

May 21, 2020

Dear Apostles Friends,

I went to my first Orioles game on April 27, 1968. I was a ten-year-old fifth grader and Safety Patrol Lieutenant at Woodland Way Elementary in Hagerstown. April 27th was Maryland Safety Patrol Day at Baltimore's Memorial Stadium. I joined the Safety Patrol because my teacher, Mr. Bowers, was the Safety Patrol Teacher Advisor, and he told me to sign up. Mr. Bowers was the only male teacher at Woodland Way. I didn't have another male teacher until I was in 8th grade. If you don't know the significance of those last statements, I would encourage you to go anywhere around Waynesboro (after the pandemic is over) in the company of Bob Benchoff. Bob retired from teaching years ago, but he is still a rock star. Grown adults, both men and women, will run up to him and say, "Hi Mr. Benchoff. Remember me?" Not surprisingly, he usually does.

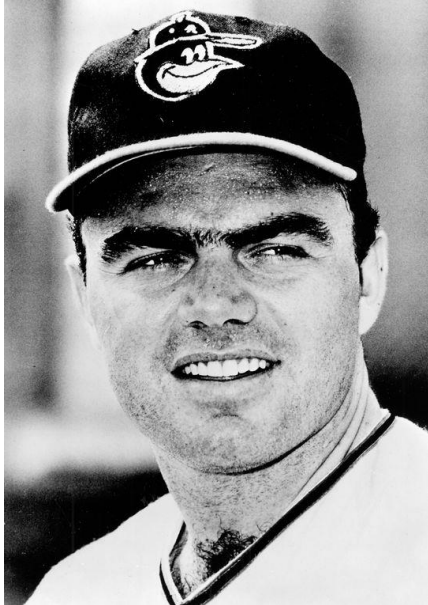


Looking back now, the whole idea of the Safety Patrol seems improbable. Would you give a ten-year-old a badge and a white, webbed belt and tell him to stop a '68 Buick so two little kindergarten girls could cross the street? Of course you wouldn't. Why did we do it, then? We did it because Mr. Bowers told us to do it, and because it got us two free tickets to see the Birds on Maryland Safety Patrol Day.

We arrived on that chilly, rainy Saturday afternoon to discover the game was going to be delayed by rain. The Safety patrol seats were all in the upper deck nosebleed sections, but most people were huddled under shelter on the lower concourse until the rain stopped. It quickly became apparent that many of the Safety Patrol dads had used the delay time to make acquaintance with the beer vendors. I'm afraid we heard words and observed conduct that was highly frowned upon in the School Safety Patrol Member's Handbook. While the dads were suitably distracted, several packs of feral fifth graders roamed the stadium, scavenging and looking for weakened stragglers who had been separated from the herd.

I wasn't sure we were going to make it through the rain delay. My dad hated to wait. It didn't matter how long the wait or what the wait was for. He just hated waiting. He also hated crowds, hated the feeling of being hemmed in by a crowd, hated loud and unruly crowds. He was miserable as we huddled with the drunk dads in the lower grandstand during the rain delay. He eventually bought us both inadequate but expensive Oriole rain ponchos, and we waited out the last half of the delay, wet and mostly alone, in our upper deck seats.

Our quiet perch gave me a great vantage point to watch the stadium slowly come alive as the rain stopped and the teams prepared for play. This was my first trip to a real stadium, and I was fascinated by every detail – the scoreboard lights, the advertisements, the non-Safety Patrol fans on the lower deck, how green the grass was, the way players warmed up. I just soaked it all in.



The record books say the rain delay was one hour, 23 minutes. It was the blink of an eye for me and an eternity for my father. The Oriole starting pitcher was Tommy Phoebus. Tommy was average in stature and ability – gritty, workmanlike, reliable but only extraordinary in two respects. First, he had a curve ball that was practically unhittable when he was throwing well. Second, he had the worst unibrow in the major leagues. Or, I suppose you could say he had the best unibrow in the majors if unibrow was the look you were going for. Tommy had one really good year in the majors, 1968. Our opponent that day was the Boston Red Sox.

I entered into an alliance with several kids in our section, permitting trips without parental accompaniment to the snack bar and rest room (the ultimate embarrassment). We wouldn't have fared well in all-out warfare with the feral packs, but there were enough of us in the alliance to cause the packs to go in search of easier targets. Emboldened by successful missions to acquire, then eliminate large orange soda pops, we decided to explore the Memorial Stadium Galaxy. This was a thoroughly satisfying adventure, despite missing the middle innings of the contest and a close encounter with an unusually territorial pack led by a slovenly youth in a Yankees batting helmet who would never have passed muster with Mr. Bowers.



My favorite player was Brooks Robinson. He's still my all-time favorite. I saw him hit a two-run double to start the Orioles' scoring in the 3rd inning before leaving on The Alliance Great Adventure. Then I saw him make an incredible defensive play in the 8th inning, after our mission of exploration was over. The Birds were ahead 6-0, cruising to an easy victory.

The crowd didn't seem in cruise mode, though. Just the opposite. They seemed to be getting more and more excited. Even my father, who was a tepid sports fan at best, seemed really into it. I concluded that must just be how it is in big league stadiums, and I sat down to savor what had been a wonderful day. When the final out was made there was pandemonium in the stands and on the field. The Orioles mobbed Tommy Phoebus. My dad stood and cheered, a rarity. He looked down at me with this big, undadlike grin on his face and said, "Wow, we just saw a no-hitter. I can't believe it!"

I couldn't believe it, either. My wonderful day was ruined. One of the rarest events in baseball was happening all around me, and I didn't even realize it. I had totally missed a third of the game exploring the ugly innards of what I would later learn was a pretty ugly stadium, and I didn't catch the significance of the rising enthusiasm as the game neared its end.

"You didn't know, did you?" my dad asked. I didn't answer. Didn't have to. My look said everything. "Thought not."

"You could have told me."

"No, sorry. Against the rules." My dad was an expert in the rules, so I didn't doubt this was true. I later learned that refusing to acknowledge a possible no-hitter in progress was among the most tightly held superstitions in what was (and to some extent still is) a very superstitious sport. The fact that my father even knew this rule, despite being only a casual fan, testifies to its significance. I don't think this rule is as strictly adhered to today as it was in 1968. I've told myself (and many, many others) that, were I ever in my father's position, I would have given my son a heads up. Now I'm just not sure.

This is the first time I've tried to reduce this story to writing, despite its place in family lore for more than 50 years. I've tried to be more mindful, to be fully present in the moment, but I'm still not very good at it. I don't think many of us are. There have been moments when I've experienced transcendent clarity, but my attention is mostly ungovernable, and the world contains far too many shiny objects. I spend most of my time stirring the soup in my cerebral cortex and sampling whatever potato floats to the top.

I try to follow the advice Paul gave the Church in Rome, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God." (Romans 12:2) I think Paul was talking about a process. Transforming your mind is something you do continually, it's not a switch you throw once and you're done with it. In my own defense, I have to say that I think there is a value to noticing how green the grass is, the color of ladies' hats in the lower deck, of exploring the limits of your own small galaxy. That's mindfulness, too, but it's no excuse for being given the opportunity to witness a rare and beautiful event and not taking advantage of that privilege.

I wonder how we will see this pandemic experience when we are able to give it the perspective of history? Will we see it as a rare moment in time, or as an unpleasant encounter with feral fifth-graders? Only time will tell.

Lord, I want to appreciate the forest and still see the beauty of the trees. Please help me to love this world without conforming to it and to continually transform and tune my mind to discern your big picture and my small part in it. Amen.

Take care and God bless you all.

Bert