targeting the defense during free agency and in the draft, landing Pro Bowl receiver Jeremy Maclin in something of a late-spring coup and working with unproven young players who are expected to step

into more significant roles.

The annual grind of training camp will be a critical time for the organization, and not just for the 15 or 20 players sitting on the roster bubble.

Having missed the playoffs in three of the past four seasons, the Ravens coaching staff and front office has to be feeling some heat in 2017.

Here are five key storylines to watch this training camp:

1. How do Breshad Perriman, Jeremy Maclin and the rest of the receivers look?

General manager Ozzie Newsome said one of the team's major offseason needs was a "complementary receiver," and after missing out on the top three receivers in the draft and ignoring the position in the early part of free agency -- drawing the ire of many fans -- Newsome and the Ravens landed Maclin in June after he was a surprise cut by the Kansas City Chiefs.

With that, a passing game that lost Steve Smith Sr. to retirement and Kamar Aiken as a free agent received a major jolt of optimism.

Maclin had two minicamp practices with the Ravens after signing in June, so he and quarterback Joe Flacco will quickly work to get up to speed.

Perriman, meanwhile, had an outstanding spring, showing off not only his speed but also improved catching and route-running.

"It's kind of back to how I felt probably the first couple of practices his rookie year, when he was running by people, and you can tell he had something," Flacco said of Perriman after a minicamp practice.

It will be interesting to see how the Ravens utilize Maclin, Perriman and Mike Wallace, who had a team-high 1,017 receiving yards last season.

Chris Moore appears locked into the No. 4 receiver job, and a host of players, including oft-injured Michael Campanaro, former Navy quarterback Keenan Reynolds, Chris Matthews, Kenny Bell and several undrafted rookies are

going to be battling for one or two roster spots.

2. Who will play tight end?

Three months ago, this was perhaps the deepest position on the team, with six players on the roster who had NFL experience.

But then Dennis Pitta went down with his third major hip injury during an OTA workout, and Darren Waller was suspended for the entire season for a second violation of the league's substance-abuse policy.

Of the four remaining tight ends returning, Ben Watson (Achilles) and Maxx Williams (knee) are coming off major injuries. Watson was limited to light individual drills this spring as he looks to return at age 36. Williams, a second-round pick two years ago, was sidelined all spring while recovering from a knee procedure that head coach John Harbaugh said had never been done on an NFL player.

Crockett Gillmore (eight catches, 71 yards last year) has missed 15 games in the past two seasons and missed more time in the spring with a hamstring injury.

The only tight end who was healthy throughout OTAs and minicamps was Nick Boyle -- who missed 10 games last season while serving a second suspension for violating the league's policy on performance-enhancing drugs.

Harbaugh predicted back in March that fans would love watching the tight end competition in training camp. At this rate, the winner of that competition might be the only one standing.

3. Will the Ravens rediscover a running game?

The Ravens had 367 carries last season, the fewest in franchise history, and criticism about the propensity to abandon the run reached all the way to the owner's box.

"I was really disappointed in the lack of a running game, the lack of a commitment to the running game," owner Steve Bisciotti said at the team's end-of-season news conference.

The Ravens have vowed that they will recommit to the run and hired Greg Roman, an architect of top-five rushing offenses in Buffalo and San Francisco. Roman, technically the senior offensive assistant/tight ends coach, said the Ravens will "refocus, retool and come up with a plan" to boost a running game that ranked 28th in rushing (91.4 yards per game) and 21st in rushing yards per play (3.99).

The Ravens added multipurpose back Danny Woodhead, and he will complement returning backs Terrance West and Kenneth Dixon, although Dixon will serve a four-game suspension to begin the season.

"Obviously, we want to run the football more this year,

and we didn't get to do that [last] year," Pro Bowl guard Marshal Yanda said. "Everybody in the building wants to get it right."

4. Is Kamalei Correa ready to start?

Linebacker Zach Orr's stunning retirement -- followed by his equally stunning un-retirement and free pass to free agency -- left a gaping hole in the middle of the Ravens' defense. Orr retired because of a congenital spinal condition but changed his mind following further medical evaluation.

The way the Ravens handled the apparent certainty of his retirement administratively resulted in Orr's free agency.

With Orr and his 132 tackles most likely heading elsewhere, the Ravens are relying on Correa, a second-round draft pick last season, to make a quantum leap from his disappointing rookie year.

Correa and the coaching staff acknowledge that Correa being bounced like a ping-pong ball from inside to outside linebacker and back last season slowed his development. He totaled four tackles. Now after hardly seeing the field on defense, Correa is being counted on to start alongside C.J. Mosley at the heart of the Ravens' 3-4 defense.

"We have kind of honed him into one spot, and he is really working hard at that and really learning that spot," defensive coordinator Dean Pees said during minicamp in June. "I think he has been moving around great. ... As far as where he fits and knowing his responsibilities and assignments and all that kind of stuff, I am very, very pleased with him at this point."

5. Will the young pass rushers have an impact?

The Ravens identified the pass rush as one of their major offseason needs and with good reason. Last year, the Ravens finished with 31 sacks, their lowest total since 2010 and third-lowest total in franchise history.

Terrell Suggs, who will be 35 in October, trained in Owings Mills, Md., all spring and looks "renewed," according to Pees. The Ravens also addressed the pass rush early in the draft, selecting edge rushers Tyus Bowser in the second round and Tim Williams in the third.

It's tough to get a read on the pass rush during noncontact spring drills, but Pees said he likes what he has seen from both rookies.

"I think both of them are going to ... potentially really help us," Pees said.

Suggs is likely to see little preseason game action, which will give Bowser and Williams plenty of opportunity to make a statement. That also goes for Matt Judon, who lined up as a starter much of the spring, and Za'Darius Smith, who recorded one sack during a disappointing 2016 season.

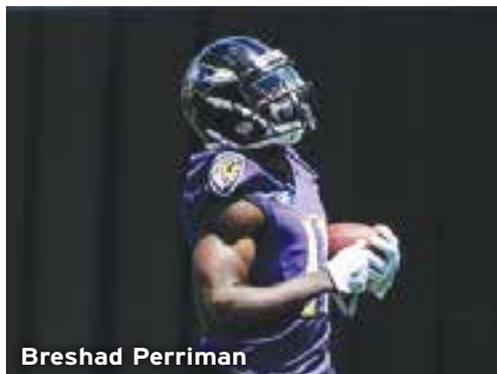
TRAINING CAMP NOTE:

Because of construction at the Under Armour Performance Center in Owings Mills, no practices at the team facility will be open to the public this summer. The Ravens will, however, hold free, open practices at M&T Bank Stadium at 6 p.m., Saturday, July 26 and at 10 a.m., Saturday, Aug. 12. They will also hold practice at Navy-Marine Corps Memorial Stadium in Annapolis, Md., at 6 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 5. •

ALL PHOTOS: SABINA MORAN/PRESSBOX



Jeremy Maclin



Breshad Perriman



Danny Woodhead



Kamalei Correa

After 29 Years And Numerous Titles, Navy Men's Track And Field Coach Stephen Cooksey Retires

★ STEVE JONES



hroughout his lengthy career with the Navy men's track and field program, head coach Stephen Cooksey preached the principles of preparation and hard work as keys to success. His student-athletes took those lessons and won a slew of championships.

