

BASEBALL DIGEST

★★ WORLD SERIES EDITION ★★

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Johnny Isakson “Fun Baseball Memories”

When comparing baseball to other sports, baseball has many unique characteristics. Baseball is played (largely) without a clock and without free substitution. A nine inning game could end at a predicted time but, so too, the game could be 5 innings or 12 innings. It is undeniably a team sport, and its stars come in every shape and size.

Politics has many similar characteristics. Each “campaign” involves a lot of players, some highly-visible, many who are very necessary but much less known. Each campaign has one or more distinctive voices and faces, has many different positions, and carefully analyzes wins and losses. To play on the baseball or political field is to know drama, opposition and challenges.

This series of interviews has included many politicians – Mayor Sam Massell, President Carter, Congressman Lewis, Governor Barnes and Senator Miller. So, when my long-time friend from my hometown of Dayton, Gary Snyder of Greenberg

Traurig, suggested that he would introduce me to Senator Johnny Isakson, I jumped at the chance.

In fact, I had met Senator Isakson on numerous occasions and have always appreciated how he could answer a difficult question in a civil, yet clear, manner. He uses stories to explain why something is important (or not). Currently, amongst other appointments, he is the Chair of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics and the Senate Committee of Veterans Affairs. He also serves on the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

It was hardly surprising that my short questions were met with wonderful answers, unvarnished and personal. The time spent with Senator Isakson went by in what seemed like a split second. He reminded me why these interviews have been so much fun – the answers have texture and feeling (unlike a text message) and they allow me to better appreciate the interviewee. I am confident you will as well.

Schear: I’m here with Senator Isakson. What are your first memories of baseball?

Red Parks, Ponce de Leon Park, the Atlanta Crackers, and a nickel. Red Parks was the catcher for the Atlanta Crackers. My father bought season tickets for, I think, \$25 for the whole season from Mr. Mann, who was the owner of the Crackers. Red Parks was the catcher, and the seats we had were right behind home plate. I was such a big fan of Red Parks that one time Red Parks came up to me, I was a little boy as I remember. He gave me a nickel. I swallowed it. I put it in my mouth and swallowed it and then I had to eat bananas for 2 days to pass it. That’s my first memory of baseball in Atlanta.

Well, that’s why you ask the questions without knowing the answers. Did you save the nickel?

Fortunately, I passed it.

I didn’t have that down as one of my questions.

I’m not giving it to you, so don’t worry.

And how old were you when you swallowed the nickel?

Five or six years old.

Did you go to the ball games a lot with your dad?

I did. The Crackers played in the old Ponce de Leon Park and we would go down there and walk down St. Charles Avenue over to Ponce de Leon and go

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in and watch the games. I probably saw 10 or 12, maybe 15 or 20 games a year from the early '50s to the mid '60s when the Braves came.

And you lived in Marietta then?

No, we lived in Brookhaven. I grew up in Brookhaven.

Did you drive to the ballpark?

With my dad, yes.

What were your memories of the ballpark?

The magnolia tree in center field and the terrace, which was unique to everyone. That's number one. The three tiers of signs in right field, which was number two. I played football in high school, and they used Ponce de Leon Park as a third football field for city of Atlanta football games. Then you had Grady and Cheney stadiums and they converted Ponce de Leon after the baseball season to football for the high school games. I still remember those signs. And I remember also the home run that was hit where the ball landed in the coal car and went to Tennessee. The longest home run ever hit. I'm not saying I was there for that home run, but I remember the folklore about it. Bob Montag, who was a great player, hit the ball.

My fondest memory is probably of the magnolia tree, which is probably the most unique thing in any park in the world. A huge tree growing in the center field on the terrace with no fence between the right field post and no fence in center field. So it just went forever and that tree was in the outfield. And then I remember the signage in the right field bleachers, and remember the nickel from Red Parks. I really enjoyed those days. And the Orange Crush, which I loved to get, and the popcorn. That's what I always liked to eat.

That was my next question. What did you like to eat.

Nehi orange crush and popcorn. I can still almost taste it.

Were you sitting in the section where everyone was gambling pennies and nickels on pitches and outs and all that kind of stuff?

If I was, I don't remember it.

There was a lot of that there.

I was 5 to 15 – those were my years with baseball. But I don't remember.

Did you know Mr. Mann?

Oh yeah. The old man would come by and say hello to my dad. He'd come by and say hi to all of us season ticket holders. He was a good owner/manager, even entrepreneur, really a great one, Minor League Executive of the Year many times. Hank Morgan was a radio announcer if I'm not mistaken.

