



Maryland

The Maryland flag is weird. Just weird. I don't think I hate it, but I don't think I like it either. I've never liked it, even as a kid. When we first started studying geography in school, we were introduced to many flags – national flags first. They were cool. Most were simple enough to copy with a pencil, a ruler, and a few Crayolas. Countries like Japan, Switzerland, Italy, Ireland (I still have to stop and think which has red and which has orange in those two), Spain, and Norway all had such simple designs that anybody could do one up in a flash.

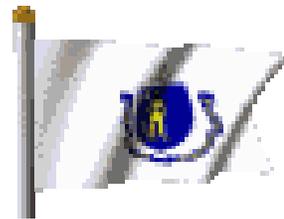
We got assigned to do flags one night for homework in third grade, maybe second. We drew slips of paper to see who would have to do which flag, then we had to go home, look up the country in the encyclopedia (no Internet back then – not even copy machines -- we actually had to copy stuff from a book by hand!), and draw the flag.

We all envied Johnny McCarthy when he pulled Japan. One big red dot on white paper and you're done. Bastard. I got Germany, which wasn't bad: three big bold stripes. I think Robert Tucker got Canada, which was a pain in the ass with that maple leaf, at least for an eight-year-old. But that was OK; Robert Tucker was a pain in the ass anyway.

Nobody wanted to get the USA: too damn many stars!! The stripes were bad enough, though you really only had to draw seven red ones and then the white ones took care of themselves.

Mexico was odd, though, because it's just the Italian flag with a little design in the middle. Mexico is like a state flag. Most state flags have some ridiculously detailed cartoon or something in the middle. How is a kid supposed to show pride in his state when it takes a goddamn graphic artist to draw the flag?

Massachusetts is impossible: it's a blue shield on a white background, with the image of a Native American (Massachuset, I'm told) in buckskins. He holds a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. The arrow points downward to represent peace. There is a white star over his shoulder to show that Massachusetts was one of the original thirteen states. Around the shield is a blue ribbon with the motto: "By the Sword We Seek Peace, but Peace Only Under Liberty." Above the shield is an arm and sword, representing the first part of the motto. Try doing all that with crayons.



To be honest, until I just looked it up, I thought the Indian was in a loin cloth with a spear. And to be even more honest, it looks like that arm with the sword is about to swing down and chop his undefended head right off. Star? Motto? Who the hell can see all that when the damn banner is fluttering a hundred feet over your head? I think the only time in 30-something years as a Bay Stater that I ever looked at that flag for any length of time was while I was standing in line at the Registry of Motor Vehicles, and I was so brain-dead from the waiting that nothing sunk in anyway.

There are a few states that do have cool flags, though. Arizona has a primary-color sunset streaked over a dark blue field. Alaska has the Big Dipper and North Star on a plain blue background. Colorado has a big C with a yellow core over blue-and-white stripes.

New Mexico is the best: they truly honor their heritage with a red sun with rays stretching out from it. There are four groups of rays with four rays in each group -- an ancient sun symbol of a Native American people called the Zia, who believed that the giver of all good gave them gifts in groups of four. These gifts are: the four directions (north, east, south and

west), the four seasons (spring, summer, fall and winter), the day (sunrise, noon, evening and night), and Life itself (childhood, youth, middle years and old age). In this sun symbol, all of these are bound by a circle of life and love, without a beginning or end. Definitely the best flag of them all. It's even third-grader-friendly.

Alabama's flag is prosaic. [Sorry, all you Alabamans, for making you ask somebody what "prosaic" means.] It's white, with a big red X from corner to corner. Blah. Easy homework, but I guess it had to be. They claim that it's a "St. Andrew's Cross," but that's a lot of twaddle: it's a red X.

Texas is pretty simple too, with a big lone star on fatass red, white, and blue blocks. If you were smart – but, keep in mind, this is Texas – you'd draw the star first and color in the blue field around it. But I'll bet a whole ton o' farmboys wore their white crayons down to nubs trying to color the star shape over the blue.

