The Cheering Never Stops

Cal Ripken Jr. is still Mr. Baseball. While he played in Baltimore, a good case can be made that Washington is where he belongs.

By Carl M. Cannon

Cal is out of position. It's an October night during the Reagan presidency, and Ripken should be playing ball in that white uniform with orange and black trim he wore his entire major-league career. But the Orioles didn't make the postseason, so Cal finds himself in Washington, dressed in another kind of uniform—black tie—for an evening at the White House.

Cal was then at peak physical prowess. Tall and wavy-haired, he had become popular in the cities on either end of the Baltimore-Washington Parkway. The night of this dinner, Ripken had played six seasons in the big leagues. He was Rookie of the Year in 1982. In 1983, his second full season in the majors, he was named the American League's Most Valuable Player while leading the Orioles to a World Series championship. This particular year, 1987,

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Cal played shortstop while brother Bill played second base and their father, Cal Sr., managed the ball club.

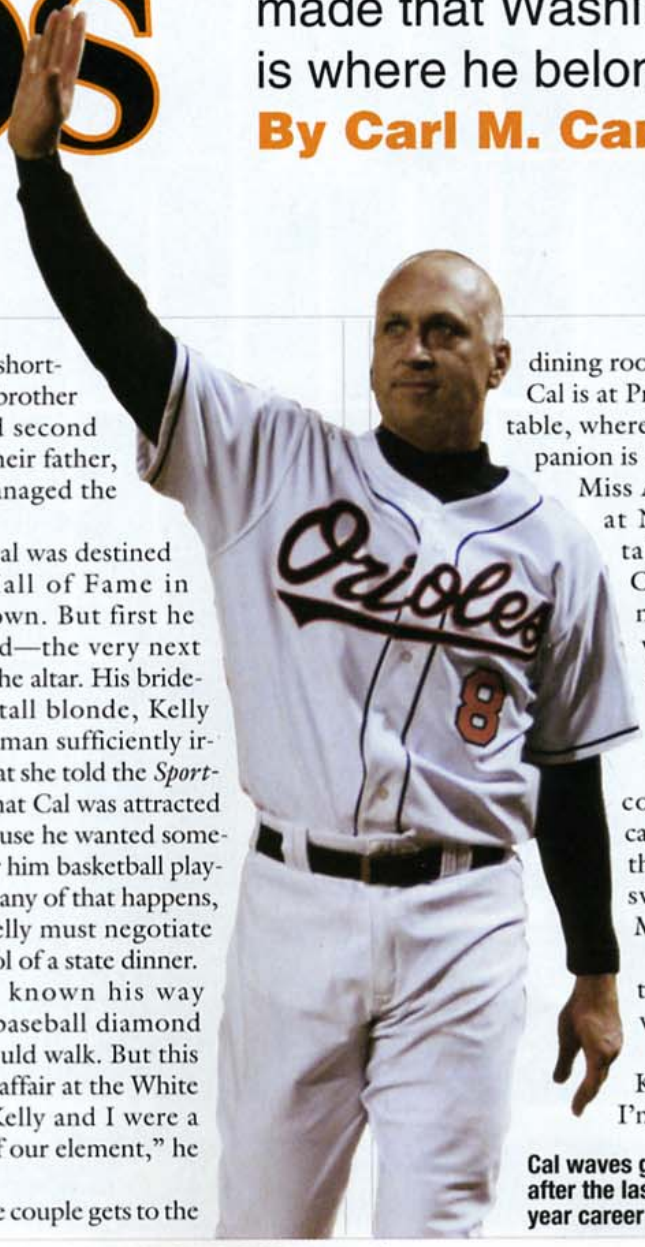
Young Cal was destined for the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown. But first he was headed—the very next week—to the altar. His bride-to-be is a tall blonde, Kelly Geer, a woman sufficiently irreverent that she told the *Sporting News* that Cal was attracted to her because he wanted someone to bear him basketball players. Before any of that happens, Cal and Kelly must negotiate the protocol of a state dinner.