I'd listen to the Crackers on the radio at night – he would sit in the studio and the ticker tape would come in telling him wherever they were playing the game and say ball one, ball two. He'd announce it as if he was watching it when he was just reading it. He had two sticks that he hit together. When they said there was single, he would pop it just a little bit. If it was a home run, he'd crack it so it sounded like a long one. And I remember all that stuff. The Birmingham Barons, New Orleans Pelicans, Memphis Chicks. All the teams that came and went.

your dad? Did he teach you to play baseball?

I played baseball in Bagley Park in Buckhead. And I played in high school at Dykes High School. I was a walk-on at the University of Georgia for one year. My grades went to hell and I had to give up something, so I gave up baseball.

Good choice.

It was the smartest decision I ever made. I always loved baseball. I knew batting averages. I knew the whole nine yards. I just loved it. It's a great sport.

Did you follow baseball in the newspaper?

I did.

And knew all the box scores?

Oh yeah. Followed the batting averages, followed who got the hits, what the pitchers' ERA scores were. Whole nine yards. Of course, back then you had the Southern Association, which is where the Crackers played. It had eight teams if I remember correctly – Nashville Volunteers, Birmingham Barons, New Orleans Pelicans, Memphis Chicks, Atlanta Crackers,

“The great thing about being a catcher is you're in every play of every pitch of every game.”

Somebody told me once that the Crackers really did great until Lake Lanier came into being and air conditioning became common because, before that, you needed to go outside. Then all of a sudden you could go to the lake or you could stay inside and be air conditioned. It's kind of interesting.

I guess you named who your favorite Crackers were. Did you remember the Sears across the street as well?

Oh yes.

It's still part of Atlanta. Ponce City Market.

And your mom and dad were big baseball fans?

My dad was into it.

And did you play baseball with

Mobile Bears, Chattanooga Lookouts and the Little Rock Travelers. But anyway, it was always a great league and the Crackers usually won. They were the Yankees of minor league baseball in the '50s and fairly early '60s. I remember how excited I was when the Braves announced they were coming to Atlanta.

When you were a little boy, did the Black Crackers still play at the stadium?

Yes. Of course they had the blacks only section in right field and you had to – well here's the picture. In the left field you had the stands, center field you had the magnolia, right field you had the billboards. To the right of the billboards in right field you had the

black only section. I think they called it colored back then. I remember that. You talk about memories of your childhood and growing up, the role that Atlanta played in the Civil Rights Era and the leaders like Ivan Allen and Martin Luther King, Andy Young and others played – those are the most memorable things of my childhood and early adolescence. Because it was the schools where Brown vs. Board of Education was carried out in terms of busing and students were used as the tool to break down segregation. Those kids did so much and then sports was really next. I played in one of the first integrated sports games ever in Atlanta when I played for Dykes High School. We had a football game at Cheney Stadium. We had an all-black team versus an all-white team.

There were two football stadiums for the city – Cheney and Grady. The third one was Ponce de Leon which they used as an overflow. There weren't but eight high schools back then.

When you played baseball, what position did you play?

I was a catcher and an outfielder and a substitute. I was a hell of a substitute.

It's a lot similar – substitutes and catchers get to talk all the time, so it's pretty much the same position.

And the great thing about being a catcher is you're in every play of every pitch of every game. That's the one thing I loved about the position. You also would have some injuries that weren't any fun from time to time, but it was a great position to play because you were in every game on every pitch.

I caught for a long time. I really liked that. I think a lot of lawyers were catchers. They like to talk. Did you collect memorabilia or cards? You were sort of that age where cards were just coming out then.

I'll tell you one of the great disappointments in my life is that I never saved all of them. I bought so many of those Topps baseball cards. I had all of them, or at least it felt like I did. I don't know where I got rid of them and how I got rid of them. I

don't know when it happened, but before they were a collector's item, I had a lot of them. Then when became valuable, I'd gotten rid of them.

If you want to come visit some of the cards, you can come visit me. I'd be delighted to show you some cards.

My mother did not throw them out and I know exactly where they are right now.

One of the things I really treasure in my office at home – I have a baseball signed by Ernie Banks. I just loved Ernie Banks. He was in Atlanta about five years ago and a friend called me from Bone's and said Ernie's down here meeting people. So I went down. My son gave me a baseball to autograph it. He was a great.

When you were a youngster, did you try to collect baseball autographs at the ballpark?

Oh yes. I was a scorekeeper. I wasn't that good a baseball player, so when I got cut, which was occasionally, I'd be the scorekeeper. I just loved baseball and loved the intricacies of it. Bagley was a great place to spend the whole day. Your parents could take you, drop you off in the morning and pick you up at night. It was a different era, of course. You can't do that anymore. It was a great place to play baseball.

Somehow I ended up with scorecards from my mother from the late '30s and early '40s. She scored games – Cincinnati Reds games. And I still have them, and I look at them occasionally because if you know how to score baseball, you can perfectly review what happened in the game.

