

Cynical senior discovers heaven in Baltimore, will road trip

This is the first day of my senior year at this institution, and I've been on the sports staff for five semesters. (There was that one disastrous flirtation with

the State & National desk — but that's a horror story best saved for another time.) During this period I have been exclusively a reporter.

Never have I found the sufficient inspiration to wax poetic about anything in a spill-your-guts, share-your-innermost-thoughts-with-the-public column. I have read the works of the great ones — Doug Hoogervorst and John Bland — and have yearned to transform my opinions on life to print (and ask anyone that knows me, I have plenty of opinions).

Well, I have been moved! For the first time in his fragile 21-year existence, the author got a chance to see his all-time favorite major league baseball team — the Baltimore Orioles — play. (APPLAUSE!)

I know, you've read plenty small-town-Southern-hick-goes-to-the-big-city-and-is-awed-by-everything-he-sees-and-then-has-to-write-about-it-

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ries, but this one is truly different. This is also the transformation of a cynic.

As I am constantly reminded by my out-of-state friends, North Carolina has no professional sports (I'm not forgetting the Hornets. I'm just not sure if they're professional yet). So we hicks had to choose between the Atlanta teams and the Baltimore/D.C. teams. This was not a hard decision for me — I am not a big Ted Turner fan (Please don't colorize Casablanca!!!).

I have always been a big sports fan, but baseball has never been up near the top of the list. It always seemed too slow and boring to excite me. When I was eight, I passed up a chance to see the O's play in favor of watching a contest put on by the now defunct North American

Soccer League (the Washington Diplomats beat the Rochester Lancers, 3-2).

I know that lately, O's can represent both the number of wins Baltimore picks up in a week as well as an affectionate nickname, but I am a diehard. So when dad offered to pay for everything and go see a couple of games before I returned to the Hill, it was an offer I could not refuse.

As of Wednesday, Baltimore was 17 games out of first in the worst division in baseball and mired 22 games below .500. The only thing keeping them from having the worst record in the majors is the fact that they still let Cleveland play as this level. (If major league baseball was run the same way as professional soccer in England, the Indians would have been demoted to Rookie League ball by now.)

The financial braintrust behind the team is billing this year as "A Season To Remember." And there have been some moments to remember — Cal Ripken Jr. doing his usual, four pitchers com-

bing to no-hit the Athletics and, just a week-and-a-half-ago, the O's were victims of a no-hitter themselves.

So as far as performance on the field, "A Season To Remember" seems misleading and downright idiotic. But they're really not referring to the play on the field as much as the field itself. This is the 37th and final season for Memorial Stadium.

The 1992 season will christen a new stadium for the O's. It is not one of modern design and late 20th-century looks. Instead, it pays homage to the parks of old, a complete throwback to the days before Memorial Stadium. (Some may say this is fitting, since Baltimore seems to be regressing back to the '50s, when they finished no higher than fifth for six consecutive seasons.)

The new park sits on an 85-acre site known as Camden Yards (romantic name, ain't it?). It's about midway between the Inner Harbor and the birthplace of Babe Ruth (who played some ball in his time). According to historians, short centerfield covers the site where Ruth's father owned a bar and where Ruth spent his childhood (This whole place just oozes baseball nostalgia, doesn't it?).

The capacity is 46,500, less than Memorial's 53,371 — but who wants to nitpick about 7,000 or so seats? And one could argue that the Orioles will never fill it the way they're playing.

And at only \$105.4 million, it's a real bargain.

The hierarchy of major league baseball has been so enamored with the project that the 1993 All-Star game was awarded to the city. Next year's opening day will be a great test-run for the organization to see how crowd control and parking will function in an already congested downtown area. But the '93 All-Star game will probably be the first overflow crowd to inundate the park (barring any miracle turnaround that makes the O's contenders in '92).

So maybe this is not the total transformation of a cynic that I promised earlier. Everything I've said about my beloved Birds sounds pretty cynical. Tough! I am cynical about them. They will be back someday, I know. I just hope I'm alive when it happens.

But part of the cynic in me has been expelled. I now understand somewhat the whole "America's game" concept of the sport, and there is some kind of magic about seeing a major league game in person.

Now, I don't think I'll ever go as far as my friends who do the fantasy league baseball thing every year, and I will never understand why someone knows what some 18-year-old rookie is hitting in Class A Ball down in Louisiana.

But, I am more than willing to do a road trip next spring — I'll even drive. We'll do the Inner Harbor and the National Aquarium; we'll do lunch in Little Italy and then we'll trot over to the park and watch the O's resurrect their grand tradition in what has to be the classiest new ballpark in the majors.