Cal has known his way around a baseball diamond since he could walk. But this is a formal affair at the White House. "Kelly and I were a little out of our element," he recalls.

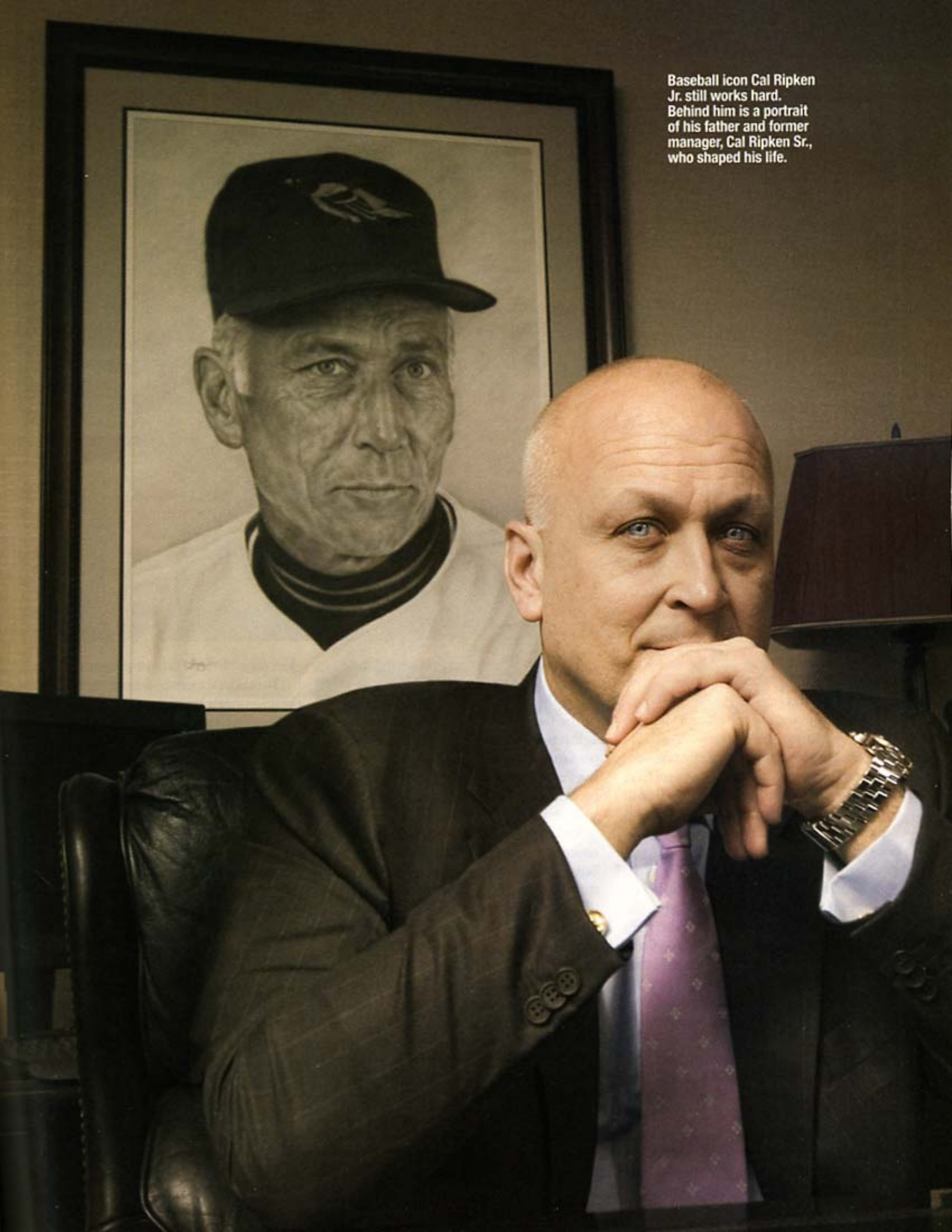
When the couple gets to the dining room they learn that Cal is at President Reagan's table, where his dinner companion is the newly minted Miss America. Kelly is at Nancy Reagan's table. This is bad, Cal thinks. He's not sure how Kelly will react; besides, he's counting on her to show him which fork to use. Kelly comes over, place card in hand, saying that she's going to switch spots with Miss America.

