

**John Unitas, Baltimore, and Heritage Politics in the NFL**  
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## **Summary**

Baltimore lost the Colts in 1984 and acquired the Ravens in 1996. Prior accounts have overlooked how it subsequently tried to both protect Colts heritage and shape the Ravens into a legitimate home team. Landmarks include the failure to regain Colts trademarks, reacquisition of the Super Bowl V trophy, homecomings for Baltimore Colts, Art Modell's decision to leave the Browns nickname in Cleveland, statue of John Unitas outside the Ravens stadium, and inductions of Baltimore Colts to the Ravens Ring of Honor. Of most importance, public support from Unitas and other Baltimore Colts for the city rewarded fans who believed in their home team. These events added a political dimension to Baltimore's history as a football town willing, and able, to disrupt the status quo.

## **1. Introduction**

And you know it's time to go, through the sleet and driving snow, across the fields of mourning, lights in the distance. - U2, "A Sort of Homecoming," 1984

British journalist James Jeffrey deemed relocations in American sports irrational since a club's identity is usually bound to its home city.<sup>1</sup> Rational or not, the confrontation between Baltimore, Maryland, and the NFL involves contradictory definitions. One is a home team definition of a professional team as a college-like social institution replete with a band, alumni, and homecomings. The other is a legalistic definition of a team as a privately-owned franchise. These definitions coexisted in Baltimore until Robert Irsay moved his franchise, the Colts, to Indianapolis, Indiana on a snowy night in 1984.

This paper defines *Baltimore* not as a municipal government, but a community of people with varied backgrounds and opinions who, after 1984, aimed to somehow protect Colts heritage and shape a successor franchise into a legitimate home team. Unfortunately, the academic world has overlooked how Baltimore forced owners and executives to grapple with differences between franchise and heritage relocations, and between types of heritage symbols, which have gone unnamed and undefined until now. In order to establish these differences, this paper

defines *franchise* as a privately-owned club and *franchise relocations* as changes in home territories engineered by owners and recognized by the NFL.<sup>2</sup> *Heritage* refers to a social inheritance built on victories, defeats, memories, and traditions, which contributes to present-day identity and a place on the colloquial map. *Heritage relocations* are attempts by owners to carry symbols of the past to new home territories. *Heritage politics* are public struggles to control these symbols.<sup>3</sup>

Franchise relocations are necessary, but not sufficient, for heritage relocations. The latter better explain the rage, and angst, of fans who stay anchored to their communities and memories after a beloved home team leaves, and then watch another city lay claim to their heritage. Owners expect little opposition on this front from other owners, or old and new home territories. But Baltimore defied this expectation and proved that heritage symbols come in two clusters. *Pro forma* symbols include trademarks, capital-C Colors (nicknames, logos, uniforms) and capital-H History (content of annual media guides published by franchises and recognized by the NFL). *Popular* symbols are based on personal relationships and include public ceremonies, like homecomings, for retired greats who played for a franchise before it moved. By these terms Irsay's change in home territories stands as a franchise relocation but a partial heritage relocation. Art Modell's move to Baltimore in 1996 is a franchise but not heritage relocation because he left Browns Colors and History to Cleveland and accepted the Ravens nickname. Today's Cleveland Browns adopted the symbols abandoned by Modell and began play in 1999. The two historic Cleveland Browns share pro forma and popular heritage but are actually different franchises.

Finally, Baltimore added a political dimension to its reputation as a blue-collar football town willing, and able, to not just support its team on the field but to challenge the NFL off it. Populism offers the best framework to understand this dimension and the importance of retired Baltimore Colts. Franchise owners are elites. If they move, do football heroes follow them, or stay with ordinary people? Baltimore fans actually earned a reputation in league circles before the famed 1958 championship between the Colts and New York Giants, who

recognized their enthusiasm in the official program sold for fifty cents.<sup>4</sup> Several hundred Colts fans who traveled to New York stormed the field at Yankee Stadium after the victory and 30,000 more, as reported all-caps by *New York Times*, welcomed the team home at the airport.<sup>5</sup> The 1958 Colts rewarded fans who believed in them, though that game took on a life of its own. After the Irsay relocation Baltimore Colts again rewarded their fans, this time off the field, by staying loyal to the city and joining the effort to get a new home team.

## 2. Place on the Map

Relocations disrupted Baltimore sports before 1984. The former St. Louis Browns in 1954 became the most recent baseball franchise to adopt the Orioles nickname, which dates to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The former Chicago Zephyrs in 1963 became the most recent basketball franchise to adopt the Bullets nickname before the Bullets moved to Washington in 1973. In football the failed Miami Seahawks of the All-America Football Conference originated the Colts nickname via fan contest in 1947. The NFL absorbed the Colts, who folded after the 1950 season. Baltimore-born Carroll Rosenbloom reconstructed the failed Dallas Texans into the second Baltimore Colts in 1953. The Rosenbloom-owned Colts won championship games over the New York Giants in 1958 and 1959 and lost a championship game to Art Modell's Cleveland Browns in 1964. In the Super Bowl era (1966-present) they lost Super Bowl III to the New York Jets of the American Football League (AFL) in January 1969 and defeated the Dallas Cowboys in Super Bowl V in January 1971.<sup>6</sup>

The Colts fell apart over the next decade. Robert Irsay of Chicago acquired the franchise from Rosebloom in 1972 and sold the contract for star quarterback John Unitas to the San Diego Chargers after the season. The Irsay-owned Baltimore Colts marshalled just three winning seasons and no playoff victories. A lawsuit by Oakland Raiders owner Al Davis in 1980 then crippled NFL relocation bylaws and created franchise free agency, which empowered owners to extract concessions from cities desperate to keep or get franchises.<sup>7</sup> Negotiations with Irsay for a new stadium deteriorated until the State of Maryland tried to enable Baltimore City to seize

the team in 1984. Circumventing the state, Irsay had Mayflower vans exfiltrate physical properties to Indianapolis during an overnight March snowstorm. Irsay also retained rights to the iconic horseshoe logo that dates to the 1950s.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1: Sticker from 1983, the last season in Baltimore.**

