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ORIOLE PARK
CAMDEN YARDS

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Cover Story »



Football has ubiquity. Basketball has superstars. Hockey has all of Canada and soccer the rest of the world.

And then there's baseball.

The sport with the oldest professional league in the country is no longer America's favorite (that honor, by most measures, goes to football) or, by most people's standards, the most exciting. And yet, there's a reason baseball is called the national pastime. While we're not eating as many peanuts and Cracker Jacks these days (except for the Orioles fan sitting next to this JT reporter at a recent Red Sox game who brought her own bag of peanuts), taking your family out to a ballgame is still one of the most quintessentially American summer activities. And it turns out it's a pretty Jewish one too, especially here in Baltimore.

The key to a great baseball experience — whether diehard fan or casual observer — is a great (and affordable) ballpark. Baltimore happens to be home to one of the best: Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

Jews on First

On Camden Yards' 25th anniversary, the JT takes a look at the ballpark's Jewish history

By Hannah Monicken

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Celebrating 25 years in 2017, Camden Yards changed the way ballparks are built (nearly every ballpark built since its opening has modeled itself after the Baltimore stadium's retro-modern look and feel) and it still tops many best ballpark lists.

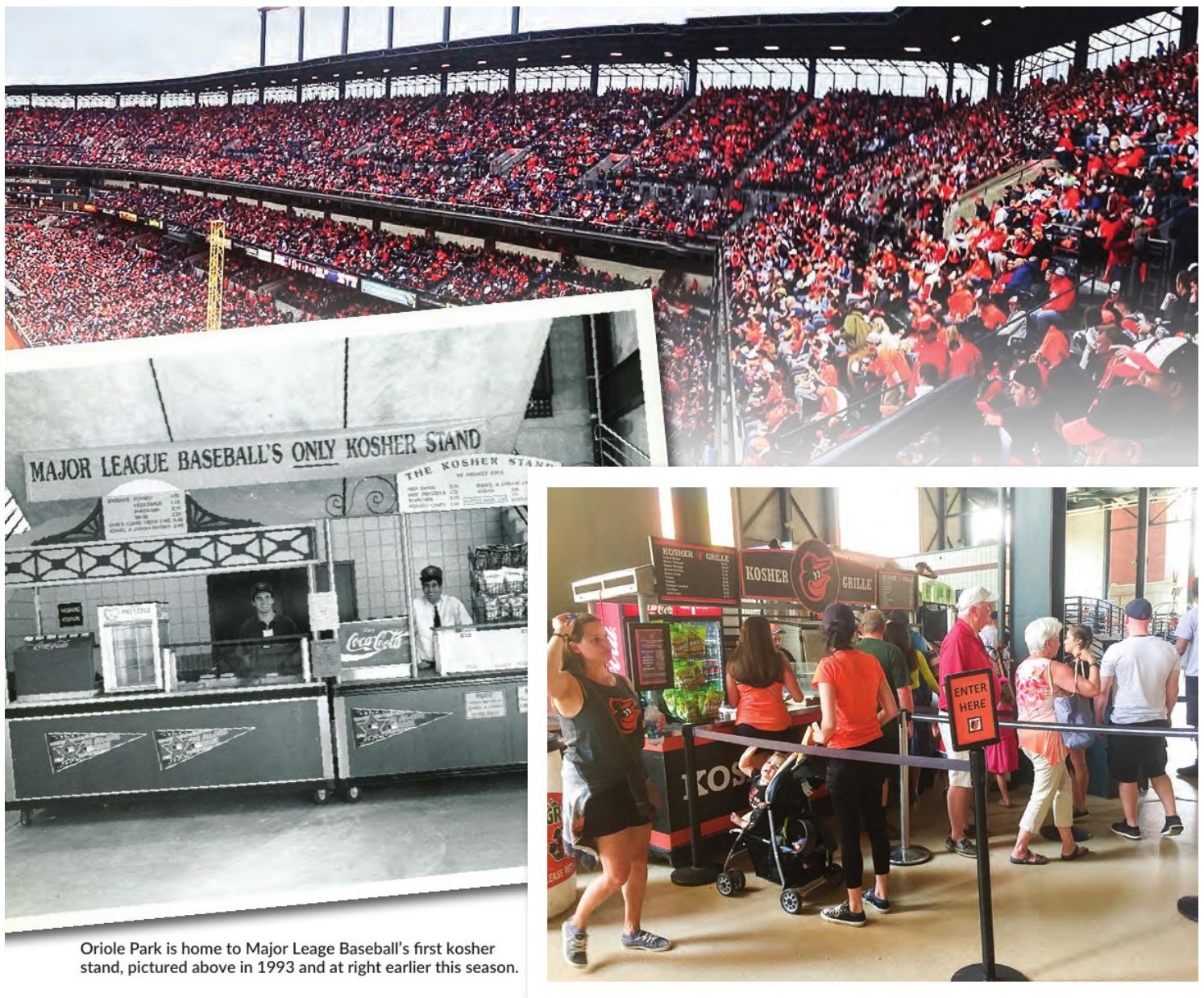
From the Jewish owners and executives to the Jewish players and, of course,