"You can't trade places!" he whispers.

"Well, I could," Kelly says. "But I'm just kidding."



Cal waves goodbye to the fans after the last at-bat of his 21-year career on October 6, 2001.



Baseball icon Cal Ripken Jr. still works hard. Behind him is a portrait of his father and former manager, Cal Ripken Sr., who shaped his life.

The Orioles' royal family—shortstop Cal Jr., manager Cal Sr., and second baseman Billy Ripken—in 1987.

She laughs. Cal relaxes. This has a familiar feel to it. Kelly was giving him the needle, filling a role played in the Orioles' clubhouse by players such as Rick Dempsey and Eddie Murray.

It's going to be all right, Kelly was telling him. She was right. In the years that followed, the company of presidents turned out to be a pretty good fit for Cal Ripken. Perhaps Washington is where he belongs.

Nearly two decades later, Ripken is reminiscing about that night at the White House and telling other DC stories and presidential baseball yarns from his office in Baltimore. The building sits in an office park in a leafy section of Baltimore just off Falls Road. Today, Ripken is middle-age and bald—the hair was prematurely gray anyhow—but he's that same strapping fellow invited to the White House by President Reagan's social secretary. He has an office job now, but he doesn't look like a desk jockey. He looks like Hercules.

Ripken stays in shape not by lifting weights but by running, pushing, and hand-checking even larger guys in the basketball games he hosts at his big spread in Reisterstown, Maryland. It's hard to hang around Cal and not want to hit the gym yourself. Born in 1960 near the tail end of the baby boom, he is an inspiration to aging boomers. I hadn't talked to him in person since that magical night of September 7, 1995, when he broke Lou Gehrig's record for consecutive games played; he still carries himself like an athlete.

And he isn't content to drift into semi-retirement. Despite his millions, Cal is as busy as he was when he played, so busy that last year he never made it to a Nationals game—though he's promised his old manager, Nats skipper Frank Robinson, that he'll come this season. "I hardly went to see the Orioles," Ripken says. "I kept my season tickets, my skybox, and I thought I'd use it all the time. But you get into your own life. I go to my kids' games, to see Rachel and Ryan play . . . ."

Ripken has formed friendships with Yankees infielders Derek Jeter and Alex Rodriguez and Yanks manager Joe Torre, and the nights he made it out to Camden Yards in 2005 tended to be when New York was in town. It got so bad that Orioles outfielder B.J. Surhoff began ribbing Cal when he'd show up for Yankees games. "Yeah," Ripken says. "B.J. called me a 'front runner.' "

But there's a method at work. What Ripken has been doing since he hung up his spikes is acquiring the knowledge needed to run a major-league team—something the Yankees do better than anyone else—and a skill now needed in Washington.

Should the new owners of the Washington Nationals be wooing Cal as a front-office presence or a coach or manager? This is my pitch, not Ripken's. "That's a very flattering thought—I'd certainly listen," he says. "You don't really know what kind of baseball evaluator you are until you get in that position, but I have a lot of ideas and philosophies about baseball I'd like to test. I'm a systematic thinker, and building an organization from the bottom up would appeal to me. It was a good nucleus of people who came up with 'the Oriole Way,' and it could be done again."

Out of respect for the power of Ripken's name around here, some of the groups vying to own the Nats have touched base with Cal. But partly in deference to O's owner Peter Angelos, no one has offered Ripken a job. One reason is that even baseball people with no use for

Angelos still consider Ripken an Oriole. Cal does, too.