Michael MacCambridge discussed Baltimore and the Colts in *America's Game*, a popular history that featured *the* photo of Utafas (Figure 2) on the cover and was distributed to league employees by Commissioner Paul Tagliabue.<sup>9</sup> MacCambridge placed Utafas and the Colts among the people and events that defined professional football's first Golden Age, including the 1958 championship game that put the sport on the map, Super Bowl III which legitimized the NFL-AFL merger, and controversial relocations in the 1980s. MacCambridge titled a chapter "Baltimore" to signal how the convergence of college-like support and the 1958 championship game enabled professional football to compete against other sports. He also invoked Barry Levinson's autobiographical film *Diner* (1982) to capture the home team bond that appeared broken by the Irsay relocation. But MacCambridge noted that dozens of Baltimore Colts

attended the Ravens' last game at Memorial Stadium, home field of the Colts in 1953-1983 and Ravens in 1996-1997, and that Unitas stood on the Ravens sideline for the first-ever visit to Baltimore by the Indianapolis Colts in 1998. MacCambridge's overview offers the simplest explanation, reciprocity, for the loyalty of Baltimore Colts to that city after 1984. He nonetheless condemned the Modell relocation as the greatest shock to American sports since baseball's Brooklyn Dodgers and New York Giants moved to California in 1958. For MacCambridge, Modell's surrender of Browns symbols broke new ground but paled against the mistreatment of Cleveland.<sup>10</sup> Historians Daniel Nathan and Charles Kupfer also discussed the Baltimore Colts as a social institution in a fractious blue-collar city. Kupfer captured the wild vendetta ride of the Canadian Football League (CFL) and early Ravens eras for those fans who saw the rebirth of professional football as a victory over the NFL and Baltimore's many critics.<sup>11</sup>

Academic studies suggest a local canon that helps explain why so many found it difficult to get over the Colts, accept a new team named Browns, or separate the Colts from the Ravens. The canon identifies the pre-1984 Colts as a Baltimore institution and treats mutual affections between fans and players as the ideal home team relationship, Memorial Stadium as the ideal home field advantage, and the 1958 championship as a Double Victory that put Baltimore and professional football on the map. It also holds that the NFL violated the special relationship by allowing Irsay to not just leave in 1984, but take the Colors and History, refusing to grant Baltimore an expansion club at the direction of Tagliabue in 1993, and blocking owner Jim Speros' "CFL Colts" nickname for the CFL franchise in 1994.

This paper revisits these events by tracking heritage politics, Unitas, and Rings of Honor (ROH). ROH in the NFL date to the 1970s, though the Baltimore Colts never created one. ROH affixed to stadiums in cities affected by relocations are pantheons for franchises *and* communities. This tension complicates how owners treat storied moments and people from the past, and tests the legitimacy of heritage relocations. Owners cannot compel retired players to take part, and gameday induction ceremonies, the rule of thumb across the league, are homecomings only if

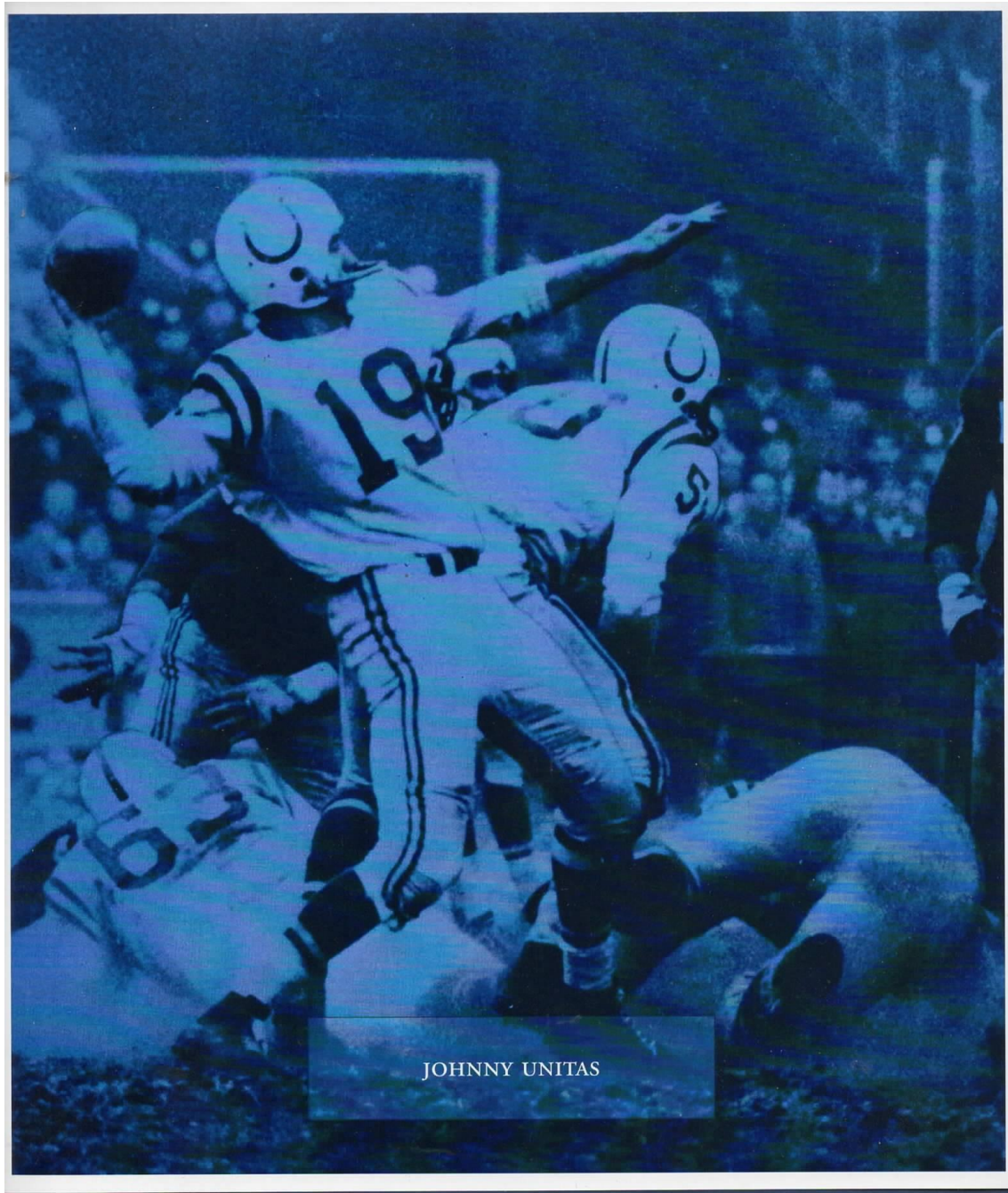
inductees played for that city. Inductees who played for a franchise before it moved may remind fans that their putative home team is also private property.