Cooksey will retire from the Naval Academy Aug. 30 after 29 distinguished seasons at the helm of the program that has dominated the Patriot League and turned out a succession of All-Americans.

Under Cooksey's guidance, the Midshipmen won 14 Patriot League championships -- nine indoors, five outdoors. In addition, Navy won five Heptagonal championships, taking three straight outdoor crowns from 1991-1993 and the 1992 and 1993 indoor titles. The Midshipmen also captured the 1991 Colonial Athletic Association outdoor championship.

Cooksey's athletes earned All-American honors 23 times. The most recent All-American was senior Lucas Stalnaker, who finished fifth in the 10,000-meter run at the 2017 NCAA Outdoor Championships in Eugene, Ore. Cooksey's most accomplished athlete was four-time All-American Greg Keller, who earned national recognition indoors (mile, 1992 and 1993) and outdoors (steeplechase, 1992 and 1993).

Athletes also excelled academically

under Cooksey. During Cooksey's final season as Navy head coach, senior distance runner Ryan Speir earned first-team Academic All-America honors from the College Sports Information Directors of America. Speir was the 13th Navy track and field athlete to be named an Academic All-American during Cooksey's tenure.

Cooksey is ending his coaching career with the Midshipmen on a championship roll. Navy has earned five consecutive Patriot League indoor titles and four straight outdoor crowns. Still, Cooksey believed this was the right time for him to leave.

"I just felt like I needed to give it over to the younger guys," said the 67-year-old Cooksey, who will also retire from his position as an associate professor in Navy's physical education department. "It's time to get new blood in here and keep this thing going."

Once his retirement officially takes effect, the longtime head coach will get to see his family more frequently.

"The time goes by so fast," said Cooksey, who lives in Annapolis, Md. "I talked to my wife, Val, and my daughter, Brooke, about it, and decided that I wanted to spend more time with them."

Cooksey's teams compiled a 353-48 dual-meet record. Cooksey, who earned the Patriot League's Coach of the Year honor 14 times, also guided Navy to a 37-21 mark against archrival Army West Point, including nine indoor and outdoor sweeps of the Black Knights in the past 17 years.

His track and field legacy started at Indiana State University, where Cooksey earned All-America honors as a high jumper. Cooksey began his collegiate coaching career at Ball State two years after his 1972 graduation from Indiana State. During his 10 years at Ball State, the last six as the Cardinals' head coach, Cooksey developed an NCAA champion and a trio of All-Americans.

Cooksey left Ball State after the 1984 spring season and spent the rest of his career at Navy. He served as an assistant coach for the cross country and track and field teams under Al Cantello for four seasons before becoming the head men's track and field coach in 1988.

"Steve proved to be a gem," said Cantello, who is now an assistant coach for the Navy men's track and field team and also serves as the Academy's head men's cross country coach. "He's true to the core, and there's nothing phony about him. Steve was a perfect gentleman who had great expertise and was very consistent in his approach. He would give a Mid every possible chance to improve. The Naval Academy did well by Steve Cooksey."

Cooksey's indoor and outdoor teams combined for 56 winning records and 22 undefeated seasons in dual-meet competition. Navy's outdoor team hasn't lost a

dual meet since the 2011 season.

Cooksey's impact was felt beyond the Navy program. He was the head coach of the U.S. team that won the World Junior outdoor championship in 1998 and the U.S. squad that took the 2008 World indoor title.

Cooksey insisted the work ethic of his student-athletes was the key to Navy's continuing success.

"It was about our kids doing the work to get themselves ready for competition," Cooksey said. "If you're going to meet your goals, you're going to have to work hard. You have to go through the grind of being out there every day. Sacrifice and hard work have propelled us along."

Despite the unique demands of coaching at a service academy, Cooksey's approach didn't vary much over the years at Navy.

"I always stayed with the idea that this is supposed to be about education," he said. "At Navy, our kids are very bright and hard-working, and we need to give them the time to do what they need to do here. They have a lot more on their plate here than they do at a state university."

Cooksey is wistful as he looks back on his storied Navy coaching career.

"The coaching years and days are very special," Cooksey said. "For me, it's always been about the kids. Watching the kids work to get to a higher level has been rewarding. I'll miss seeing them get better and better, and I'll also miss the staff here at Navy." •



Stephen Cooksey



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New Recruiting Rules For Division I Lacrosse Impact Local Coaches

★ TODD KARPOVICH



College lacrosse is reining in some of the madness that goes with recruiting student-athletes.

Earlier this year, the NCAA passed a rule that prohibits Division I lacrosse coaches from speaking with a prospective student-athlete before Sept. 1 of his or her junior year in high school. The new rules are expected to stem some of the pressures put on young athletes to commit to a college when they are still adjusting to high school.

Calvert Hall head coach Bryan Kelly supports the new rule because high school students can now make a college decision with a better understanding of who they are and what they want to do. He said the toughest part of the change for college coaches is that they won't be able to speak at all to players who have committed until September of their junior year.

"It's a lot of pressure on these little guys," said Kelly, who was named the ALL-USA Coach of the Year by *USA Today* this past season. "As you can see, kids change. What was important to them at age 15 is different when they turn 16 or 17, especially from an academic perspective and what type school they might want to attend. Kids were making decisions before they stepped foot on a high school campus."

The recent Under Armour All-America lacrosse games at Towson University attracted dozens of college coaches scouting potential players. Kelly, who helped coach the rising 10th-graders at the games, said more of the recruiters were watching some of the older players, as opposed to just focusing on the younger athletes as in years past.

Even before the rules were approved, several Division I college coaches, such as Virginia men's lacrosse head coach Lars

Tiffany, stayed away from recruiting high school freshmen. Tiffany said his program and prospective student-athletes simply need more time to get to know one another and there were also academic issues to consider.

Mount St. Mary's men's lacrosse head coach Tom Gravante is another proponent of the new rule. He said the early recruiting was hurting the game because many younger athletes were being put in a situation to make a life-impacting decision before they were fully prepared.

"I think many college coaches are pleased of the new rule imposed," Gravante said. "I did not believe in the early recruiting process from the start, as I don't feel it was right to place such pressure on young men who are still developing as young adults."