fans, Baltimore's baseball history intertwines with its Jewish identity. And the Baltimore Jewish community even beat its New York brethren for one particular baseball milestone — the first kosher food stand in a Major League Baseball stadium. The stand opened in 1991 at Memorial Stadium and moved with the team to Camden Yards the following year.

The idea for the stand came from local businessman Frank Storch, who had convinced the Orioles to put a merchandise store in his Prince George's County shopping center.

"I have been a big fan of the Orioles for way over 50 years," he told the JT in an email. "After opening up the store, I went to the Orioles and told them that I would love to bring my clients to the game, and can we open up the first Major League kosher stand? They loved the idea, and now there are approximately 35 kosher stands throughout ballparks in the United States."

Kosher Grille, as it is now called, is



Oriole Park is home to Major League Baseball's first kosher stand, pictured above in 1993 and at right earlier this season.

Kosher Stand: Jerry Esterson/Courtesy of the Jewish Museum of Maryland; Kosher Grille: Hannah Moncken

today operated by Salomon Bemaras, owner of Me Latte, and serves kosher hot dogs, pastrami sandwiches, pretzels and more every game day except Friday and Saturday and Jewish holidays. It sits unobtrusively near Entrance F on the main level of the stadium. On a well-attended game day, the stand can serve 400 to 500 people, Bemaras said, only a fraction of them people who keep kosher. The others come just because it's good.

"People look for the stand because they like the food and the service," Bemaras said.

For one Orthodox family, Tovah and Ezra (who did not want their last name used) and their two small children, their first baseball outing to watch the Orioles play (and, disappointingly, lose to) the

Red Sox on June 4 was greatly improved by having kosher food available.

"Coming as kosher folks who often go places where kosher food isn't available, it's really nice to come out and have this available," Tovah said.

"We love it," Ezra added.

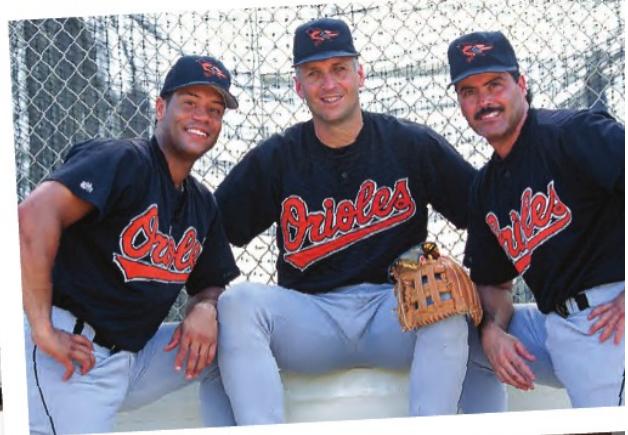
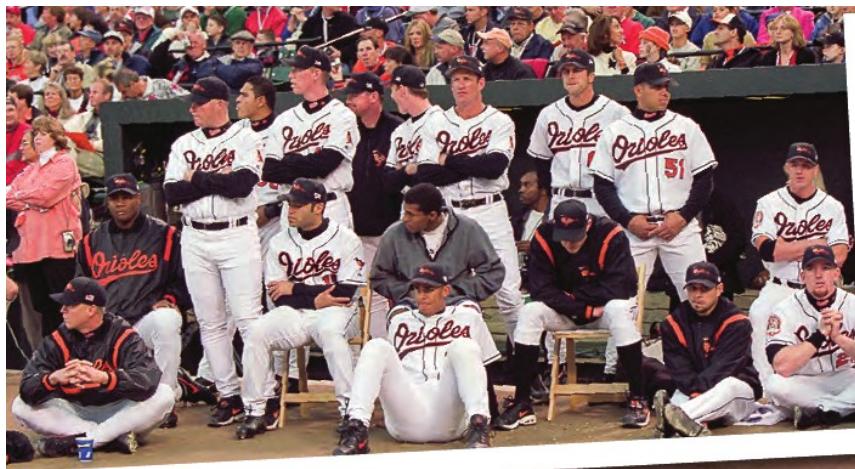
The two Red Sox fans behind them didn't seem to realize the food was kosher — they had stopped at the first hot-dog stand they saw — but were pleasantly surprised, declaring it "amazing!"