### 3. Conflicts over Heritage and a New Home Team

John Unitas, who played for the Colts from 1956 to 1972 and retired to Baltimore, has been its greatest asset. Biographers have described him as unflinching, unpretentious, and undiplomatic, not always beloved but often held in awe by fans and peers.<sup>12</sup> On the field he helped establish quarterback as the marquee position in American sports. The NFL named Unitas the sole quarterback on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary team in 1969 and the first-ever recipient of the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award in 1970. The league again named him one of four quarterbacks on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary team in 1994 (Sammy Baugh, Otto Graham, Joe Montana, Unitas) and one of ten for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2019 (Montana, Tom Brady, Unitas, Graham, Baugh, John Elway, Peyton Manning, Roger Staubach, Brett Favre, Dan Marino).<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica* links the development of the sport to Unitas' hardscrabble biography, the 1958 title game, and Super Bowl III.<sup>14</sup>

Awards and images like the photograph below scratch the surface of the Unitas legend in Baltimore and the first Golden Age. They also hint at the value of Unitas, and the horseshoe, for owners who change home territories and need legitimacy. Off the field Unitas had no more legal authority over franchise relocations than journalists or fans, which is to say none. But in the realm of hearts and minds he personified the role of retired Baltimore Colts as targets and independent actors in heritage politics who bore expectations of loyalty from fans, held powers of investiture over owners based not on law but charisma and tradition, and overwhelmingly chose the city they played for over the franchise that employed them. Their public support and star power cut against the grain of the NFL and kept the Baltimore Colts on the map.





**Figure 2: John Unitas in the 1958 championship game. Distributed by Sports Legends at Camden Yards, Baltimore, Maryland, 2008. Original photograph by Robert Riger.**

Baltimore journalists, many decorated in their own right, also kept heritage politics on the agenda. John Steadman (1975) and Cameron Snyder (1982) won the Bill Nunn Jr. Award before the Robert Irsay relocation, the latter after Irsay questioned his ethics.<sup>15</sup> Vito Stellino (1989) won Nunn in the aftermath.<sup>16</sup> In addition, Sam Lacy (1998) Steadman (2001) and Baltimore-

born Frank Deford (2012) won the Red Smith award.<sup>17</sup> Steadman never trusted Irsay.<sup>18</sup> Lacy implicitly criticized Steadman for driving relations with Irsay past the breaking point.<sup>19</sup> Decades later journalist Michael Olesker basically agreed.<sup>20</sup> Taking stock, historian Michael MacCambridge described the Colts as the “Brooklyn Dodgers of football writing, a cherished franchise that inspired more than its fair share of literary contemplation, heightened by a wrenching move that many would equate with a loss of the entire sport’s collective innocence.”<sup>21</sup> Yet Brooklyn never acquired a new team, while in Baltimore, reflecting on the past became inseparable from protecting Colts heritage for the future. Irsay notwithstanding, Steadman’s obsessions with the Colts and the city’s moral compass put him on a collision course with Art Modell.

With these assets in place the alignment of Baltimore Colts with the city crystalized at once in March 1984. Unitas and others condemned Irsay.<sup>22</sup> Jim Palmer of the Orioles acknowledged the business side of relocation but questioned the “Indianapolis” Colts.<sup>23</sup> New York journalist Dave Anderson predicted Irsay would “steal the nickname ... the cheapest trick in any franchise move.”<sup>24</sup> Howard Cosell sympathized with Mayor William Donald Schaefer’s argument that Irsay should have left memorabilia in Baltimore.<sup>25</sup>

The United States Football League Stars became the first franchise to succeed the Colts. The Stars relocated from Philadelphia, won the USFL championship in their only Baltimore season in 1985, and would have moved into Memorial Stadium from College Park had the league survived.<sup>26</sup> The lone heritage reference in their media guide involved broadcaster and Baltimore Colt Tom Matte.<sup>27</sup>

As the USFL and litigation to recover the Colts floundered in December 1985, Unitas suggested a compromise in a piece by Steadman. Said Unitas:

I would like for them (Indianapolis Colts) to take my name out of their record book. I can’t relate to Indianapolis or the team ... they have no right to anything



that happened in Baltimore ... I can't identify with Indianapolis. Nothing against Indianapolis but I never played there.<sup>28</sup>