However, there could be some potential problems with the new regulations, according to UMBC men's head coach Ryan Moran. The full impact of the new rules won't be realized for years, but it might not be good for all athletes.

"When you think about it, yes, kids were committing early, but is getting the opportunity to verbally say I am going to go to some of the best academic universities in the world and play lacrosse at the Division I level such a bad thing?" Moran said. "How much more mature is a 14-year-old than a 16-year-old? I mean, we are talking about a very, very small percentage of the kids nationally that fall under this realm of perceived pressure of making a decision early."

Moran contends there will still be pressure on student-athletes. Those players could potentially be contacted by dozens of Division I coaches that day without ever having the ability to visit many of those schools.

"My greatest fear is that I think we are going to enter a world on Sept. 1 where a coach could potentially call a kid in the morning saying he wants him to visit his school, and send

him an email that same night saying that kid's position has been filled," Moran said. "On the flip side, what about the kids waiting with their cellphones that never receive a call from a coach? Lastly, all recruits with aspirations of playing Division I lacrosse will probably have to bypass playing a fall sport in order to visit multiple schools and revisit their top schools during the fall time frame, which is unfortunate. I just think we might be trading one set of problems for another."

Fallston boys' lacrosse head coach Matt Parks said the new recruiting rules are great for the student-athletes who have been overlooked the past few years because they were "late bloomers" or started playing the sport later. Parks said the change also lessens the pressure for families to spend an excessive amount of money and their summers in the club lacrosse grind. It will likely put emphasis back on high school success and allow younger players more of an opportunity to spend time developing their skills and lacrosse IQ rather than just playing games to "be seen," Parks said.

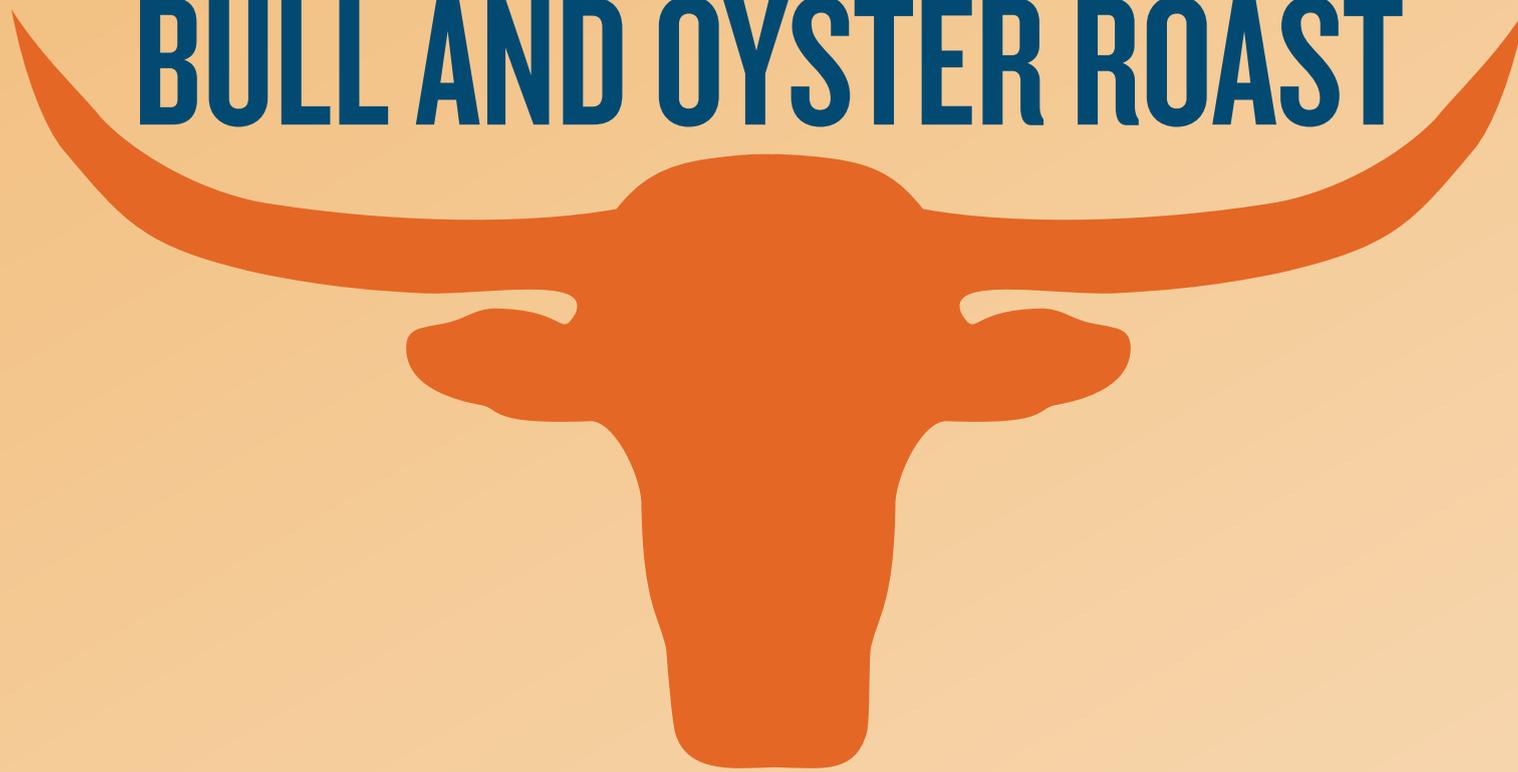
"The amount of pressure that was felt by student-athletes and families at such an early age was crazy," said Parks, whose team reached the 2017 Class 2A/1A state semifinals. "How many eighth- or ninth-graders really know what they want from their college experience at that age? Big campus, small campus, major, close to home, away from home, public or private; all things most prospective college students take a lot of time to filter through the options to find the right fit."

The Intercollegiate Women's Lacrosse Coaches Association worked diligently for three years to get the new rule passed. The influential group was convinced that recruiting needed to be reined in for the good of the athletes and overall college game.