It's a neat hieroglyphics because you can end up – you can call the game on the radio without watching the plays, just reading the scorecard.

I enjoy looking at her scoring and I look at the ads. And the ads are pretty neat. Did you collect magazines and read about baseball?

Street & Smith – that was kind of the main baseball magazine. That and of course Sports Illustrated, stuff like that. Street & Smith was a really good baseball magazine.

What Major League team did you follow back then?

Cubs.

Why was that?

I just liked them. I was attracted to Ernie Banks, who was quite a player. The Cubs were the forerunners of the Braves. They were the worst team in baseball for a while until the Braves took their place for a long time when Ted Turner bought the superstation and bought the Braves. I liked Johnny Goryl, played third base. And a lot of others. Ernie Banks and Johnny Goryl and Billy Williams. And also because we had some friends in Wisconsin that we would go see in the summer 2 or 3 times when I was growing up. When we went to their house, we went through Milwaukee and through Chicago. One time dad stayed so we could see a game at Wrigley Field.

Was that the first Major League game that you'd seen?

I think it probably was. Atlanta at that time didn't have any Major League teams.

Right.

Murph's is a good place to get a beer but I wasn't getting beer then. And then Milwaukee was the home of the Braves – at least it was for a while. Now it's the Brewers. The Braves went from Boston to Milwaukee to Atlanta.

Bud Selig got the team back to Milwaukee and ultimately became commissioner because of it. Did a pretty good job.

So, in college, you did play for Georgia?

A little bit. Back then we had freshman teams and varsity teams and I only played my freshman year. I was a second string everything.

Until you decided that it took up too much time in school.

I never lost my passion for the game, but I just lost my passion to commit to do what I had to do to play the game.

You ever wonder if you were the commissioner what you'd do about baseball? What would you change about baseball?

Well, personally, if you look at the

professional sports that are out there – this is me talking now – baseball probably has done the best job of the major sports at carrying out its role as a major league sport in a major league country like the United States. I think the NFL has slipped and fallen some with what’s going on right now with the players and the national anthem. That’s unfortunate. I think baseball has dealt with its problems better, I think, than football did. Basketball never, in my judgment, the NBA’s never held the role of a professional sport nationally in terms of really playing to the fans. It plays pretty much a corporate enterprise and advertising. And major league soccer is doing a great job. Probably of all the major sports now, they’ve caught the interest of the millennials in a city like Atlanta with so many international people here either as citizens or tourists. Baseball is the national pastime, has been the national pastime, still is the national pastime. I think it always will be, if for no other reason than the fact they play 162 games. That dominates any season. Football plays 16, basketball and hockey play 82. Baseball plays 162.

Were you excited when Atlanta got the Braves?

Yes. I’ll tell you a story about that. I

was really excited when we got them. My best friend in college, a guy named Jack Cox from Waynesboro, Georgia, was a year ahead of me. He graduated in 1965, which was the year the Braves sealed the deal. Ivan Allen and Mills Lane agreed to build Atlanta Fulton County Stadium in one year. They said we had to have the stadium ready in a year. I don’t know how anybody thought they could do it. They built it in 51 weeks, they’d paid \$1 million bonus to the contractor. It’s a really a great success story. Anyway, the steel was up for a three deck stadium, an old-type circular stadium. Jack came through town to visit me coming from OCS where he joined the Marines. He told me “Johnny, I’ve just gotten my orders. I’m going to Vietnam. I want to see you before I go.” So I went to with him to have a hot dog at the Varsity and took him around to see the new stadium. Jack was a real good football player, a walk on at Georgia. We went to the stadium and we walked up the three levels to the top deck in what was center field. You could see all of Atlanta. This was a big deal for Atlanta. This was 50 years ago now. Jack and I sat there and talked, and he said “I’m probably not going to see you again until I get back from Vietnam, but when I get back I want

you to promise you’ll go with me to a game.” I said, “I will.” A year later, he was killed in Vietnam. I’ve never forgotten that day I think there are a lot of similarities. A lot of politicians by tradition pretty much like baseball. I like baseball, I know that. I’ve gotten the greatest thrill of all being elected to the United States Senate representing the State of Georgia and being able to play on the Republican baseball team with Jim Bunning, a great pitcher.

He was a really good pitcher.

He was a piece of work. Let me tell you. Hit more batters than any pitcher in history I think [Note: 160] and readily admitted he did it for effect.

To go back to where we started, when I started my interviews years ago – I was talking about Greg Maddux. And people remembered that Greg Maddux had the greatest control of almost anybody, but he hit 137 batters. He probably hit all of them on purpose.

That’s right.

There was nothing subtle about it. He just hit batters. It was part of the game, that’s what Bunning and Gibson did. You just put your bat down and you walked to first base. I don’t have anything else. This was just great and I’m very appreciative of your time.

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