Irsay refused, but *New York Times* reported Unitas' comments.<sup>29</sup> Irsay then agreed to consider returning the Colts nickname, and did return the Super Bowl V Vince Lombardi Trophy and other memorabilia to Mayor Schaefer in 1986, to settle lawsuits.<sup>30</sup> Steadman dismissed the trophy because the original had been pilfered from Irsay by Carroll Rosenbloom.<sup>31</sup> Unitas concluded "I just think it's tremendous just to get Irsay the hell out of the way" of the search for a new team.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile an accumulation of facts-on-the-ground was defining the post-1984 Baltimore Colts as a social institution not just unsuitable, but incapable, of moving to Indianapolis or disappearing in Baltimore. Organizations like the Marching Band and Corrals clubs stayed operational. Likewise, the Ed Block Courage award transitioned to a league-wide honor that invited recipients, including Indianapolis Colts, to annual ceremonies in Baltimore.<sup>33</sup> Unitas founded the Golden Arm Award for college quarterbacks in 1987.<sup>34</sup> Teammate Art Donovan wrote in 1987 that losing Marines in war provided real cause for mourning, but he still reveled in the bonds between fans and players.<sup>35</sup> A history by Steadman on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1958 restated Double Victory and included an introduction from Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who recalled Memorial Stadium as an exceptional venue for professional football of the 1950s.<sup>36</sup>

Memorial Stadium became a real-time showcase for popular heritage as the city pursued a new team. One event included a Super Bowl III anniversary in 1989 headlined by Unitas and New York Jet Joe Namath.<sup>37</sup> Another involved a homecoming celebration in 1992 for John Mackey, who joined the Colts in 1963 and had been selected for the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Ohio, at a preseason game between former Colts coach Don Shula's Miami Dolphins and the New Orleans Saints. Eighty alumni took part, including 1958 Colts like Donovan, Gino Marchetti, Lenny Moore, Jim Parker, and Unitas, and post-1958 stars like Ted Hendricks, Bert Jones, and Bubba Smith.<sup>38</sup> Unitas and Moore contributed to Baltimore's doomed expansion application in 1993.<sup>39</sup>

The CFL team that played two summer-fall seasons at Memorial Stadium was the second franchise to succeed the Colts. The 1994 season coincided with a memoir from journalist William Gildea, who recalled traveling to Yankee Stadium in 1958 and how he and his father loved the team.<sup>40</sup> The NFL celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary that year. NFL Films' *75 Seasons* inserted a clip from *Diner* and framed the college-like relationship between Baltimore and the Colts in the 1950s as critical for the sport.<sup>41</sup> Owner Jim Speros understood local expectations and recognized this legacy in his media guide.<sup>42</sup> A federal court also recognized the Baltimore Colts but struck down Speros' "CFL Colts" nickname on 12 August as a violation of Indianapolis' trademarks.<sup>43</sup> Speros unveiled a Ring of Honor at Memorial Stadium anyway on 20 August based entirely on home team geography, as none of the inductees played for Speros or in the CFL. Inaugural members included Donovan, Moore, and Unitas, joined later by Mackey, Parker, Orioles Palmer, Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson, and broadcaster Chuck Thompson.<sup>44</sup>

Speros set a precedent for ROH based on geography rather than franchise history. Indianapolis created a ROH but did not induct Unitas. The St. Louis Rams honored alumni from two cities and two franchises. Today's Ravens and Browns inducted Baltimore Colts and original Cleveland Browns, though the latter two franchises are currently based in Indianapolis and Baltimore. The Cardinals and Titans tied their ROH on franchise history rather than geography. Both honored inductees who played for those franchises before they moved to Arizona and Tennessee. Likewise, the Texans have yet to induct Houston Oilers. As of 2024 the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers dropped the ROH they created in St. Louis and San Diego. The Raiders franchise, which moved three times since 1980, never created a ROH though its media guide lists Raiders inducted to the California Bay Area Sports Hall of Fame and the Hall of Fame in Ohio.<sup>45</sup>

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**Table 1: Rings of Honor in Cities That Experienced Relocations Since 1980**

Franchise (first season as an expansion team or nickname in 1980)	Inducted Players
1994 – 1995: Baltimore Stallions (1994)	Baltimore Colts: John Unitas et al. Baltimore Orioles: Brooks Robinson et al.
1996 to present: Indianapolis Colts (Baltimore Colts)	Baltimore Colts: Chris Hinton* Indianapolis Colts: Peyton Manning et al.
1999 – 2015: St. Louis Rams Ring of Fame (Los Angeles Rams)	Los Angeles Rams: Merlin Olsen et al. St. Louis Cardinals: Dan Dierdorf et al. St. Louis Rams: Marshall Faulk
2000 to present: Baltimore Ravens (Cleveland Browns)	Cleveland Browns: Earnest Byner** Baltimore Colts: Unitas et al. Baltimore Ravens: Ray Lewis et al.
2000 – 2016: San Diego Chargers (San Diego Chargers)	1960 Los Angeles Chargers: Ron Mix et al.*** San Diego Chargers: Dan Fouts et al.
2006 to present: Arizona Cardinals (St. Louis Cardinals)	Chicago Cardinals: Ernie Nevers et al.**** St. Louis Cardinals: Dan Dierdorf et al. Arizona Cardinals: Pat Tillman et al.
2008 to present: Tennessee Titans***** (Houston Oilers)	Houston Oilers: Earl Campbell et al. Tennessee Titans: Eddie George et al.
2010 to present: Cleveland Browns (1999)	original Cleveland Browns: Jim Brown et al. current Cleveland Browns: Joe Thomas
2017 to present: Houston Texans (2002)	Houston Oilers: none Houston Texans: Andre Johnson et al.