Other provisions of the new rule stipulate:

- Club and high school coaches may not be used to circumvent recruiting contact rules.
- Direct messaging to prospective student-athletes through these third parties is not permissible.
- Communication about verbal offers through these third parties is not permissible. •

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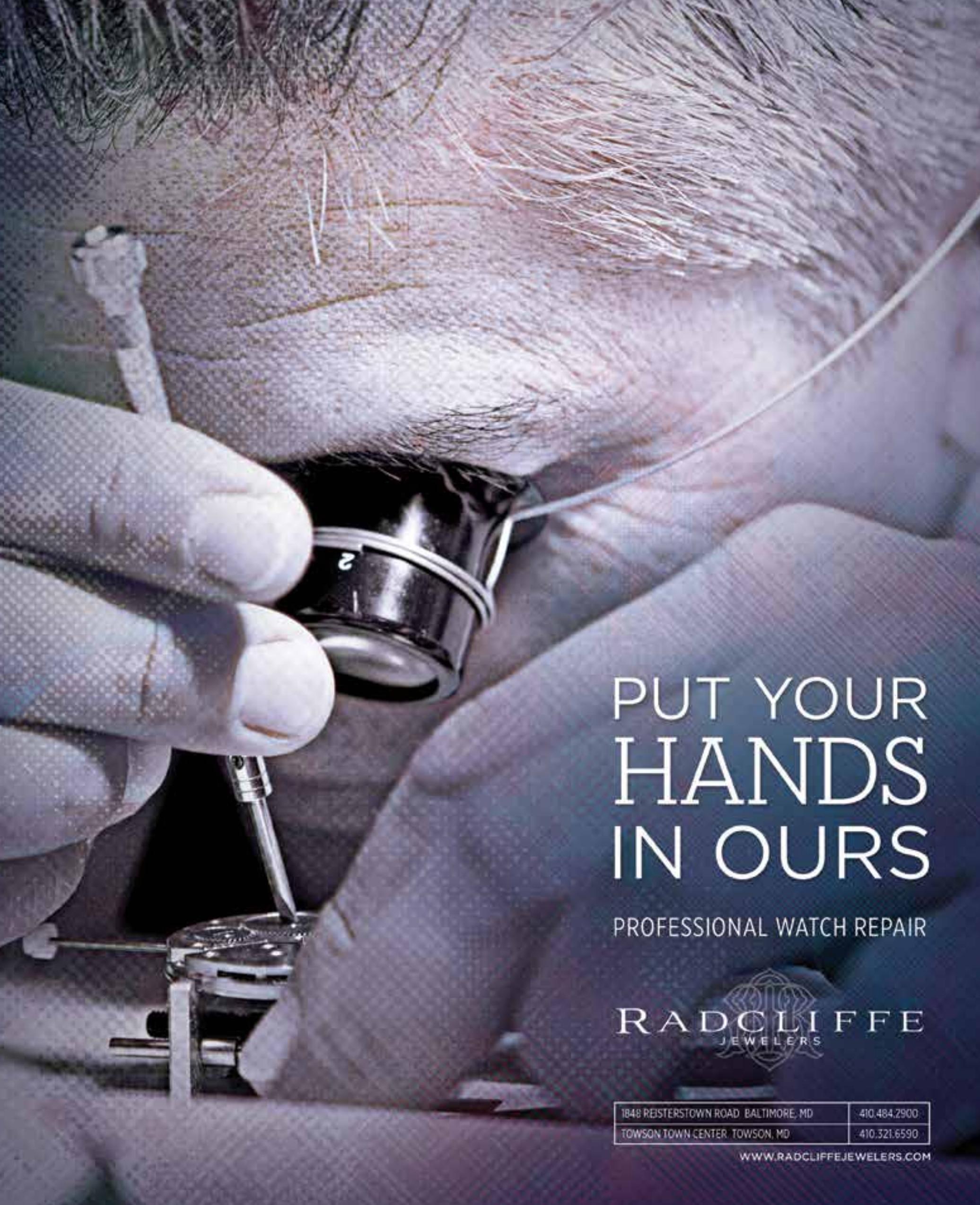
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VARSITY REPORT

Aaron Urban-Zukerberg Gunning For League Title In First Season As Boys' Latin Coach

★ WICK EISENBERG

New Boys' Latin soccer head coach Aaron Urban-Zukerberg may be new to coaching at the varsity level, but he's been around the sport a long time.

He was a standout at Owings Mills High School, where he also wrestled and played lacrosse. Soccer was his primary sport, though, and he competed collegiately at St. Mary's College of Maryland, where he graduated in 2000.

After the birth of his first child, Jackson, Urban-Zukerberg decided it was time to embrace another side of the sport and get his coaching license.

"I just always wanted soccer to be something that I would have with my kids," Urban-Zukerberg said. "At first, it was really just about my kids."

Urban-Zukerberg has coached his children through the Towson United organization, where he's also served as the club's technical director. He has also stepped into coaching roles for teams that don't feature his children, spending the past 12 years coaching Dulaney High School's boys' and girls' junior varsity teams, as well as coaching futsal (a version of indoor soccer) at Boys' Latin the past two years.

This coming school year, Urban-Zukerberg will take on the challenge of being a high school varsity head coach.

"It's a lifelong dream, especially being a public-school kid from Owings Mills, to be able to have this kind of opportunity to coach at BL," he said. "I'm just trying to build on the tradition that's already here. It's a wonderful

place, incredibly special, that has incredibly special families and kids."

That tradition is as strong as any in the Maryland Interscholastic Athletic Association "B" conference. The Lakers routinely find themselves near the top of the conference's standings and competing for league championships.

Urban-Zukerberg replaces Don Rickels, who announced in April that he was vacating the head coach position. During Rickels' tenure, the Lakers won six MIAA "B" conference titles, the most recent in 2012.

"Our soccer culture is outstanding," goalkeeper Jordan Douglas, a 2017 Boys' Latin graduate, said. "We're always in the playoffs and we rarely disappoint people. Playing soccer at Boys' Latin is a big honor. Even though soccer isn't the biggest sport at BL and we aren't in the highest conference, we always come together and play as a group."

Getting players to focus on a sport that isn't necessarily their primary athletic passion is something Urban-Zukerberg acknowledged he will have to confront. Urban-Zukerberg referred to it as the York Road Challenge -- getting lacrosse players to become better at soccer.

His desire to make soccer a bigger sport at the school has helped him build chemistry with his players who do view it as their primary sport, one of which is rising senior striker Alex Westerkamp.

"I'm confident we're going to do well

this year," Westerkamp said. "I know Coach is pretty intent on having a good first year because he's already given us packets on conditioning and weight lifting so we don't have to focus on that as much once the season begins. I feel like he wants to try to make soccer here like lacrosse, football or basketball, which I like."

For now, Urban-Zukerberg is focusing on getting himself and his players acclimated to each other. He's organized pick-up sessions on Monday evenings throughout the summer. The group scrimmages during those pick-up kick-arounds, but Urban-Zukerberg said this summer's focus is mostly on him getting to know all his players.

He has a bit of a head start on that as well. A few Boys' Latin players came through the Towson United system, while some have played futsal for him.

The workouts have been well-received by the players, especially younger ones.

"These kick-arounds really bring everyone together," rising freshman right winger Avery Tankersley said. "Getting to play with each other before the season really helps, too. You get to know everyone and little things about each other's games, which helps a lot."

The kick-arounds have also given Urban-Zukerberg an idea of what he has to work with from a talent perspective. There is a good chunk of returners from last year's team, which finished 7-12 overall, including



AARON
URBAN-ZUKERBERG

a 6-10 mark in conference play.