South Carolina is uncomplicated: the Palmetto State having a white shape of a Palmetto tree under a crescent moon. But, like Canada's maple leaf, the tree must've been a bitch to draw.

Which, I guess, *finally* brings us back to my original statement – well, that's not true either: my "original" statement was probably something like "ma ma" or "da da" or "o-pen bahhh". But anyway...

The Maryland flag is ugly and bizarre, not to mention a grade-schooler's nightmare. Officially, it contains "the family crests of the Calvert and Crossland families. Maryland was founded as an English colony in 1634 by Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore. The black and gold designs belong to the Calvert family. The red and white design belongs to the Crossland family."

Unofficially, it looks like a chessboard on acid. It's just so "busy." You'd think that, after all these years, I'd make up my damn mind about whether I like it or not. There is this big sign at the state border, welcoming travelers to the Land of Mary, and it has these funky designs on it. No words, no seal, no walrus, just damn funky patterns in contrasting colors. The red-and-white part (Crossland) looks too French for me to like it, but the black-and-gold irregular checkerboard squares (Calvert) are too out of whack for me *not* to like it.

Ohhh, curse thee, cold ambivalence!!! Slay me not with thy pernicious uncertainty!!

☺

Maryland was state number four. It would not be of critical importance. There was nothing much to see there, but I did want to take the time to have dinner with my longtime online friend, RBO, who may well have been the first person I ever chatted with in cyberspace. He lived north of Baltimore, in a well-to-do historic district called Lutherville.

I was eager to meet him. We had become good friends in the way that the late-night anonymity of long-distance outpourings and ventings and ravings and confidings can build trust and closeness. It's so strange, in a way, this Internet. There were things I would not have told my lifelong best friends that I shared with RBO, and vice versa. Something about it ... it wasn't like you were just talking to your computer; you knew it was another person at another desk, hundreds of miles away. Maybe it's because there is no eye contact, or no awkward silences in conversation, or misread intonations. Or maybe it's like sending a message off to the stars above and actually having a message come back. I don't know.

We had a good dinner at TGIFriday's and some good conversation, but it was strange too. I know RBO felt the same way. There was no curious pause while you waited for the cleverly-worded reply to flash up onto your screen. It was instant, and audible, accompanied by face and tone and expression. But it lacked something, somehow. Maybe we weren't quite as witty without the extra time to sculpt our dialogue. The friendship had been based on a

certain mode of communication, and just didn't seem right when it was outside that mode. Still glad we met though. I will always wish RBO the very best.

I think the Orioles were in town that night, but I made no effort to attend. The adopted strategy of this roadtrip was to avoid places I'd already been, and to devote this month to finding new places. I had been to Camden Yards before, and it was a very pleasant experience.

The last touristy stop of Roadtrip '98 was Baltimore, the heart and soul of this odd-flagged state. And there was really only one thing that I wanted to see in Bal'mer, and that was Oriole Park at Camden Yards. The park had met nothing but rave reviews since it opened several years before, so I was eager to check it out. The Orioles were indeed in town, and I was confident that I would not be facing the season-long-sellout problem that had stymied me in Cleveland.

Trouble was, I got wayyyy ahead of schedule -- which explains why my roadtrips rarely *have* schedules -- and got to the city about noon. My buddy Rand McNally told me about Loch Raven Reservoir, a blue blotch positioned just above the pinked-in metro area and its double-blue I-895 belt.

Part of the lure was, surprisingly, *running*. It had been a full eleven days since the irksome re-pulling of my capricious calf muscle, and I was feeling sufficiently spry to give it another go.

Now, a part of *that* motivation (oh, noooo, here he goes again) was New Shoes, and trying out my new, suddenly-size-13 feet. After more than two decades of slipping comfortably into 12's or 12½'s, my feet were now a triskadekaphobic's nightmare, at least where Nike was involved. WTF?

Anyhoo, those blue-and-gold 13's were an impromptu buy while tooling along I-70 just east of Nashville. I succumbed to the call of the outlet store nestled beside the highway, so convenient to the exit ramp. Despite late-trip budgetary concerns, that Nike logo just flagged me right in.