In fact, everyone seems to think of Cal this way except, strangely, the Orioles. The team does not involve Cal or its past heroes such as Brooks Robinson and Earl Weaver in its player development the way the Yankees and other teams do. After eight straight losing seasons, the team might consider it. Whatever the O's hang-up, it's not a personal problem between Angelos and Ripken. Angelos gave his blessing to the affiliation of Ripken's minor-league team with the Orioles, and the O's boss contributes to Ripken's foundation. The two men also have lunch or dinner every month or so, where they argue good-naturedly about baseball.

It would seem a no-brainer to listen to Cal Ripken. He's one of the best shortstops of all time, a hard worker, a student of the game, popular among players, and deft with the media. Whether Ripken wants to resume a lifestyle that would have him spending springtime in Florida and half the days from April to October on the road is another question. Rachel is 16, and Cal likes coaching her basketball games. Ryan is 12 and developing into a pretty good baseball player.

Cal seems to have given Kelly some assurance he'll stay away from field managing until the kids are in college. "That's the ultimate plan," he says.

But it's clear Ripken is contemplating his second act in major-league baseball. He was in the first generation of stars to make big money for a long time and, though still active, had a corporation that handled his off-field business in anticipation of his post-playing career. That corporation has evolved into Ripken Baseball, with 50 employees including sister Ellie and brother Bill as co-owner. The group's mission is to grow the game of baseball worldwide—and do it "the Ripken Way."

The Ripken family runs its own charitable foundation, runs youth and adult baseball camps, and owns and operates the Ironbirds, a single-A franchise that plays in a new stadium beside a state-of-the-art baseball complex in Aberdeen, Maryland, visible from I-95. This summer, Cal is set to inaugurate an even larger training facility in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, a $24-million enterprise with nine diamonds.

During the past three seasons, Cal has immersed himself in the business side of baseball. "I've learned the business model in the minor leagues," he says. "When I was playing, I didn't know much about things like season tickets, group sales, concession agreements. I do now."

Teaching kids the Ripken Way at one of his baseball camps.

With wife Kelly, daughter Rachel, and son Ryan in Hollywood. The kids are athletes, too.

The Washington Nationals sold 2.7 million tickets in 2005, their first season, playing in old RFK stadium with little promotion and in a market where fans could barely find them on television or radio. It was a great first season. But to keep doing that kind of business will require a more organized strategy from a front office that knows this area. Could Cal help us? He did once before.

The Census Bureau considers Washington and Baltimore the same metropolitan area. In truth, few people reside in one city and hang out in the other. The primary reason someone who works in Washington lives in Baltimore is cheaper housing. And except for Preakness Day, the main reason Washington residents visited Baltimore was to see major-league baseball.

We have our own team now, but for many years Baltimore and Washington were a joint entity when it came to baseball. The Orioles—the Orioles in the time of Ripken—were the reason.

Winning, it is said, cures everything, but this cliché is not always true. Winning didn't cure the Orioles' woes at the box office. For 15 seasons, beginning in 1966 when it swept the World Series against the Los Angeles Dodgers, Baltimore fielded a baseball club that would have made any city proud. But the team didn't draw.

The perception is that this changed when the Orioles abandoned Memorial Stadium for the more DC-accessible confines of Camden Yards. But this is only half right. There were other reasons.

"The Orioles became a regional team," Cal is saying while sitting under a painting of his father. "It was a marketing strategy by our front office. Larry Lucchino did that."

Pitching great Jim Palmer told me the credit for making the Orioles an areawide franchise goes to Edward Bennett Williams, who bought the team in 1979 for $12 million and who considered moving the O's to Washington before deciding to

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keep them in Baltimore. He wasn't being sentimental as much as shrewd. Williams figured he could consolidate the Orioles' terrain with what had historically been Washington Senators' territory.

While talking to Ripken, it dawns on me that he and Palmer are mistaken, that the real variable is Cal himself. I run that theory by Lucchino, the former Orioles team president and CEO who now does battle with the "evil empire" (the Yankees) from the front office of the Red Sox.

"All three answers are correct," Lucchino says. "It was Ed Williams's vision and identity. It was I who worked on it, helping to implement it. And Cal became the iconic figure with whom the people in the region could identify."