Notes: \*Moved with franchise to Indianapolis in 1984.\*\*Moved with franchise to Baltimore in 1996.\*\*\*Moved with Chargers to San Diego in 1961 \*\*\*\* Cardinals moved from Chicago to St. Louis in 1960.\*\*\*\*\* Franchise merged Hall of Fame created in 1999 with Ring of Honor created in 2008.

Sources: Mike Farabaugh, “VIPs take farewell tour of Baltimore's fabled field of memories; Stadium artifacts identified by experts,” *Baltimore Sun*, 12 March 2000, 3B; *2024 Media Guide: For the Shoe* (Indianapolis Colts, 2024), 484-89; *St. Louis Rams 2015 Media Guide* (St. Louis Rams, 2015), 552; *2024 Baltimore Ravens Media Guide* (Baltimore Ravens, 2024), 459; Jay Paris, “No Midlife Crisis for Chargers,” *North County Times*, 3 February 2000, C1; *San Diego Chargers Media Guide 2016* (San Diego Chargers, 2016), 276; *Twenty Twenty Four Media Guide* (Arizona Cardinals, 2024), 356-8; *2024 Tennessee Titans Media Guide* (Tennessee Titans, 2023), 495; *2024 Cleveland Browns Media Guide* (Cleveland Browns, 2024), 256; *2024 Media Guide* (Houston Texans, 2024), 151-52.

The second CFL season offered more heritage. Journalists Vince Bagli and Norman Macht published an oral history with dozens of Colts, executive Ernie Accorsi, broadcaster Thompson, and every Hall of Fame player or coach except Hendricks. Participants expressed fond memories of fans and respect for how Rosenbloom urged players to become part of the community. Others held Irsay accountable for the decline of the team.<sup>46</sup> Speros, who renamed his franchise the Stallions, hosted a Super Bowl V homecoming.<sup>47</sup> Like the Colts, the Stallions won their league championship, the Grey Cup, but moved to Montreal and adopted the Alouettes nickname in 1996.



**Figure 3: Caricatures of Robert Irsay and Paul Tagliabue on a tee-shirt sold outside a Canadian Football League game at Memorial Stadium. Photograph by Evie Linantud.**

Heritage politics from multiple directions now ambushed Modell. His decision to abandon Browns symbols reflected a perfect storm of constraints: years of unrest in Baltimore, criticism from other owners, a convergence of interest among two football cities, a commissioner, Paul Tagliabue, who sensed an opportunity to salvage a positive from this convergence, and

Modell's own willingness to negotiate concessions in exchange for termination of lawsuits and a fresh start.

The agreement between the State of Maryland and Modell required idealistic football advocates to condone, or at least tolerate, franchise free agency. But Modell, backed by Governor Parris Glendening during the outdoor press conference of 6 November 1995, added insult to injury when he said he would keep the Browns nickname. That evening Tagliabue framed the problem as an opportunity to help fans in Baltimore and Cleveland.<sup>48</sup> On 7 November journalists John Eisenberg, Ken Murray, and Olesker condemned the deal.<sup>49</sup> Steadman would have annulled it: "Baltimore wanted to regain its stature in the NFL, but not at the expense of the Cleveland Browns...Baltimore in its best football day never compared to Cleveland."<sup>50</sup> But journalist Ken Rosenthal suggested new symbols would preserve the city's moral separation from Indianapolis and change how the league handled relocations.<sup>51</sup> Schaefer also advised Modell to change nicknames.<sup>52</sup> On 22 November *Baltimore Sun* editors endorsed the idea.<sup>53</sup>

Cleveland could have gravitated to heritage symbols independently. The Browns too had a glorious football past and a nickname inspired by Ohioan Paul Brown. Mayor Michael White understood Baltimore well and had vowed in 1994 to avoid a Mayflower scenario.<sup>54</sup> Ironically, on 8 November 1995 journalist Pat Galbincea conceded the Browns nickname based on the federal ruling against Speros.<sup>55</sup> Grant Segall and Robert Vickers reported Rosenthal's proposal on 10 November.<sup>56</sup>

The deal with Modell did not change how Baltimore Colts dealt with Indianapolis. As luck would have it, the Indianapolis Colts made the American Football Conference championship against the Pittsburgh Steelers in January 1996. Indianapolis named scout Don Joyce, a former Baltimore Colt, honorary captain. Steadman, however, told Los Angeles journalist T.J. Simers that Colts who retired in Baltimore might ostracize anyone who consorted with Indianapolis. Unitas added:

The tradition is in Baltimore. There is no reason for any of us who played for Baltimore to be with Indianapolis. They have never invited me there with a personal invitation, but if they had, I would have said, "Thank you, but no thanks."<sup>57</sup>

Unitas told *New York Times* "Rozelle should have made Irsay give the nickname back...there's no loyalty anymore in the N.F.L. No regard for the past." Journalist Harvey Araton concluded Baltimore Colts were alienated from the league but bound to that city and each other.<sup>58</sup>

After the playoffs Tagliabue brokered negotiations that included a failed attempt to transfer the Colts nickname to Modell. Cleveland shifted from targeting Modell's franchise to the symbols he discarded in February 1996, and the league agreed to place an existing or expansion franchise there by 1999. Tagliabue's final report again linked Baltimore to Cleveland as football cities.<sup>59</sup> Modell understood the hostility to heritage relocations in both cities and insisted he wanted Browns symbols to stay in Cleveland.<sup>60</sup>

Modell's decision is still an anomaly. Only Bud Adams, who founded the Houston Oilers, followed Modell on nicknames. Like Modell, in 1999 Adams needed legitimacy in Nashville after two tepid seasons as the Tennessee Oilers. Unlike Modell, he kept control of Oilers symbols so no Houston team could adopt them.<sup>61</sup> The otherwise seamless relocations of nicknames in Table 2 contrasts with the fractured and cancelled ROH in Table 1 and illustrates the gaps between pro forma and popular heritage across the league. Neither Table includes franchises that did not move after 1980 because authorities in home territories built new stadiums.