And it was here that Tennessee waved some more stupidity at me. The Outlet Center itself was not Bling-worthy, but the road leading therein was.

You know those Left-Turn-Only lanes that are sometimes in the center of a three-lane road? With the opposing arrows? Well this road had one. And, I, being a bit confused in my search for the correct entrance, got in that Left-Turn lane much too early.

I had just about congratulated myself on my good fortune that nobody had been coming the other way, when I realized the only thing to my right -- which those yellow arrows were clearly pointing directly to -- was **a six-foot ditch and a undeveloped field!! W(ho)TF would be turning into *that??* Why the damn arrows? What is it, a trap?!?!**

Damn Tennessee.

Hmmm. Left turn...Nike...Shoes...Run...Reservoir... and Baltimore. Man, that *is* protracted, even for me.

OK, the run was nice, yada yada who fugging cares. Blah Blah trees, hoo-ha water, yah yah trails, etc. etc.

SO: Camden Yards. This is one GREAT place to hang out for a baseball game.

The plaza behind right field was a wonderful mix of foods, beverages, people and fandom. The wide walkway in front of the famous warehouse was a



constant stream of people, only diminishing to a trickle *well* after the game had gotten underway. Prior to the anthem, it was jammed with folks, lining up to get their sausages, or burgers, or tips, or sodas, or *microbrews*!! Now, there was a touch I appreciated. Screw the sausages!! I was on my Just Say No to sat-fats streak anyway, but microbrews will always be a staple on my menu. I had a Gooseneck Amber to start my night, and it was pure yumminess, especially given the contrast in my mind with Fenway's cups of swill.

Then there is the mezzanine level just behind the right field wall (see photo) where people can stand and watch the whole damn game if they want to. Not a bad view at all, really, if you're right up against the wall, and if you're tall enough to see over it comfortably -- no way little kids could.

I had purchased a ticket for a decent seat, which was dumb because there were thousands of empty seats. It was doubly dumb since I spent all of *one* inning (the first) at my good seat, then went walkabout (to various seats *farther away*) and never returned.

In the 2nd row of the right field upper deck, I witnessed a lovely sunset over the stadium rim, and one of the biggest whacko Coke vendors anywhere: a screamer/bellower who really didn't even scream/bellow intelligible syllables. He just stood there at the bottom of a row, his Kramer-esque hair flopping, and yelled: "AAAHHHHH!! AAAYYYYYY!!! HA! HA! AHHHHHHH!! HEYYYYY!!!" What a fugging loony. I was too afraid to purchase anything from him. Glad he wasn't the beer vendor, although I might have been tempted to try that brew.

But, as usual, I heard the sirens' call of the Remotest Seat. Somehow, I find solace in sitting as far away from the focus of everyone's attention as possible. I do this in every park or arena if I can: top rows of Husky Stadium at University of Washington, LSU's Tiger Stadium, Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium, Toronto's SkyDome, Montreal's Olympic Stadium, Denver's Mile-High Stadium (close to the top, anyway), LA Coliseum, The Georgia Dome, Syracuse's Carrier Dome, and even up into the rafters TV camera platform in Atlanta's Omni, where I autographed the canvas camera cover.

So, I scoped it out: Section 388, Row N, Seat 24. Waaaay up in left field. It was empty, as was 90% of that section. And, as BanMan says, you have to sit in left field, just because (unlike Fenway) you CAN. In the bottom of the third, I set out on my quest.

Along the way, there was another siren singing sweet tunes in the summer air: this one was crooning "*pii-zzzz-aaaaaa!*" in a low and seductive voice. Those tidy little individual 'zas, just dripping with melted cheese, beckoning me away from my Buy-No-Meals, Eat-No-Fat regimen. WTF! Your diet needs to be about 20% fats anyway, I argued, and bought one. After nearly three weeks of cold cuts and salads and tuna, it was truly, truly OUTSTANDING!!

