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Groveling at the Feet of Football's Greedy Lords

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Groveling at the feet of football's greedy lords

July 08, 1993 | By Kenneth Lasson

Kenneth Lasson

HOW unseemly it is, the good burghers of Baltimore groveling at the feet of professional football's greedy lords, bidding us to sell out a ballpark before it is built, then having to implore the NAACP to withdraw its cheap endorsement of the challengers from Charlotte!

We're the ones who are being sold out. What price dignity? Better to place our faith in good will and blind fortune than send delegates 'round the countryside begging to buy into an elitist club of well-groomed extortionists. Better to cry in our beer than be demeaned by racial blackmail.

Better still, perhaps, to genuflect before the lesser gods of urban goods -- write our members of Congress, for example -- before lowering ourselves any further. The whole ghastly rite of expansion has already assumed the proportion of a constitutional right, anyway, and for good reason. Great metropolitan areas have come to depend on major league sports for their economic impact, not to mention the psychological boon given cities, like Baltimore, suffering from drugs and crime, unemployment and poverty. A team in contention distracts from the misery.

Sooner or later the government may step in on its own to regulate pro football, by requiring that a team be awarded to any city that meets objective marketing criteria (and making it a federal offense to ferret away a franchise in the dark of night).

The late lamented Colts were as much a part of Baltimore as coddies and crab cakes, and they meant a good deal more. We grew up with them. They brought us back a measure of national respectability we hadn't had in a century. The largest unknown city in the United States (the Queen City of the Patapsco Drainage Basin) suddenly found itself home of a world champion.

But Baltimoreans both blue-collar and blue-blood have always been a people whose essential dignity derived more from roots than rooting -- whose true hubris has always come more from neighborhoods, family, ethnic origins. Mencken's boobus Americanus was a Neanderthal from elsewhere, not one of the staunch folk scrubbing white stoops in Patterson Park. Boobus might pull for Da Bears, or even be a pinstriped Yankee fan.

The essential Baltimorean is also a fan, of course. Locked into our civic consciousness are memories of three decades of Sunday afternoons, some sunny and crisp, others dank and bone-numbing, all somehow transcendent and glorious. We were part of the team, the team part of us. For us the prototype will always be Johnny Unitas, Lenny Moore, Raymond Berry, Gino Marchetti. Back then, even the other franchises each had unique character, not the homogenized stereotypes packaged and cloned by and for television.

Will it ever be the same? No. Though many of us haven't missed pro football as much as we thought we would when the Colts were torn from our midst eight years ago, the game has changed whether we like it or not. And whether or not we get one of the coveted new franchises, we will never bring back the glory days.

Moreover, who's going to get to go to the games? Not the working-class fan, if Camden Yards is any indicator. (An Oriole Park skybox starts at \$60,000, and that's just the beginning of the expense.) So far the seats being sold at the unbuild football stadium are those now-standard luxury boxes (up to \$105,000 each) and "club-level" locations (from \$700 to \$1,700, according to the glossy, three-dimensional sales brochure) -- none of them at prices designed to attract blue-collar fans.

The would-be ownership groups, the moneyed folks competing to shell out a \$170 million franchise fee for the privilege of fielding a team of rejects, are hardly blind to the realities of modern major league sports. They may be fans with local interests and fond memories, but they're business people with eyes fixed on the bottom line. Take away their Baltimore %J connections, and what you get is simple investment strategy. Exhibit A: Eli Jacobs.

For us, meanwhile, after all the shameless groveling for a franchise and moaning about endorsements gone astray, the excitement of actually having a new team will likely be shallow and short-lived. Sunday afternoons in Baltimore will never be the way they were in the '60s. Whatever team we may get, they won't be the Colts.

Kenneth Lasson writes from Baltimore.

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