

baltimoresun.com

You can't take Baltimore out of the boy [Commentary]

One professor's ode to Charm City

By Frank Askin

December 25, 2013

Although I have lived in New Jersey for nearly 60 years, I still explain my strange loyalties by saying "You can take the boy out of Baltimore, but you can't take Baltimore out of the boy." advertisement

While I left Charm City for good in 1955 (long before the advent of that moniker), I still subscribe to Major League Baseball's Extra Innings so I can watch the Orioles on TV all summer. And for years I tried to put a hex on the Indianapolis Colts for sneaking out of town with our name in the middle of the night. But that feeling eroded after the Ravens came to town; and all year I have been proudly strutting around New Jersey wearing my Ravens [Super Bowl](#) Champions jersey.

I became apoplectic when a latter day owner of the Washington Bullets changed their name to the Wizards out of political correctness. I don't know whether he was even aware that the name Bullets was a tribute to the town's landmark Shot Tower, which produced cannon balls for George Washington's army during the Revolutionary War. I doubt even many Baltimoreans are aware of that.

But the Bullets played a crucial role in MY life. My uncle Morton (Babe) Askin was co-founder of the franchise in 1944, and my first job was to keep the public scoreboard at the old Baltimore Coliseum on Monroe Street. I was paid \$2 a game, while the players in the infancy of professional basketball in Baltimore were paid \$10. (Big-time pro basketball was then centered in the Midwest - with teams like the FortWayne Piston Zolners and the Chicago Zephyrs.)

Speaking of the Orioles, I still remember the championship 1944 International League team that beat the American Association Louisville Colonels in the Minor League World Series.

Another highlight of the 1944 season was the fire that destroyed the old Oriole Park on Greenmount Avenue and moved the Orioles games to Memorial Stadium on 33rd Street. That move was a godsend for us kids. It was surrounded by a 10-foot high chain-link fence, which we could easily scale. We would go over in waves, and the lone guard could nab only one of us, who would then repeat the move with the next wave.

Memorial Stadium was, of course, across the street from City College, where I spent three years, two of them as sports editor of The Collegian, and earned a varsity letter on the tennis team before graduating with the class of 1948.

The summer of 1948 was actually the turning point in my life — when I was transformed from perpetual athlete

to political/policy advocate.

The catalyst for this transformation was my much older brother Stan, who had been a genuine hero in World War II as an officer in the Fifth Ranger Battalion. (The two most poignant memories of the war for me were the times when military vehicles showed up at our door on Whittier Avenue, and my mother started crying, sure he had been killed in action. Only wounded!) After the war, Stan was elected by his comrades in arms as the first President of the U.S. Rangers Veterans Association, now known as the Special Forces Veterans.

The experience of war had also transformed him into a vociferous advocate for peace and racial equality. He publicly resigned his commission in the Army Reserve as a protest against the looming Cold War and also became a leader of the early civil rights movement challenging racial segregation in all aspects of life in the Jim Crow city of Baltimore. In the summer of 1948, Stan led the nation's first sit-in at the Druid Hill Park tennis courts after the city recreation department denied a permit for an interracial tennis match. That feat earned him a two-year jail sentence (suspended) for alleged "conspiracy to riot." (Now there is a monument to Stan and his comrades at the site of the sit-in.)

As I said, that was also the summer that changed my life. When Stan left for New York to pursue a career as a radio/TV writer, I succeeded him as the local organizer, challenging school, recreation and lunch counter segregation. That did not endear me to the rather large Askin clan in Baltimore. Nor to J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, which did not see civil rights advocacy as politically correct. By the time I was 18, I was on the FBI's "security index" of dangerous radicals.

For a brief period, I actually merged my political activism with my basketball prowess. Although not permitted in the city's public recreation league, a left-wing basketball enthusiast put together an independent interracial team that included some of the best black amateur players in Baltimore and a few competent white players. I was one of the few competent whites. We played mainly local teams from the various military bases situated around the state.

My activism also resulted in my departure from Baltimore at the age of 23. I was invited to come to New York to edit a left-wing youth magazine called New Challenge. So the boy left Baltimore, but Baltimore never left the boy.

One curious coincidence in light of my last 47 years as a professor of law at Rutgers Law School in Newark. When I was a child, my father ran the Biltmore Tavern, part of the Biltmore Hotel at the southwest corner of Fayette and Paca Streets. I ate many a lunch there from the ages of 3 to 6. Today the University of Maryland Law School stands on that corner. Maybe I was always destined to be a teacher of law.

Frank Askin is distinguished professor of law and director of the Constitutional Rights Clinic at Rutgers School of Law-Newark. He is the author of "Defending Rights — A Life on Law and Politics," distributed by Prometheus Books. His email is faskin@kinoy.rutgers.edu.

To respond to this commentary, send an email to talkback@baltimoresun.com. Please include your name and contact information.

Copyright © 2013, [The Baltimore Sun](#)