I was still chowing on the 'za as I walked purposefully toward my seat. Between bites, I spied two young lads emerging from the tunnel in the lower rows of the upper deck. They turned and aimed themselves at my seat, but I knew I had the advantage of distance, slope and angle. They climbed the aisle, looking mostly at the steps underfoot, and I casually zoomed to the coveted perch. When they looked up, still about twelve rows away, they paused at the sight of the taken seat. But, apparently recognizing me as a friendly ghost, they continued up. I eyed them with bland curiosity as they eschewed the plethora of empty seats in my vicinity, and plunked themselves down in #22 and #23, the two seats right next to me.



Our conversation started immediately, and lasted without lull for nearly four innings. We probably paid

attention to a handful of plays in that hour-plus (we could barely see them anyway, from our nosebleed location), as we covered topics from junior high to fishing, from writing to computer games, with my two cents thrown in on which high school the tall one, David, should choose when his family moves. They asked me about my travels, and I gave them selected (and carefully edited) excerpts.

They were at the game with David's dad -- and some of dad's business cronies from the DC area -- in one of the luxury boxes, and just went for a park tour, like I was doing. They heard the same call, and strove to reach the farthest seat as well. It didn't bother them that I was in it; they happily took the next best available. Somehow, that contrary need to be FAR from home plate bonded us. They were bored with the adults in the luxury box, and were happy to find somebody more on their own plane.

David Hoy, the tall one, was entering ninth grade. He has the classic distance runner build, but his only athletic interest is lacrosse. I pressured him relentlessly to take up running, pouncing on every tiny pause to ask, "So, you gonna do Cross-Country or not?" This may well have been an NCAA violation.

Michael Mulcahy was clearly the sidekick of the pair: the sidecar to David's motorcycle. Not as thin or athletic, and a year younger, he was a tad more timid about offering information, but would respond garrulously when asked anything directly. At one point early on, he spied my notbook and innocently asked me, "Are you a reporter?"

I kindly replied, "I'd have a better seat."

It must have been the top of the eighth when David said a bit ruefully, "You know, we should be getting back to my dad."

Michael offered, "We could probably get you a lot of free food!" A tempting offer, to be sure, but I still had guilty-glutton feelings churning in my gut from all the fat in the pact-busting pizza, so I declined. They bid me farewell, and started down the steps. When they were about halfway down, I called after them, "Hey, David!"

He turned.

"Are you gonna do Cross-Country, or what?"

"I'll think about it!" he shouted back.

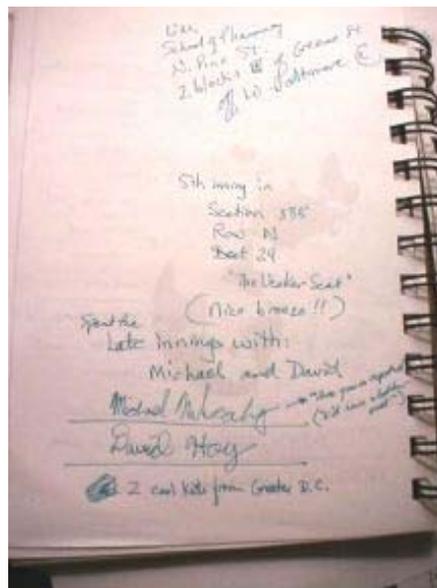
As they reached the bottom and were just about to disappear from view, I bellowed, "**DAVID!**"

He looked up.

"**DO IT!!!!**"

They laughed, waved, and vanished.

I think the Orioles won. Maybe they played Texas???



Any time there is an opportunity to take in a game in another city, I try to do it. It's cool to see what other fans have compared to what you have in your hometown venues. Fenway holds its own for Quaint, but it pales in Amenities and Technologies.

Thanks to Ban, I got to take in the 1991 Major League Baseball All-Star Game at Skydome in Toronto. On various other roadtrips, there were baseball games in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, Atlanta's Fulton County Stadium, both Chicago parks – Wrigley Field and the

old Comiskey – Denver’s Mile-High Stadium (AAA Denver Bears), and failed attempts at Cleveland’s Jacobs Field (sold out – went to a bar instead), Kansas City (Royals out of town), and St. Louis (Cardinals out of town – on *three* separate occasions – twice went to Bud Brewery instead), and the aforementioned Yank-Me Stadium. The Carrier Dome, the Georgia Dome, the Hoosier Dome, Madison Square Garden, Market Square Arena, the L.A. Coliseum, Tiger Stadium at LSU, Husky Stadium at U-Dub, and cozy minor league baseball parks in Sarasota and Rochester all served as entertainment sites for this traveler.