Urban-Zukerberg will be keeping a close eye on his defensive line, as he likes to have his teams play the ball out from the back and control the game from there. In order to do that, Urban-Zukerberg is going to need highly skilled defenders.

"It all depends on what you have in terms of personnel," he said. "You have to be able to adapt to what their skill sets are, but the basis of my philosophy is you need to possess the ball coming out of the back. I always like to have some of my better players in the back because if mistakes are made on defense, you give away goals. If you do that, you're not going to win many games."

While winning games is certainly Urban-Zukerberg's main priority (he hopes to win the league title in his first season as head coach), he views developing talent as a crucial aspect of the job.

The Towson United and Dulaney junior varsity programs both saw players improve under Urban-Zukerberg's tutelage.

To the first-year varsity head coach, the development cycle is never-ending for soccer players.

Boys' Latin should be as good a place as any for Urban-Zukerberg to cultivate talent due to the sheer number of opportunities the Lakers provide. In addition to the varsity and junior varsity, there are teams for each grade at the middle school level, and there's talk of adding a fresh/soph team for high school as well.

When it comes to player development, Urban-Zukerberg's strategy is to get his players comfortable with using every aspect of their body while on the field.

"There are 28-30 different surfaces on your body that you can use during your game," Urban-Zukerberg said. "The best kids can use every single one of them well. It's about getting those reps in, getting kids using both feet and moving off the ball. You have to teach them that there's always another level that they can get to. They may not know they can at the present moment, but if they work hard, they'll be able to get there. I hope to help our players achieve that." •

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Katie Dustin Named U.S. Army Impact Player Of The Month

★ WICK EISENBERG



Katie Dustin, a catcher for the softball team at Glenelg High School in Howard County, is the U.S. Army Impact Player of the Month.

Dustin, a rising senior, was nominated for the award by Glenelg head coach Ray Gerstner.

"She is a three-year starter for the team and has been a team captain the last two seasons," Gerstner wrote in his nomination. "Katie has been the starting catcher for all three seasons."

A strong all-around player, Dustin put together an impressive junior season, hitting .671 with 47 hits, including 12 doubles, two triples and six home runs. She also had 40 RBIs and 36 runs scored, while striking out once.

Dustin also was reliable behind the plate. She caught most innings and called the games without help from Glenelg's coaching staff, a rarity in high school softball.

Glenelg benefited from Dustin's efforts. The Gladiators finished 2017 with a 17-6 record and an appearance in the Maryland Public Secondary Schools Athletic Association 3A East title game.

"I think we did amazingly. Our record says it all," Dustin said. "Us girls on the team, we were really close and pushed



Katie Dustin

each other to do better. We communicated very well. We would convene after at-bats and talk about the tendencies with the pitcher so that we could do better our next time at the plate. Also, we picked each other up whenever one of us was down -- that helped us, too."

For Dustin, one of the season's highlights was the opportunity to play with her sister, Molly, who is a rising sophomore third baseman. The two sisters enjoyed playing together, and getting the opportunity to do it one last time is one of the main things the elder Dustin is looking forward to about her final year of high school softball.

"I love playing with my sister," Dustin said. "I have two sisters, but I've only ever gotten the chance to play competitively with Molly. I'm incredibly close with both, and softball is something we all can share and talk to each other about. Getting to put on a glove and play with them is amazing."

Dustin began playing softball at the age of 10 when a friend asked her to join her rec team. Not knowing much about the sport beforehand, Dustin decided to join the team and fell in love with the game.

That initial excitement Dustin felt when she first started playing accompanies her every time she takes the field.

"With how crazy life can be away from the field, I love that I'm able to play softball and be a kid," Dustin said. "I don't have to worry about homework or upcoming tests, I can just focus on my team and have a good time."

As she continued to thrive at the high school level, Dustin became a highly sought-after prospect by college programs. Though Dustin looked into numerous schools, she landed on the one she's wanted to go to ever since she was little.

"Maryland has always been my dream school," Dustin said. "I've always wanted to be a Terp. I love the campus, and I'm a Maryland girl. I love the state and I wanted to stay. In my mind, it was always going to be a great fit. I went and visited most of the schools that contacted me, but my heart stayed in Maryland. It just felt like home."

Dustin has orally committed to play softball for Maryland, and plans to officially sign with the program in the fall.

In Dustin, the Terps are getting an individual who also has thrived away from the softball field. She currently holds a 4.6 GPA and is a member of the school's Key Club, which encourages its students to help others. Through Key Club, Dustin has gotten involved with 5 Star Athletics, an organization dedicated to getting young girls playing softball.

With 5 Star Athletics, Dustin teaches younger players the basics of the game, a responsibility she takes seriously.

"Softball is getting a lot more recognition these days; it's becoming more alive," Dustin said. "The sport has given me so much, so I feel like it's my duty to give life back to it by teaching younger players not only how to play, but have fun with it, too." •

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The Impact Player of the Month award is given to an individual who has impacted his or her team in a positive way, both on and off the field.

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COMMUNITY BEAT



★ WALKS/RACES

JULY 29 -- BALTIMORE ROAD RACE

Celebrate family fitness at this event, which includes the Smith Family 5K Footrace, Walter's Walk and James Mosby/Smart Steps Youth Fun Run to benefit Park Heights Community Health Alliance. For details, visit phcha.org/baltimore_road_race.html.

AUG. 4 -- SNEAKS COME OUT AT NIGHT

Take part in The AT&T Sneaks Come Out at Night 15K and 3x5K relay and run through the hills of Druid Park starting at 6:30 p.m. Funds from the event will benefit Back on My Feet Baltimore, a nonprofit organization that combats homelessness through the power of running, community support and essential employment and housing opportunities. For more information and to register, visit give.backonmyfeet.org/sneaks or call 410-675-7500, ext. 174.

AUG. 5 -- CASEY CARES/ORIOLES 5K

Lace up your running shoes for an incredible cause to benefit the Casey Cares Foundation, which provides uplifting and ongoing programs with a special touch to critically ill children and their families. The 3.1 mile run/walk begins and ends at Oriole Park at Camden Yards. Visit caseycarefoundation.org or call 443-568-0064.

AUG. 12 -- RUNWAY 5K

This women's-only race encourages all women runners and walkers to come out in their latest running gear and cross the red carpet finish line for a photo finish. Runners will also receive a long-stem rose and a custom medal all to benefit Calvary Women's Service. To register, visit runningintheusa.com/Race/View.aspx?RaceID=162353.

AUG. 19 -- BELIEVE BIG 10K

Join the Believe race team at the River Valley Run, which features a 10K and 15K trail course, scenic 5K road course, kids stampede fun run and a toddler trot. Come run/walk with your friend, your sports team or co-workers and make a difference in the lives of those who are facing, fighting and overcoming cancer. To register, visit believebig.org/rvr/.