Give me a call.

IAAF votes for biennial world champs

The Associated Press
TOKYO — The International Amateur Athletics Federation stiffened its penalties for drug use Wednesday, and in a move designed to add millions of dollars to its income, voted to hold its world championships every two years instead of four.

The IAAF Congress voted to extend to four years from two the length of suspensions for athletes who use drugs, twice the limit set by the International Olympic Committee for the Olympics.

IAAF president Primo Nebiolo said the move was essential to protect the sport. He said 32 athletes were suspended in the first six months this year, even after the intensified anti-drug campaign and the strengthening of international controls following the suspension of Ben Johnson.

Many consider the four-year suspension equal to a lifetime ban because it is very difficult for most athletes to stay in top shape while not competing.

The congress also voted overwhelmingly to hold the championships every two years instead of every four. IAAF officials estimated this would produce additional revenues of around \$80 million for the federation, to be used mostly for the promotion of the sport in Third World countries.

The IAAF has justified the move by saying that in addition to the financial benefit, it would allow greater control by national federations over the activities of their athletes and increase the opportunity for Third World athletes to compete at high levels.

The federation said a study conducted by its medical experts showed that fatigue suffered by track and field athletes was much less than the levels measured for sports such as tennis and ice hockey.

It stressed that a survey of track federations, coaches and officials showed strong support for the change. Despite opposition from Japan and Britain, 131 of 135 delegations voted for the change.

The decision also led to a change of schedule for the World Cup. It was moved from 1993 to the end of the 1992 season with the approval of the Cuban delegation, which will host the competition in Havana.

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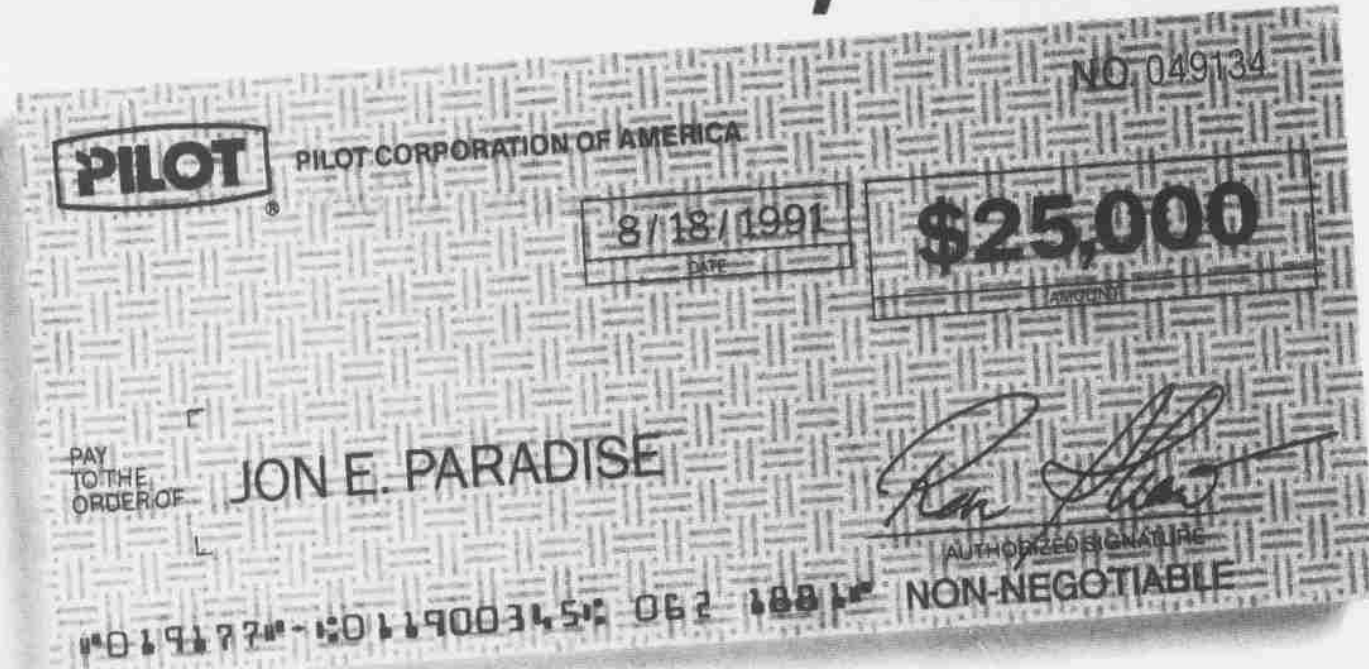
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