Aside from some good fun in and around Toronto for four days, that ‘91 All-Star game was actually pretty boring. What I remember most was the grounds crew. Halfway through the game, when it came time to do the usual sprucing-up of the infield dirt, a long white limousine rolled out into shallow center field. It sat there for a moment, and then the doors flung open in unison, and a team of a half-dozen field attendants dressed in black tuxedos, white caps, and white sneakers dashed to their task. When the infield dirt was all nice and tidy – which doesn’t take long with an artificial turf field -- they scurried back to the limo and drove off.



Ban had gotten me passes to most of the receptions and such that accompanied the game, so we did some elbow-rubbing. It was nothing new for him, being in that line of work, but to me it was pretty damn cool.

There was a VIP tent set up across the street from Skydome on Monday afternoon (the game was on Tuesday night), and I used my pass to stroll on in and catch some free beverage and burgers *au gratis*. I was actually pretty fit at the time, and in my tank top and shorts on this July day, I had the size and appearance of an athlete.

Most of the crowd was either still in the Stadium for whatever father-son game type thing was going on in there, or they were out at more interesting places, because this tent and its fifty or so tables was pretty much deserted. I only stayed because the price was right.

I ordered up a Labatt’s and a medium rare CB from the 19-year-old waiter dude, and we struck up a conversation. He asked rather timidly if I was a ballplayer. I laughed affably and asked if softball counted. He commented that he really didn’t expect any big leaguers to be dropping in to this common-man type of venue. However, he said, some of his fellow waiter-dudes were itchin’ to meet some pro ath-o-letes, and asked if I would mind pretending to be one. I assured him that bullshitting was one of my specialties, and that I would be a convincing, albeit unfamiliar, professional baseball player.

When my cup ran dry (didn’t take long), one of the other waiter-dudes came over eagerly to see if I wanted a refill. I told him “bien sur” and he went off to fetch me one. When he returned, he asked if I was a ball player. Grateful for his generalized question, I replied with appropriate hubris that I was.

Apologizing for not recognizing me by sight, he asked who I was. Needing a non-household name, but one that would stand up to research, I chose a somewhat obscure player who had been with the Red Sox the last time I checked. I asked, “Does the name Phil Plantier ring a bell?”

“Ummm, I thinnnk so...,” he began to lie.

"Don't worry about it," I reassured him, "even a lot of people in Boston don't know me." I got on a bit of a roll and explained the frustration of being a second-string first baseman behind Mo Vaughn; that being in the majors was great, but it's hard to be there and not play much; and that I just came up to the game mostly because I wanted to see the National League players in person.

It was all a crock, of course, except for the line about a lot of people in Boston not knowing me. And I was careful to state everything in passive voice or impersonal pronouns, never referring to myself (or Phil) directly.

Waiter-dude listened intently, and when I had finished, he asked if he could have an autograph. I said "Sure, I'll give you an autograph," again avoiding the word "my." He proffered a black marker. He was carrying no paper of any kind, and when I gestured a "where do you want it," he grabbed the bottom hem of his blue Labatt's T-shirt – his waiter dude uniform – and stretched it out for me to write on.

With a grin, I scrawled elaborately, "Best wishes, Phil Plantier." That way, if Phil ever saw the shirt, he would receive my best wishes.

Waiter-dude thanked me and returned to his fellow waitstaff. They admired his shirt, and I could tell they were all trying to read the name because they had never heard of Phil Plantier.