AUG. 19 -- SURVIVOR STRONG 5K FUN RUN/WALK

All proceeds will further the mission of The National Center for Citizen Safety to raise awareness on how to respond to domestic terrorism. Opening ceremonies begin at 7:45 a.m. at 6940 Columbia Gateway Drive. To register, visit bit.ly/NCCSAFE5k.

AUG. 20 -- IRON GIRL TRIATHLON

The 11th annual Iron Girl Columbia Triathlon will take place at 7 a.m. at Centennial Lake in Ellicott City. Iron Girl aspires to bring women of all ages together as a community by offering a supportive, energetic and empowering environment for females pursuing a healthy and active lifestyle. To register, visit irongirl.com/Events/Columbia_Triathlon.htm#axzz3zxZ0jBY.

AUG. 26 -- STARS 5K & 2K WALK

Walk at the Canton Waterfront Park to raise awareness and

funds to support individuals who have sickle cell disease. The event benefits Sickle Cell Disease of America. To register, visit classy.org/baltimore/events/walk-stars/e113697 or contact cpaige@sicklecelldisease.org.

SEPT. 2 -- CHARLES STREET 12

This unique point-to-point race will take runners down historic Charles Street, now a national scenic byway, and end at Power Plant Live! A portion of the proceeds from the race will benefit the Children's Heart Program at the University of Maryland Children's Hospital. For more information and to register, visit charlesst12.com.

SEPT. 9 -- NUN RUN

This 5K and one-mile fun run benefits St. Martin's Home and the Little Sisters of the Poor Baltimore. The race begins at 8 a.m. at The Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, 5200 N. Charles St. To register, visit charmcityrun.com.

SEPT. 17 -- SUPER HERO WALK

Join the Baltimore Child Abuse Center for a free, fun and family-friendly romp around Lake Montebello in your finest superhero costume to raise awareness of child abuse. All are welcome to attend, and superhero costumes are optional and encouraged. Music, face-painting, healthy snacks and a cape-making station will be on-hand for all to enjoy. To register, visit bcaci.org/super-hero-walk/.

SEPT. 24 -- ZERO PROSTATE CANCER RUN/WALK

Register for the Cancer Challenge 10K, 5K and one-mile fun walk at Towson University's Johnny Unitas Stadium. This tight-knit community event will bring together athletes, doctors, cancer survivors and those who care about ending prostate cancer. The goal is to find a cure for prostate cancer by funding research and providing free testing and education. To register, visit zerobaltimore.org.



★ BASEBALL/SOFTBALL

AUG. 12 -- BASEBALL CARD SHOW

A sports card and memorabilia show to benefit Monsignor Slade Catholic School will be held at Monsignor Slade Catholic School in Glen Burnie from 9 a.m.-3 p.m. For more details, call Leo at 443-416-6447.

ADULT BASEBALL

Join the Eastern Baltimore County over-40 baseball league, which plays with wood bats on 90-foot diamonds. Players of all skill levels are encouraged to visit over40baseball.org or call Mike Lockett at 410-446-0443.

COCKEYSVILLE RECREATION

For updates about baseball registration for the Cockeysville Recreation Center, visit cockeysvillereccouncil.org or call 410-887-7734.

MEN'S COED SOFTBALL

The Baltimore County Lutherville-Timonium Rec Council has opened team registration for the fall slow-pitch softball

program at Reisterstown Regional Park, which runs from mid-August to early November. Leagues are Monday and Wednesday evenings. Email tjharrington51@netscape.net or call 443-847-1072 for additional registration details.

BLUE DEVIL UMPIRE ASSOCIATION

New baseball umpires are needed to officiate in Baltimore, Carroll and Frederick counties. No experience is necessary. Email Bob Frank at lawyerfrank@comcast.net or call 410-493-7011, or contact Larry Silverman at Bluedevilumps@comcast.net or call 410-484-2118.

FAST PITCH

U14 and U16 Dynasty Prime fast-pitch softball teams are looking for committed players and families for the upcoming spring/summer season. Games are played in local and national tournaments and showcases. Players participate in year-round workouts and practice at Prime Sportsplex in Glen Arm. Visit Dpdynasty.com or email Coach Denny at dpdsoftball@gmail.com.

MUSEUM OF NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL

Visit the Hubert V. Simmons Museum of Negro Leagues Baseball at the Owings Mills Metro Centre. The museum is named after Bert Simmons, who played for the Baltimore Elite Giants. The museum is open daily, and admission is free. Volunteers are always welcome. For more information, visit smnlbinc.org.



★ SOCCER/RUGBY/SQUASH

CELTIC SOCCER CLUB

Tryouts for the Celtic Soccer Club are for boys ages 6-18 and girls 6-12. Registration and additional information is available at baltimoreceltic.com.

MIGHTY KICKS PUP LEAGUE

The Pup League provides year-round soccer training for boys and girls of all abilities ages 2-7. It's designed to build motor skills, self-confidence and basic techniques. Ongoing programs are available around Baltimore. For more information, visit mightykicksbaltimore.com.

RUGBY

The Baltimore-Chesapeake Rugby Club, the region's only Division I men's rugby club, is looking for experienced players or those new to the game. For more information, email baltimorechesapeakerugby@gmail.com or visit baltimorerugby.net.

SQUASH

SquashWise provides incentives for middle school students to excel academically, athletically and socially, as well as the opportunity to compete in local and national squash tournaments. No squash experience is necessary to become a tutor. Visit baltimoresquashwise.org to make your tax-deductible donation. To make equipment donations and/or become a volunteer tutor, email abbym@baltimoresquashwise.org.

★ GOLF

AUG. 6 -- MINI-GOLF TOURNAMENT

Co-hosted by Robyn Dixon from Bravo's "The Real Housewives

of Potomac," the success of the tournament will help the Adam E. Herndon Foundation, which teaches local youth through its mentoring program. The tournament takes place from 6-10 p.m. at the Columbia Sports Park. To register, visit adameherndon.com.

AUG. 26 -- THREE CLUB CLASSIC

A nine-hole event played with three clubs will be held at historic Carroll Park Golf Course to benefit First Tee of Baltimore, whose mission is to provide kids the support to thrive academically and socially through golf. The use of only three clubs forces golfers to be creative and invent shots, especially around the greens. This event puts a major emphasis on shot-making, club selection and making the most of limited resources. For more information, call 240-273-GOLF (4653) or visit 3clubclassic2017.ezevent.com.

SEPT. 25 -- 4TH QUARTER GOLF OUTING

Enjoy a day of golf at Waverly Woods in Marriottsville to benefit The 4th Quarter, a nonprofit organization focused on building leadership skills and confidence through after-school sports programs for middle school-age students. For more information, visit the4thqtr.org/upcoming-events/ or call Justin at 443-904-6318.