Lucchino points out that Cal wasn't the only Ripken involved. "There was his father and his brother—even the mother was a well-respected figure in Maryland. It was the whole family, really, that epitomized the franchise. They were a perfect symbol to build around. Most of all, of course, there was Cal. He was heaven-sent."

When he retired in 2001 after 21 seasons with the Orioles, Ripken had hit more home runs than any shortstop in history while fielding his position better than anyone in the game. Baseball writers said Ripken redefined the position of a major-league shortstop, and it was true, but even the writers didn't quite believe their own eyes: In 1990, they awarded Ozzie Guillen the Gold Glove Award even though he misplayed as many balls on the last day of the season as Ripken did all year. But Guillen, now manager of the Chicago White Sox, looked like a shortstop, sleek fellows with soft hands, players built like pianists. Ripken, six-foot-five in spikes, with strapping shoulders and massive legs, was built like the moving-company men who carry pianos.

Good thing, too, because by the time Bill Clinton was president, Cal was carrying the entire sport on his back.

In the autumn of 1994, Bud Selig and the rest of the Mensa society known as Major League Baseball managed to cancel the World Series, an annual ritual that two world wars hadn't been able to interrupt. The public was disgusted by a "union" that represented millionaire players and by a cartel of even richer owners who locked the players out.

The next summer the gods of baseball offered up Gehrig's record on the altar as recompense. Cal did his part, eclipsing the Yankees legend on a lovely night in Baltimore, just three blocks from the Emory Street house where Gehrig's Yankee teammate Babe Ruth was born.

For the first 908 games of The Streak, Ripken played every inning of every game—8,243 consecutive innings in a row. The Orioles front office was convinced it was wearing Cal out. His father, then managing the team, was pressured to end the every-inning streak, which Senior did on September 14, 1987, in Toronto.

The event is remembered in Ripkenville as a kind of a harbinger. The team did not have a winning record that year, losing 95 games, and when the 1988 Orioles lost their first six games of the season, Cal Sr. was fired. He was replaced by Frank Robinson, who'd been a Hall of Fame player for the O's, but the team was still terrible. Under Robinson, it proceeded to lose 101 ball games while winning 54.

"Dad was fired in a very unfair way," Ripken told me, recalling that he was due to be a free agent after that dreadful season ended. "If I'd have had to make a decision, I'd have gone elsewhere. But Frank always took a special interest in me. He explained it to Billy and me. He said, 'Look, they were going to replace him with somebody. Why not me?' We came to accept that . . . but for the first month or so we were mad at everybody."

Cal Ripken won't be eligible for Cooperstown until 2007, but the day he retired in 2001, the Hall of Fame switchboard lit up with callers wanting to reserve seats at a swearing-in ceremony six years in the future.

"Cal Ripken is the modern-day Lou Gehrig," says Dale Petroskey, president of the hall. "He went to work every day, regardless of how he felt, and did his job in not a flashy but a rather matter-of-fact way."

As a White House correspondent traveling with the President on "pool duty," I was in the Orioles clubhouse the night Gehrig's record fell and was surprised when interviewing Cal for this article to learn that he'd had a fever that day. Surprised not because of what happened—Cal homered in the fourth inning and then took a lap around Camden Yards as play was stopped for 22 minutes in the fifth to celebrate his record—but because before the game began, he seemed like the most comfortable guy of anyone in the room, including President Clinton.

Earlier that day, friends had told me to take a couple of baseballs for Cal to sign for my kids. The Orioles store near the White House had only one baseball for sale, which I bought, and that night I was holding it in my hand weighing the ethics of the situation, before stuffing it back in my pocket. I looked up to see Ripken watching me.

"You want me to sign that?" he asked.

"Nah, Cal. I'm a White House correspondent," I said. "We don't go in for that kind of thing." I don't know why I said that.

"Suit yourself," he said.

Then I heard a voice behind me. It was Tony Lake, the national security adviser—holding half a dozen baseballs. "Carl," Lake said. "Introduce me to Cal!"