When I returned to the tent later that evening, it was obvious that the word was out, because a different server accosted me for an autograph. I gave the same signature, with the same well wishes. At least all of them would think Phil was a damn nice guy. ☺

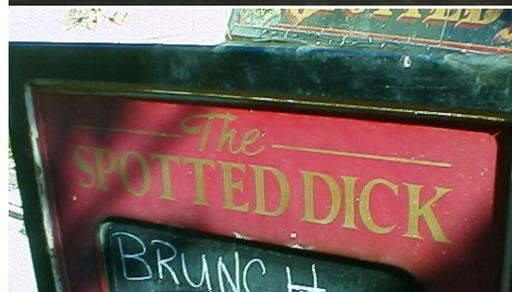
Turns out, as I would find out the next day, Phil was not with the Sox anymore, having been sent back to Pawtucket for some more minor league seasoning. He also was not a first baseman, but an outfielder. And the kicker was, on that very day, he was going 3-for-4 in the Minor League All-Star Game somewhere in Kentucky or Tennessee.

Possibly blessed by the good karma I spread his way, Phil went on to have a very solid career, mostly with the San Diego Padres, where he got to see National Leaguers play every day. The waiter dudes and dudesses most likely knew I was full of shit anyway.

Toronto had some of the strangest signs:

- "Avenue Street"
- Sign outside an urban elementary school: "No Loitering, For Purposes Inconsistent with the Education Act." Huh???
- There was a restaurant called "The Spotted Dick." No, I did not eat there.
- On the pier behind one of the large Harbor Hotels: "Do not feed geese seagulls or pigeons." To all you people who think that a comma makes no difference, this is what it should look like: "Do not feed geese, seagulls, or pigeons." That latter example lists three types of birds that should not be fed. The

former one, the one that really exists, admonishes you that, for some unstated reason, seagulls or pigeons should not be fed to the geese. It's like saying "Do not feed children rat



poison or yellow snow.” Apparently, you can feed the damn geese just about anything else, just don’t try to get them to eat a seagull or a pigeon.

Quick Quiz:

Which is bigger, Maryland or New Jersey? No. Maryland.

Which is bigger, Maryland or Massachusetts? No. Maryland.

Which is bigger, Maryland or Nevada? No. Nevada, dumbass.

Which is better, Maryland or New York. Righhhht. ☺ Sorry, you Empire Staters.

Maryland ranks an impressive fifth in population density, with almost 500 Marylanders per square mile, so they can be proud that their population is so dense.

It is the Old Line State. Blah. It’s an allusion to Revolutionary War soldiery. Some general named Washington tabbed them reliable and dependable as all hell, so as a point of pride, they made it their state nickname. Blah. It’s history and all that, but it’s blah.

That’s about all there is to say about the Land that Mary built, though Loch Raven Reservoir, just north of Lutherville and Towson, was once again still a real nice place for a mellow nature run.

And, oh yes, you just gotta love the official sport of the State of Maryland. No, it’s not Johns Hopkins Lacrosse – even though it probably should be – it’s **jousting!** Yes, jousting. And the kicker is that it’s not some obscure remnant of pre-Colonial days; jousting was named the Official Sport of The State of Maryland in 1962!

It’s not all flesh-ripping, bone-crunching, man vs. man thrusts though. Too bad. Now, it’s kinda wussy jousting. You ride the horse and carry a long lance, but you have to spear some rings that hang about seven feet off the ground. You have 8 seconds to cover 80 yards. I’m sure it’s not easy – the rings are only ¼” to 2” in diameter – but, come on, if you’re gonna joust, **joust!** This is like determining the winner of a boxing match by seeing which fighter can punch the speed bag the most times in ten seconds. It just don’t sing.

Still, it *sounds* pretty cool.

As they often do, my tunes spoke meaningfully to me as I turned west from Lutherville, and aimed more directly towards Sacramento: “Somewhere a destination crosses the front of my path.” It’s a line from the Samples’ song, *Give Me Some Information*. The Maryland Meander was done. The somewhat aimless driving around the eastern seaboard states had been fun, but it was time to join up with I-81 and get back to the trip’s itinerary.

West Virginia would be state number five. I needed a good night’s sleep before I could attempt to skin that cat. Scranton had been bad to me, but WV had been worse...