Kosher Grille is home to more than just kosher-style baseball fare, however. It's also where observant Jews meet during the seventh-inning stretch for minchah. For this game, about 12 showed up, a few even wearing their kippot under baseball caps.

"We pray three times a day, so we do it where we are," said Isaac Pretter, who came for the minchah and who attends a handful of games with his family every year. "It's great in Baltimore to have Jews around [at the game] and a minyan and even a kosher stand."

But building the now-iconic (and Jewish-friendly) Camden Yards as we know it took a lot of compromise and no small amount of risk.

"This was not a grand plan in advance," said local attorney Herb Belgrad, who was chair of the Maryland Stadium Authority (MSA) from its inception in 1986 to just after Camden Yards was finished in 1992. "This was developed step-by-step, and it required a lot of give-and-take



After nearly 40 years at Memorial Stadium, the Orioles made the move to Camden Yards. Clockwise from above: 2001, 1996 and celebrating a victory over the Washington Nationals earlier this season.



between the Orioles and the Stadium Authority."

In 1986, Baltimore was still smarting from the loss of the Colts, its National Football League team from 1953 to 1983. And so the Maryland Stadium Authority was created with two main objectives, Belgrad said: Find a way to bring back an NFL

team and keep the Orioles in Baltimore.

"The charge was for football and baseball," Belgrad said. "We came up with this idea, 'So, let's build a baseball park because that's all we have here.' And then if we got a football team, we would have a location where we could put a football stadium nearby."

The MSA considered more than 20 different sites for the new stadium and ultimately settled on Camden Yards. The decision to build a new stadium, let alone move it from its then-location next to

Waverly (at East 33rd Street and Ellerslie Avenue), proved to be contentious. Those in the neighborhoods surrounding Memorial

Stadium were worried about what would happen to an empty stadium. Those downtown were concerned about noise pollution and increased traffic. Cal Ripken Jr., then one of the Orioles superstars, was said to have had his doubts. State legislators not from the Baltimore area had to be convinced a new stadium was worth the money.

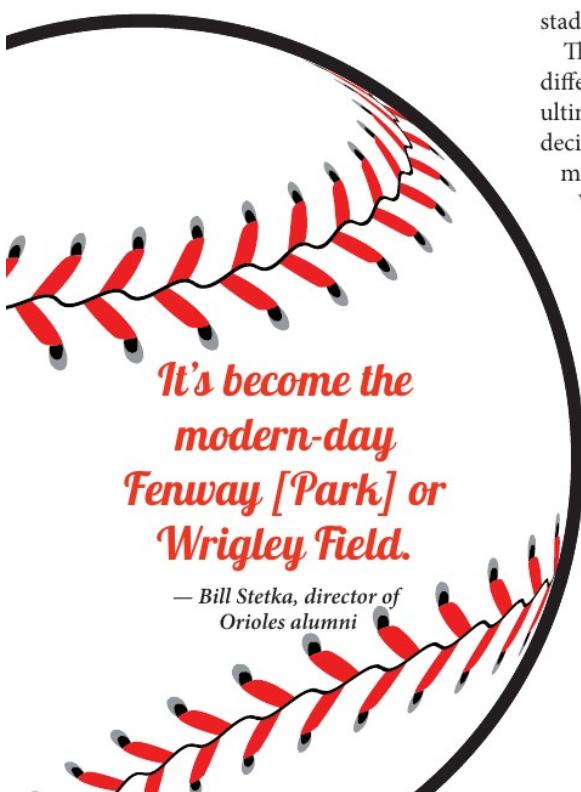
Luckily, Camden Yards lived up to its potential. Bill Stetka, director of Orioles alumni and "de facto team historian," likened the change to moving from a small rowhome where everyone had to share a bedroom and there were no modern conveniences like a washing machine to a new home with enough bedrooms for everyone and upgraded amenities.

"You remember the memories of the old home, but you wouldn't want to move back there," he said. "Once we moved here, the fans embraced it. The players certainly did."

Once Camden Yards opened, the great ballpark won over even its original detractors.

"After we completed the ballpark and the Orioles were playing there, I received a fair number of letters from people who lived in the community and who had been opposed to the construction saying that all of their fears were unfounded," Belgrad said.

At 25, Camden Yards is now the 10th-oldest ballpark in the Major Leagues. It's a Baltimore institution and a downtown anchor. And that doesn't show any sign of changing.