So I presented the head of the National Security Council to the shortstop. President Clinton came over and began telling Ripken what a national security adviser does ("He tries to keep me out of wars") while Ripken signed Lake's baseballs. When Ripken finished, he looked at me.

"You got a kid?" he asked.

"His name is Nick," I replied. (Actually I have three kids, still a sore point with daughters Kelly and Grace—especially because Nick loved basketball and Kelly's room was adorned with Ripken posters.) Cal motioned to me to pull the baseball out of my pocket. He signed it to my son and dated it, a pretty fine souvenir.

Then he went out and played the historic game. The home run he hit was typical of Cal, who developed this habit of performing his best when US presidents were in the yard. "I did?" Cal says when this is pointed out to him. "Well, some people said I had the ability to rise to the occasion. I wouldn't say that's entirely true—sometimes the harder I tried, the worse I did—but it's true that presidents tend to come on Opening Day."

On the first day of the 1984 season, when the Orioles got their World Series rings from the year before, President Reagan sat in the dugout during the game, a first in baseball history, and Ripken responded by hitting a home run.

"Reagan was in the dugout as honorary manager, so you might say I hit a home run under his leadership," Cal told me. "That was the coolest thing."

After Reagan went back to California, Ripken picked up where he left off. On Opening Day 1989, with President Bush and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in the park, Ripken hit a three-run homer off Roger Clemens to give the Orioles the lead. When Bush 41 showed up at Memorial Stadium that June, Ripken also hit the winning home run. The following July, with Bush and his family in attendance, Cal broke the record for most consecutive chances by a shortstop without an error.

In 1991, Cal's second MVP season, he

went to the All-Star game in Toronto and won the home-run-derby competition (he hit 12 homers in 22 swings of the bat). In the All-Star game, he hit a three-run dinger to win the game, as Bush and Canadian prime minister Brian Mulroney, along with Ted Williams and Joe DiMaggio, applauded his feats.

In 1995, President Clinton came to the 2,131st game. "He was in the broadcast booth calling my home run," Ripken says. "That was pretty cool, too."

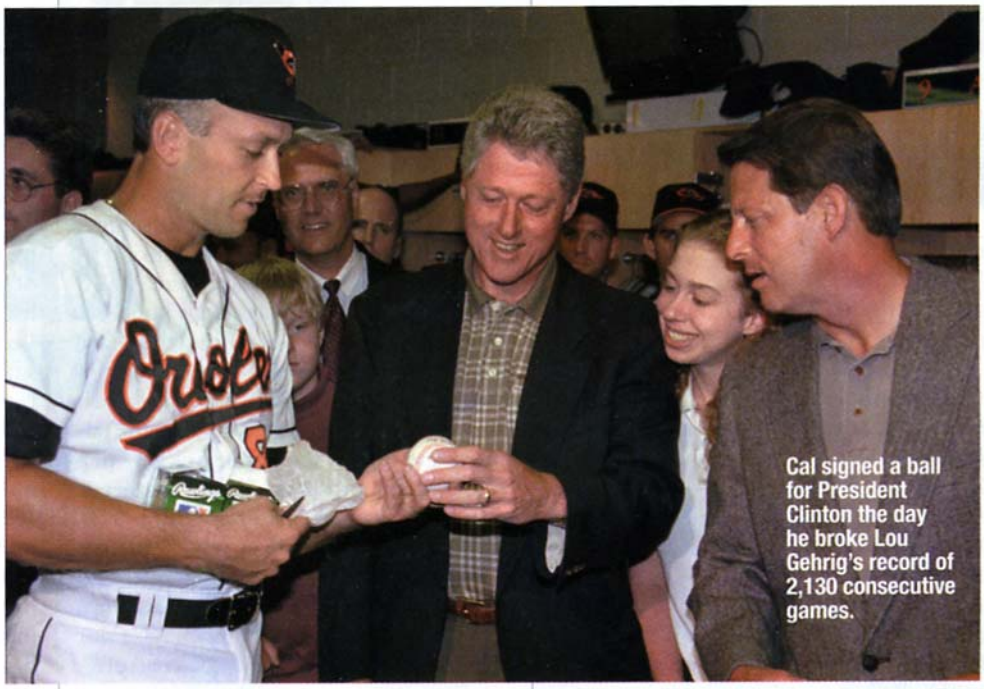
If this were a movie, we could flash forward through the next decade to find our hero sitting on the White House lawn, holding court as "commissioner" of White House T-ball, a title bestowed on him in a spirit of playfulness by President George W. Bush.