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**Table 2: Franchise Relocations Since 1980**

Post-Relocation Nickname	Pre-Relocation Nickname
Los Angeles Raiders (1982 – 1994)	Oakland Raiders (1960 – 1981)
Indianapolis Colts (1984 to present)	Baltimore Colts (1953 – 1983)
Phoenix Cardinals (1988 – 1993) Arizona Cardinals (1994 to present)	St. Louis Cardinals (1960 – 1987)
St. Louis Rams (1995 – 2015)	Los Angeles Rams (1946 – 1994)
Oakland Raiders (1995 – 2019)	Los Angeles Raiders (1982 – 1994)
Baltimore Ravens (1996 to present)	Cleveland Browns (1950 – 1995)
Tennessee Oilers (1997 – 1998) Tennessee Titans (1999 to present)	Houston Oilers (1960 – 1996)
Los Angeles Rams (2016 to present)	St. Louis Rams (1995 – 2015)
Los Angeles Chargers (2017 to present)	San Diego Chargers (1961 – 2016)
Las Vegas Raiders (2020 to present)	Oakland Raiders (1995 – 2019)

Note: Right column shows immediate pre-relocation territory only.

Source: *Official 2024 National Football League Record and Fact Book* (National Football League, 2024), 387-418.

Modell's Ravens, the third franchise to succeed the Colts, struggled to overcome controversial origins, a generation gap, and fans who wanted the Baltimore Colts. But Unitas et al. lacked an NFL affiliate they considered legitimate, while Modell needed legitimacy and a stable transition. Modell signaled a commitment to his new home by promising to restore Colts heritage and adopting the Ravens nickname from a *Sun* poll.<sup>62</sup> Even if he felt no obligation or interest besides investiture, Modell incorporated the Marching Band, organized massive Colts homecomings at the Ravens' first and last games at Memorial Stadium, and inserted Colts records in the debut media guide without asking for recognition, or permission, from the NFL.<sup>63</sup> The Ravens even transplanted grass from Memorial Stadium to M&T Bank stadium in 1998.<sup>64</sup> They did not take possession of the Super Bowl V trophy and other memorabilia shipped by Irsay to Schaefer in 1986. Donovan and Steadman, moreover, challenged the Ravens to create their own identity.<sup>65</sup> Irsay's son Jim, who now ran that franchise, refused to sell rights to the horseshoe logo.<sup>66</sup>



Eisenberg predicted the Ravens could escape the Colts' shadow once they left Memorial Stadium. He recommended they not induct Colts into a future ROH.<sup>67</sup>

But the Indianapolis Colts blotted the landscape and occasionally played the Ravens *in Baltimore*. This made it harder to forget Irsay and easier to weaponize (sic) the Ravens, who defeated Indianapolis on the latter's first visit in 1998. Stellino condemned the Indianapolis media guide, fans unleashed a frenzied anti-homecoming on rookie Peyton Manning and Jim Irsay, and Unitas watched from the Ravens sideline.<sup>68</sup> Before the 1999 season ESPN captured the roar of the crowd whenever live stadium video switched to Unitas. Host Chris Fowler concluded:

After the Colts packed up and moved to Indianapolis under the cover of night in 1984, Unitas demanded that his name and exploits be stricken from the Colts record book. Nothing personal, but he never played in Indianapolis. Simple? Yes. Honest? Almost painfully so. But this is number nineteen. What you see is what you get.<sup>69</sup>

Gildea, however, had found customers at Club 4100, a haunt for old Colts and fans, who could not oppose the "horseshoe" when Indianapolis visited in 1998.<sup>70</sup> In 1999 Indianapolis journalist George Stuteville reported patrons at Club 4100 cheering for Indianapolis against Washington, though he did not report if they were rooting more against the Redskins than for the Colts.<sup>71</sup> That same week Modell agreed to cede control of the Ravens to Baltimorean Steve Bisciotti. Olesker reasoned that local ownership, a new stadium, better on-field team, and debut of the expansion Cleveland Browns made it easier to accept the Ravens.<sup>72</sup> It is notable that journalist Ted Patterson included the Ravens in an illustrated history of local football published before their victory in Super Bowl XXXV in January 2001.<sup>73</sup>

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**Figure 4: From a tee-shirt sold outside M&T Bank Stadium before a Baltimore Ravens game against the Indianapolis Colts in 1998. Photograph by Evie Linantud.**

Super Bowl XXXV secured an independent source of legitimacy for the Ravens and validated treating both them and the Colts as home teams separated by Colors and time, but united by championships and geography. Steadman died in January 2001 and never wrote about Super Bowl XXXV. Gildea detected a displacement in time as fans once again rallied behind their team.<sup>74</sup> Tagliabue, joining the bandwagon with the narrative he developed during the Modell relocation, compared the Ravens to the Colts.<sup>75</sup> He congratulated Modell at the postgame ceremony for taking the title “back to Baltimore, and to Baltimore’s great fans, for the first time in three decades.” Modell responded that the Super Bowl trophy belonged to the people of

Maryland.<sup>76</sup> A resolution by U.S. Senator from Maryland Paul Sarbanes linked the Ravens to the Colts.<sup>77</sup>

The Ravens have not held Memorial Stadium-scale homecomings at M&T Bank, but they have treated the Colts like alumni of a Baltimore home team. Unitas died in September 2002. In October, the Ravens dedicated a statue of Unitas and inducted every Baltimore Colt player in the Hall of Fame to their ROH. Participants at the ceremony included Unitas' widow from his second marriage, Raymond Berry, Donovan, Mackey, Moore, and Parker. All except Berry had retired in Baltimore. Hendricks and Marchetti did not attend.<sup>78</sup>