Above: Jewish fans pray near the Kosher Grille during the seventh-inning stretch of a recent game. Right: Richard Bleier is currently the team's only Jewish player.



"I think this ballpark has held up well," Stetka said. "It's become the modern-day Fenway [Park] or Wrigley Field — a place that should stand the test of time."

The park underwent a round of refurbishing in 2012, although renovations are an ongoing process, according to Leonard Attman, who is a current member of the MSA board. Oriole Park at Camden Yards is a big draw throughout the Baltimore metropolitan area, he said, and will continue to be for the foreseeable future.

"What we want to do is maintain it and keep it in top shape so it never gets to a point where it's deteriorating," Attman added. "We are there for the long haul."

By the time Camden Yards opened, the Orioles had been in Baltimore for nearly 40 years, having started as the Milwaukee Brewers for one year in 1901 before becoming the St. Louis Browns for 52 years and finally, in 1954, moving to Baltimore after being purchased by a number of local investors — including the Jewish owner of National Brewing Company, Jerold Hoffberger. (Another Jewish businessman, Eli Jacobs, owned the Orioles when Camden Yards opened for the 1992 season.)

There have been a number of Jewish players for the Orioles over the years,

Richard Bleier Photos courtesy of the Baltimore Orioles. Prayer photo: Hannah Mordechai

about 15 that Stetka knew of.

These days, there is just one Jewish player for the O's, left-handed pitcher Richard Bleier, who played in the minor leagues for nine years before being called up last year by the New York Yankees. This year marks his first with Baltimore's team. In 2013, Bleier was invited to play for the Israel national baseball team in the World Baseball Classic. They fell short in qualifiers but attained some momentum for their strong showing this year.

"People saw there are Jewish athletes

who can play baseball," Bleier said about his time with the Israel team. "I wanted to go this year, but, with a new team [the Orioles], it would have been hard to be in the spot I'm in now and miss spring training. That was a hard decision to make."

As it is, Bleier, 30, is determined to make the most out of his Major League appearances and help the O's win however he can. And he's happy to take up the Baltimore Jewish baseball mantle.

"I might not practice as much as I used to, but I'm proud to be Jewish and



Oriole Park at Camden Yards is now the 10th-oldest ballpark in the majors and remains a Baltimore institution.

represent the community in a unique way," he said.

The not-large-but-steadily-increasing group of Jewish players in Orioles history is reflective of the sport as a whole.

For the century-plus of Major League Baseball's existence, the sport has been a pathway of assimilation into American culture. More recently, that's played out in the large number of Hispanic and Latino players. But it's also been true for the Jewish community.

"I think it's a natural fit," said Larry Ruttman of Brookline, Mass., author of "American Jews and America's Game" and longtime Boston Red Sox fan. "With the great influx of Jews between like 1890 and maybe 1923, a lot of them came from Eastern Europe, and instead of in Eastern Europe where the kids went to Jewish schools and [there was] not a big

market for sports, they got here and started playing in the streets. And parents got very upset. 'You should be studying,' [they said]. But the kids wanted to be American."

A lot of Jewish players changed their names to be more acceptable within a still fairly anti-Semitic society, Ruttman said. It was Hank Greenberg (Detroit Tigers player in the 1930s and 40s), he added, who really changed things for Jews and baseball.

"Jews are much more accepted in society [now]," Ruttman said, "but in that time, especially in Detroit where Greenberg played, Henry Ford was republishing 'The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.' And Father Coughlin was spewing out hate from Detroit radio every week. Nazism was rising under Hitler. And along comes Greenberg — handsome, big, hits home runs with almost

the same frequency as Babe Ruth, drives in 187 runs in a season — my god — and is a tremendous player [who] led Detroit to two world championships. But more than that, he was a rallying point for Jews in that period."

Baseball has a way of capturing our attention, along with our hearts and minds. Babe Ruth. Jackie Robinson. The Battle of the Beltways. The 2016 World Series between the Chicago Cubs and Cleveland Indians whose dramatic Cubs' victory in Game 7 was the most watched in a quarter century.

Attending a baseball game is a lesson in patience and a lesson in faith. If that sounds familiar, well, Ruttman sums it up: "The Jews have had an interest in baseball right from the beginning. Jewish values are American values." JF

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Aerial Camden Yards: Carol M. Highsmith (United States Library of Congress/Public Domain); Entrance: Alan Levine (Public Domain); Anniversary Patch and Orioles win Clock: Keith Allison (CC BY 2.0 (bit.ly/2m9R6oE))