HOMESCHOOL SPORTS

Baltimore-area homeschooled boys and girls in grades six-12 interested in playing interscholastic sports -- like soccer, volleyball and baseball -- can register for the upcoming school season. For more information or to register, email chensports@verizon.net.

MARYLAND OFFICIALS CLUB

Interested in becoming a high school swimming official in the Baltimore-Anne Arundel area? Experience as a competitive swimmer or coach at the high school, college or masters level -- or prior experience officiating -- is strongly preferred. Email mdcommish@comcast.net or call Mike Connors at 410-653-7307.

DUCKPIN BOWLING

There are openings for youth duckpin-bowling leagues for ages 3-21 at various duckpin centers in Baltimore. Most programs run Saturday mornings and include bowling, shoe rental and coaching. For more information, visit ndya.org, call Stacy Karten at 410-356-0936 or "like" duckpin bowling at facebook.com/theduckpinnews.

OFFICIALS WANTED

Do you love roller derby? Do you love whistles? Do you love

stats? Then you may be ready to join the ranks of the Charm City Roller Girls' officiating crew, which is looking for skating and non-skating officials of all skill levels. No experience necessary. For more information, email referees@charmcityrollergirls.com.

BALTIMORE FITNESS ACADEMY

BMoreFit's goal is to reduce childhood obesity throughout the Baltimore metropolitan area by educating and mentoring urban youth with targeted programs for improved health, fitness and nutrition. For more details, visit bmorefit.org.

BICYCLE REPAIR

As a cooperative bicycle shop, visitors can work on a donated bike, use tools to fix a broken bike or buy ready-to-ride secondhand bikes. Volunteer staff will provide assistance. For details, visit velocipedebikeproject.org.

WIFFLE BALL

If you can swing a bat and throw and catch a ball, then you can play Wiffle Ball. Enjoy a game that caters to players of all ages and have some fun. For summer tournament information, visit midatlanticwiffle.com.

★ FOOTBALL

BALTIMORE TERPS YOUTH

Games are open to all players ages 4-14, regardless of weight or skill level. The games provide a platform for participants to play the proper position for their body size while also ensuring their success as they move on to high school and beyond. To register, visit baltimoreterps.com or call 443-863-TERP.

★ OTHER ACTIVITIES

AUG. 13-19 -- CROSSING MARYLAND

Become a trekker and hike or bike alongside meteorologist Justin Berk as he makes his way across Maryland to benefit kids with cancer and their families. To register, visit coolkidscampaign.org/mdtrek.

SEPT. 16 -- DOGFEST

Baltimore Humane Society's Dogfest Walk & Festival is a dog-day extravaganza for pets, kids, pet owners and pet lovers that benefits animals in need of care and refuge at the 365 acre no-kill shelter. Sign up now to be a walk fundraiser and/or come for a great family day of games, contests, swimming for your dog, demonstrations and lots of food. Plus, meet adoptable dogs, cats and rescue groups. For tickets and more information, visit dogfest.org.

CAR RACING

Enjoy car racing with a dose of adrenaline in a safe and legal environment all summer long. Visit mirdrag.com or call 301-884-9833.

ULTIMATE FRISBEE

Central Maryland Ultimate Association promotes youth ultimate frisbee leagues in the Baltimore area. Go to cmuadisc.org/youth/ for information about spring/summer leagues in Pikesville and Towson as well as Howard and Anne Arundel counties.

BABE RUTH MUSEUM

The improved Babe Ruth Birthplace Museum has reopened next to Camden Yards. Babe Ruth's legacy shaped the sports and American life we live now. Consider making a tax-deductible donation. Visit baberuthmuseum.org/donate or call 410-727-1539, ext. 3012.



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THE REALITY CHECK

Are The Ravens In Better Position To Win Close Games?

★ **GLENN CLARK**



As training camp gets underway in Owings Mills, Md., this month, I have one particularly pressing question about the 2017 Baltimore Ravens. It's a question I definitely won't be able to answer before the regular season begins. And yet it's a question that will shape exactly what I'm looking for during camp and the preseason.

The single-biggest factor that will determine the fate of the 2017 Ravens is: Are they in better position to win close games?

You will likely remember that in 2016 the Ravens did not play a game that was decided by more than one possession until Week 10 (a 28-7 win against the Cleveland Browns on "Thursday Night Football"). For the totality of the season, only four of their games were decided by more than eight points, including the Week 17 loss to the Cincinnati Bengals that lacked much in the way of interest after the Ravens were eliminated from playoff contention by the Pittsburgh Steelers the week before.

While close games are seemingly a normalcy in the NFL, the Ravens' propensity for close games in 2016 was

still exceptional. Their two biggest rivals in the AFC, the Steelers (nine games) and New England Patriots (11) had significantly more games decided by more than one possession last season.

And while it would be nice to think the Ravens could help solve this issue by simply winning more games by lopsided scores, the easiest way to fix it would be more offense. New England and Pittsburgh were both top 10 scoring offenses in the league last season, while the Ravens were 21st. Considering the number of questions that remain on the offensive side of the ball, it's hard to anticipate Baltimore being much better in that department.

Clearly, the Ravens are counting on their defense to help carry them in 2017. But a team with an average offense and a quality defense is still likely to play a number of close games -- games that are decided by a score of 17-10 or so. The Ravens had a top 10-ranked defense in terms of yards and scoring a season ago, but that quality defense couldn't get Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger off the field in Week 16, when he got the ball back with less than a minute-and-a-half to play and engineered the game-winning drive during a 31-27 Pittsburgh triumph.

All of this is to say that I fully expect the Ravens to be in a number of close games again this season. What I don't

know (yet) is whether they're ready to win more of them. Fittingly, during a season in which they finished .500, the Ravens went 6-6 last year in games decided by one score or less. Two more wins would have totally changed the outcome of their season.

Of course, their ability to win close games isn't really something we can know for sure until they play real games in September. Regulars won't be on the field at the end of preseason games, and even the scripted pressure situations the team works on in practice (like when they have the offense take the field with 45 seconds on the clock trying to "win") can't replicate the pressure of Heinz Field in December. (Reminder, the Ravens return to Pittsburgh Dec. 10, after their play-off hopes were dashed there on Christmas last year.) So what am I watching for in training camp? Sacks and touchdowns.

For all of the overall quality of the Ravens' defense last season, there were only six teams in the NFL that had fewer sacks than the Ravens' 31. The best way to make a stop at the end of the game when teams have four downs to get 10 yards is to get a quarterback on the ground (admittedly not easy against Roethlisberger), and take them from second-and-10 to third-and-19. The Ravens will hope for a renaissance year from linebacker Terrell Suggs, but I'll be closely watching young pass rushers Za'Darius Smith, Matt Judon, Tyus Bowser and Tim Williams to see if they're ready to make an impact.