**Figure 5: Unitas Plaza before a Baltimore Ravens game against the Cincinnati Bengals in January 2011.**

The next reckoning involved a home playoff versus Indianapolis in January 2007 that inspired Barry Levinson to explain why time alone has been insufficient for die-hard fans to get closure. The problem boiled down to optics. The Indianapolis Colts looked like the Baltimore Colts, which could trick people into thinking the Colts had always played in Indianapolis, or empower hostile actors who wanted to belittle or wipe the Baltimore Colts and their fans from the map.<sup>79</sup> Levinson himself acknowledged the disorientation of having “two Colts:” the home team Ravens and the opponent wearing the “horseshoe.”<sup>80</sup> Yet before the game, Indianapolis journalist Mark Alesia reported the owners of Club 4100 refused to mount a Manning jersey gifted by Jim Irsay.<sup>81</sup> After the game the Super Bowl V trophy, ceremonies, Unitas statue, and ROH stayed in the city even though the Ravens lost — all evidence of the independence of these symbols from on-field defeats. Journalist Jamison Hensley reported shortly afterwards that Bisciotti displayed memorabilia from Unitas and Raven Ray Lewis in his suite and had purchased Unitas items to keep them from other collectors.<sup>82</sup> In 2008 about 80 Colts and Ravens alumni, primarily from Super Bowl V and Super Bowl XXV, participated in a paid autograph event.<sup>83</sup>

These facts-on-the-ground continued to belie the loss of Baltimore Colts as actual people. Fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the 1958 championship centered on Baltimore. Writers from Baltimore and New York, including Gildea, Olesker, and Eisenberg, restated Double Victory.<sup>84</sup> M&T Bank hosted a gala for fans, Colts, and New York Giants.<sup>85</sup> Berry, Donovan, Moore, and others appeared at the Ravens game on 28 December 2008 against the Jacksonville Jaguars. Levinson’s 2009 documentary *The Band That Wouldn’t Die* appeared in this atmosphere and gave a relatively happy ending to the Irsay relocation wherein fans regained a home team and retained social connections to Colts and each other.<sup>86</sup> Levinson inserted television footage of Irsay in 1984 denying he planned to relocate, but he also profiled John Ziemann, who credited Irsay’s wife Harriet for helping the Marching Band keep its uniforms. Levinson interviewed power brokers Schaefer, Jim Irsay, Bisciotti, Modell, and Ravens executive Kevin Byrne, who recalled Modell’s need of support from Unitas. Gildea and Olesker restated Double Victory, and Bagli marveled that fans loved the Ravens like they had the Colts.



Levinson filmed at Club 4100 and the *Almost Religion* exhibit of Sports Legends at Camden Yards, and closed with Ziemann's Marching Ravens moving through Unitas Plaza. In 2010 *Sports Illustrated's* Deford, wearing a purple collar, remembered Unitas in a video commentary for NFL Network:

This was somebody who came from a working class background, comes to a working class city, and refuses to put on airs. We liked him because he was tougher than any quarterback. The hits that Unitas took somehow added to the whole aura. Baltimore was bereft of any kind of glamour. And so, when we began to win, it meant more to Baltimore than it would have meant to any other city, and I really mean that, to any other city. We had nothing else. Unitas belonged to us. Absolutely. Completely.<sup>87</sup>

Deford did not discuss Irsay explicitly, but the support from Unitas to the city after 1984 had by then become part of the landscape.

The Ravens' victory over the San Francisco Forty-Niners in Super Bowl XLVII in February 2013 provided the next occasion for reflection. *New York Times* credited the Ravens with a "history longer than their existence" because of relationships with Baltimore Colts. Donovan, who had doubted the Ravens but took part in their ceremonies, predicted that fans would always love them like they did the Colts.<sup>88</sup> Bisciotti endorsed Modell, who had died in September 2012, for the Hall of Fame.

The animosity that Baltimore shows to the Irsays is something that I lived through and can understand. So I'm not asking Cleveland to understand. I'm not even asking Cleveland to forgive. I just know that Cleveland's rabid fans should not be the reason that they keep him out.<sup>89</sup>

Following a raucous victory parade Eisenberg argued the Ravens had eclipsed the Colts.<sup>90</sup> Similar to Sarbanes in 2001, U.S. Senator Benjamin Cardin counted Super Bowl XLVII as the third for Baltimore.<sup>91</sup>

Bisciotti, on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Irsay relocation, estimated the Ravens had the support of about half of Colts fans who were senior citizens in 1996. He installed a statue of Lewis next to Unitas' in 2014. Ziemann credited the Marching Band, Corrals, old Colts, and Schaefer for bridging the gap to the Ravens and praised Modell for recognizing that history.<sup>92</sup> Ravens fans had themselves lived up to the past by creating an unusually strong home field advantage.<sup>93</sup> Marchetti, however, believed Modell barred him from Ravens events for once mauling a Cleveland quarterback.<sup>94</sup> Marchetti did join Berry, Moore, and Raven Jonathan Ogden for a Hall of Fame ceremony at a game against the Browns in 2015, three years after Modell died.<sup>95</sup> The Ravens hosted Colts and their families for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1958.<sup>96</sup>

Unitas created space for other players to push back against heritage relocations though usually without the same polarization. A short list starts with Cleveland legend Jim Brown, who endorsed Modell for the Hall of Fame in part *because* he abandoned Browns symbols.<sup>97</sup> Moreover, Brown never experienced the same burden of decision faced by Unitas and other greats mixed up in heritage relocations. Several Los Angeles Rams and St. Louis Cardinals attended their inaugurations to the St. Louis Rams Ring of Fame at a game against the Ravens in 1999, but Merlin Olsen organized the induction of Los Angeles Rams to the Coliseum Court of Honor in 2007 when the Rams still played in St. Louis.<sup>98</sup> The Titans inducted Houston Oiler Earl Campbell to their Hall of Fame in 1999 but Campbell refused to join Oilers teammates in Nashville, drawing comparisons to Unitas.<sup>99</sup> More recently, likely Hall of Famer J.J. Watt tweeted support for Houston fans in response to the Titans' plans to don Oilers throwback jerseys against the Texans.<sup>100</sup>