No longer intimidated by the customs of presidents, Ripken is playful right back.

"Am I qualified?" he asks.

Bush laughs and tells the most overqualified T-ball volunteer on the planet that the qualifications are "knowing baseball" and "knowing how to have fun."

This might sound like a throwaway line, but it isn't. One thing—perhaps the only thing—on which Bush lovers and Bush haters agree is that regarding baseball, the President gets it. In the era of $20-million salaries, 24-hour sports radio, and $600-million publicly financed stadiums, it's easy to forget that baseball is a game, that games are supposed to be fun, and that if they have any social utility it is to teach young people the values of teamwork and hard work.



Cal signed a ball for President Clinton the day he broke Lou Gehrig's record of 2,130 consecutive games.

Ripken is trying to do his part to promote those values, especially for underprivileged kids, through

efforts that range from a weekly "Ask Cal" column in the Baltimore *Sun* to the work of the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation.

Seven years ago, Ripken's father died of lung cancer. He was 63, and his family wasn't any more ready for his passing than they were for him to be fired back in 1988.

This gruff old baseball man was more than the father of a diamond legend. He was a diamond in the rough. Cal Sr. spent 36 years in the Orioles organization, most of it in the minor leagues, as a player, coach, and manager. Senior's pinnacle as a player was 1960, catching for the Fox Cities Foxes in Appleton, Wisconsin. But two events that season would change Ripken's—and the Orioles'—destiny. The first was that Calvin Sr.'s manager was Earl Weaver. The second was that Calvin Jr. was born that summer.

By 1962, the senior Ripken was a player/manager of the Foxes, and from that perch he and Weaver, who was moving up the ranks, began instilling in their young charges a brand of disciplined baseball that became known as "the Oriole Way." Somewhere along the line, in the move from Memorial Stadium to Camden Yards, between Weaver's retirement and Senior's death and the passing of ownership to Peter Angelos, the Oriole Way drifted into disuse, and the proud franchise slipped into mediocrity. But the two big-leaguers sired by Senior are trying to keep the flame burning. The Ripken Way.

A significant part of Ripken Baseball's activities fall under the auspices of the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, which uses baseball to reach disadvantaged kids. Cal's philanthropic efforts began in his playing days. He was honored as one of the "thousand points of light" by the first President Bush for his work on adult literacy.

Ripken said he was turned onto the issue by Barbara Bush. "I had just assumed in this day and age everybody knew how to read," Ripken recalled. "I wanted to do something substantial, and I looked at Baltimore's need. We started a learning center, put $250,000 down, and the city matched it. We found that one reason grownups went back to school to read was to learn to read to their kids, so we expanded it to include kids and families."

Ripken donated money to the center for every home run he hit, later switching to runs batted in. ("My home runs were down one year, so I changed it to RBIs so the multiplier would be bigger.")

The transfiguration of the Oriole Way to the Ripken Way may sound grandiose, but old Orioles hands, including new O's manager Sam Perlozzo, find it fitting. Retired O's center fielder Al Bumbry, who had Ripken's dad as his Double A manager in Asheville, North Carolina, says Cal Sr. may have been tough, like Weaver, but "all they wanted was for you to go out and play the game the way it was supposed to be played."