Only six teams scored fewer than the Ravens' 30 offensive touchdowns last season. If they want to finish off games when they have the ball, someone is going to have to prove to be a reliable end-zone target. I'll be watching tight end Ben Watson in particular to see if he can help in that department.

I won't get an actual answer until the season starts. But without any clear indication that these two areas have improved, it will be difficult to expect much better from the Ravens in close games this season. •

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THEY SAID IT ON

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Kevin Huerter

"Melo taught us a lot. He never really got rattled ... the whole team fed off that. I'm definitely comfortable [with being a go-to guy]. Coming from high school, I was kind of in that role, and I know it's a lot different, the stakes are a lot higher [here], the crowds are a lot louder, but I think I'm comfortable making plays down the stretch and making big shots."

- Maryland rising sophomore guard Kevin Huerter June 23 on being comfortable in helping to replace former point guard Melo Trimble in big, late-game situations

"The fact that they moved me to fullback instead of just moving on with me is just a blessing. I just took it and ran with it. It was easy for them to just toss me since I've been hurt, but they found a way to get me to make the team and contribute to helping them win. So I'm embracing it."

- Ravens fullback Lorenzo Taliaferro June 19 on being moved from running back to his new position



Lorenzo Taliaferro

"I don't think Coach Wooden would have been able to coach in today's environment because the whole idea of somebody just coming in to stay there for six months and play basketball - that was alien to him. He wanted the people that came to play for him to go to school and be academically inclined. So that would have been an issue. I don't think Coach would've survived in this environment."

- Basketball Hall of Famer Kareem Abdul-Jabbar June 16 on if his legendary UCLA coach John Wooden could have worked in today's college basketball climate

"I think I can get out anybody. I think that's the mindset you have to have as a pitcher. You can't go up there scared. No matter what their name or their size is, I don't worry about it. I think I could get anybody out."

- Orioles first-round draft pick DL Hall June 14 on whether he believes he could already get Yankees slugger Aaron Judge out

"I went from 2013 being second in the league in interceptions and potentially people seeing me as one of the top corners in the league, and then didn't have that success the next year or two and then got injured. So I feel like I've got so much more to give. I've got so much potential that I haven't really tapped into, whether it was circumstance or whether it was injury. And I think this is a fresh start for me. I think this a clean slate for me to get back on to what I can do."

- New Ravens cornerback Brandon Boykin June 20 on what he believes he can offer the team this season



Brandon Boykin

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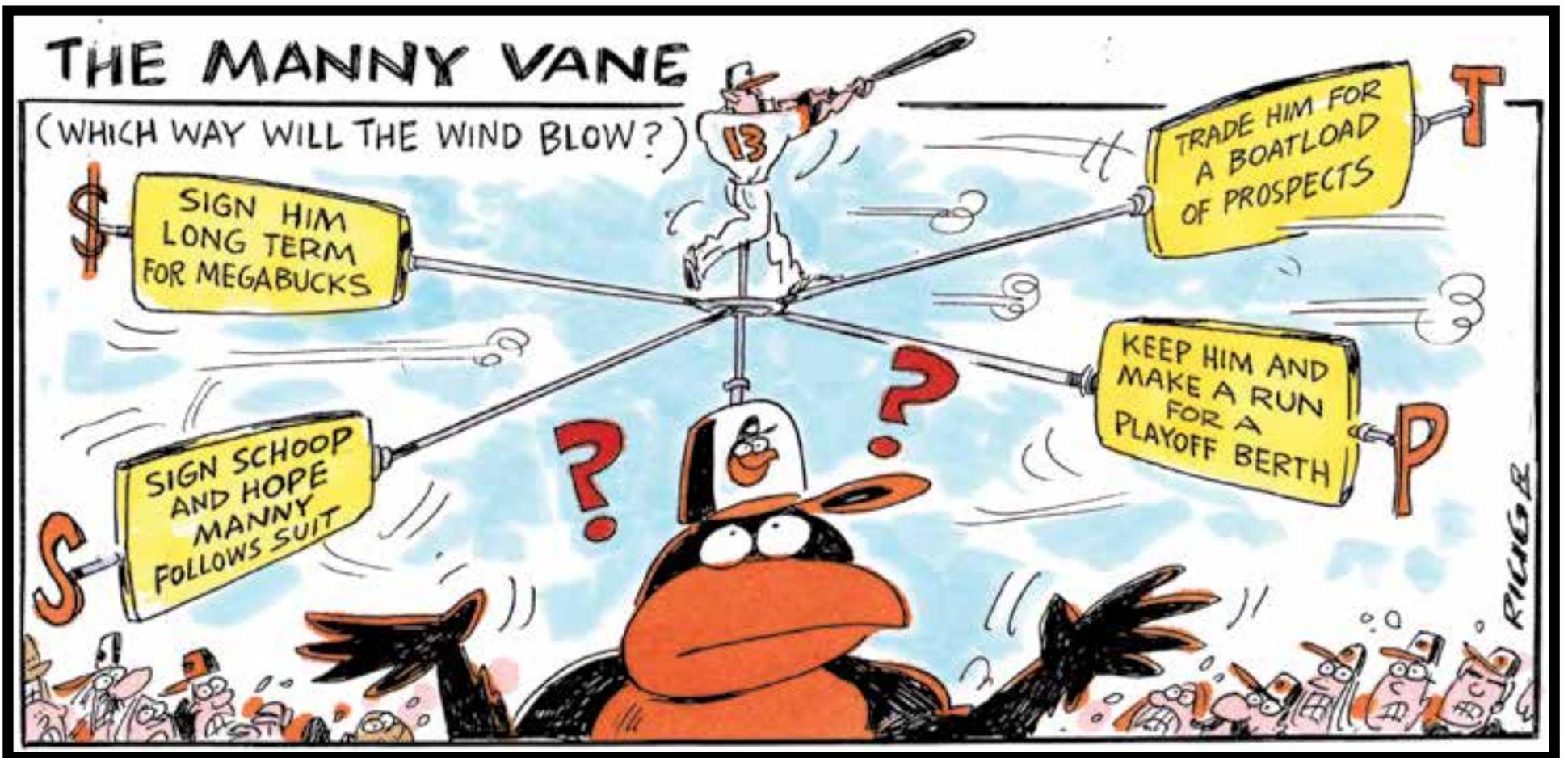
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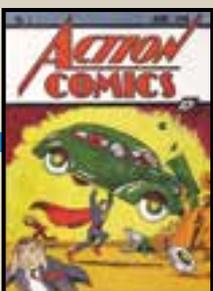


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