I've run into Bumbry at the Hippodrome Theatre in February at the second annual fundraising dinner for the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation, which gives an Aspire Award to "life coaches." This night, the honorees are two high-school coaches, legendary DeMatha High School basketball coach Morgan Wooten and Florida baseball coach Rich Hofman, who helped nurture the talents—and bolster the fragile psyche—of a young Miami prospect without a father at home, a kid named Alex Rodriguez.

"Our dad was a 'life coach,' " Ripken says. "I always saw him as someone who developed people." Speaking of his camps for youngsters, Ripken adds, "We're not trying to make major-league baseball players. We're trying to reach kids."

The Hippodrome benefit sells all 700 allotted tickets and brings in $500,000 for the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation. This crowd is proud of Cal—most of them know him personally—and include current and former Orioles, former Colts, and current Baltimore Ravens owner Steve Bisciotti. Here among the upper crust of Baltimore's sporting set, the Ripkens are royalty.

When interviewing him in his office, I had the feeling Cal wasn't going to be able to stick to "the ultimate plan" of waiting until his kids are out of the house to return to Major League Baseball. He seemed antsy just talking about it. The night of the Ripken Foundation dinner, I'm not so sure. The other side of Cal's life, the family side, is front and center. At the VIP reception before the dinner, Rachel Ripken approaches Jim Palmer, who has known Cal since before Cal turned four years old.

"Oh, my," Palmer says. "You've grown another four inches. Still playing basketball?"

"Yes," she gushes. "And I get my driver's license in 13 days!"

Kelly Ripken comes by, and I remind her of her quip to the *Sporting News* all those years ago about producing basketball players for Cal. She laughs and notes that Ryan, who is a pitcher—as his father was in high school—also plays hoops.

But Palmer wants to see Ryan's pitching motion and crouches down like a catcher, urging the boy to pretend to throw to him. Ryan doesn't want to but relents; he winds up and . . . good grief, he's a lefty.

Palmer looks at Kelly reproachfully. She shrugs and tells Palmer not to blame her—she's right-handed. Meanwhile Ryan is in mid-motion, all coiled up, head aimed back away from the plate as if toward center field, and then it comes. Palmer laughs aloud.

"Barry Zito," he says. "Go figure."

Then it's time for the presentations, and we file into the theater. There is a handful of guys who played with Cal: Jeff Reboulet, who coaches at Cal's baseball camps; Leo Gomez, who played six seasons alongside Cal at third base; Mike Bordick, who replaced Cal at shortstop when he was moved to third in late career; Brady Anderson, Cal's best friend on the team. All insisted Cal would be a great manager, and all had anecdotes illustrating why.

Only Al Bumbry demurs, and not because of Cal but because of the managing job he thinks I have in mind, the one in Washington. "Frank's there," Bumbry calls out to me. "Cal's got to wait his turn!"

One exchange occurs later in the evening that illustrates why Cal would be equally suitable as a general manager or club president of a major-league franchise.

Up on stage with A-Rod and the Ripken brothers and the life coaches being honored are emcees Tony Kornheiser and Michael Wilbon. Kornheiser postulates that when Rodriguez retires he may own most of the major hitting records but not a World Series ring. Playing Lucifer to A-Rod's Faust, Kornheiser asks Rodriguez if he'd trade all the records for a championship.

Rodriguez muses aloud, "It depends what records you're talking about . . . . Would I trade 800 home runs for a single ring . . . ?"

In the life-coaching business this is called a teachable moment. Earlier Rodriguez had referred to Cal as one of his "mentors," and as A-Rod weighs Kornheiser's devilish offer, he swivels to look at Cal, also seated on the stage, for guidance. Cal murmurs something so softly that neither Rodriguez nor the audience could hear.

"What did you say?" A-Rod asks.

Holding up his own World Series ring, Cal, who retired with most of the records for a shortstop, answers loudly: "I said, 'You take the ring!' "

That's why we need Ripken here in Washington. Not because he always performed so well for presidents, although that was sweet, but because a team playing in the nation's capital hasn't won a World Series since another right-hander named Calvin, "Silent Cal" Coolidge, occupied the White House.

It's about time we had a ring of our own.