Baltimore canon, and Ravens history that predates their existence, have gained traction elsewhere. Again, a short list begins with New England Patriots coach Bill Belichick, who grew up in Maryland and, for the NFL centennial in 2019, recalled his pride in how the 1958 Colts represented Baltimore.<sup>101</sup> When Belichick's Patriots played the Ravens in November 2019, *Sunday Night Football* broadcasters Al Michaels and Chris Collinsworth named Unitas and Moore to a virtual Mount Rushmore alongside Ravens Ed Reed and Lewis. The next morning on

105.7 *The Fan* broadcaster Ed Norris criticized the merger of Colts with Ravens, while journalist Mike Preston endorsed it. ESPN released *Bullies of Baltimore* in 2023 about the Super Bowl XXXV Ravens. The film included Unitas handing off to Alan Ameche for the winning touchdown in 1958 and Mayflower vans leaving town in 1984.<sup>102</sup>

On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of relocation Preston restated Baltimore's credentials as a football town that rebounded but never forgot the Colors.<sup>103</sup> The 2024 Ravens media guide, per usual, included a Baltimore Colts timeline and a photo of a young Bisciotti with Unitas at training camp.<sup>104</sup> Even when the last fan who saw the Baltimore Colts play is gone (my brother and I attended their final game at Memorial Stadium against the Houston Oilers in December 1983) evidence of the heritage conflicts that emerged after 1984 will remain.

#### 4. Indianapolis

Heritage politics from different directions affected Indianapolis as well. Seven years after Robert Irsay returned the Super Bowl V trophy, Jim Irsay used the legalistic definition of heritage to explain why he would not sell trademarks to a Baltimore team:

When you buy a football team, part of that is the identity. And part of that is the horseshoe. I've never heard of anyone selling the franchise name. The legacy of the franchise is now in Indianapolis.<sup>105</sup>

Indianapolis, however, has been unable to stage popular heritage ceremonies involving John Unitas and most other Baltimore Colts. In 1988 unidentified alumni declined to attend a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the 1958 championship.<sup>106</sup> In 1994 Los Angeles journalist Bill Plaschke, noting that Brooklyn Dodgers associated with the Los Angeles Dodgers, dubbed Indianapolis "Nowhere's Team" because the mix of contempt and indifference among Baltimore Colts prevented ceremonies for the NFL 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Plaschke added that John Ziemann's Marching Band, invited to perform by the Buffalo Bills, harassed the visiting Indianapolis Colts in 1993 and that Baltimore-based analyst Mel Kiper ridiculed them on ESPN in 1994. In



response, an Indianapolis executive pledged to build a separate history.<sup>107</sup> Before Baltimore visited Indianapolis for the first-ever game between the two teams in 1996, Jim Irsay called the Ravens the “Cleveland Browns” and condemned media framing of them as the de facto Baltimore Colts.<sup>108</sup> Peyton Manning was disappointed that old Colts did not associate with the club when he arrived in 1998.<sup>109</sup> Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, upon the death of Unitas in 2002, prohibited Manning from paying tribute by wearing black high-tops.<sup>110</sup>

The deaths of bitter antagonists Irsay (1997) John Steadman (2001) and Unitas (2002) cleared the field slightly. The Indianapolis Colts then made their own history by winning Super Bowl XLI in February 2007 and hosting Super Bowl XLVI between the Giants and Patriots in February 2012. Jim Irsay hosted dozens of alumni from the 1975 Colts prior to an otherwise nondescript game against the Houston Texans in 2009. Journalist Mike Chappell compared the event to prior visits by Raymond Berry, John Mackey and Don Shula.<sup>111</sup> Yet the quarterback of the 1975 team, Bert Jones, later called Baltimore their “home.”<sup>112</sup> Next, Berry represented the franchise during Super Bowl XLVI events but tied his participation to his history with not the Colts but the Giants and Patriots, who he coached in the 1980s, and argued the NFL should have kept the nickname in Baltimore.<sup>113</sup> At a game against the Giants in 2018 Jim Irsay held a 1958 ceremony involving family from Unitas’ first marriage.<sup>114</sup> One week later Unitas’ second wife attended the 1958 ceremony in Baltimore.<sup>115</sup> The only post-relocation visit to Indianapolis by Unitas himself appears to have involved an offseason museum fundraiser in 1993 hosted by Robert Irsay.<sup>116</sup>

Jim Irsay also seems unwilling to push too much shared heritage on supporters who want a separate identity. Indianapolis installed Colts-blue seats in the Hoosierdome to lure Robert Irsay in 1984, which implied he would not have to rebrand.<sup>117</sup> In December 1985 journalist Bob Collins rebutted Unitas’ criticism of the media guide and provided a template for Indianapolis to close ranks despite misgivings about relocation.

We certainly are the losers on that one. Ole high-tops was one of the greatest. Nonetheless, I believe his thinking is high-buttoned. Either that or somebody caught him in the wrong spot — like between the ears — with a crochet needle.

Unitas was aiming at Colts' owner Bob Irsay. But he had to fire through Indianapolis to reach his target. We don't like that...As I have said before, we wanted a professional football team. But we did not want Baltimore's football team.<sup>118</sup>

The Colts issued a fiftieth anniversary patch in 2002 as journalist Bob Kravitz, responding to Unitas' death and speculation about relocation to Los Angeles, invoked Barry Levinson's *Diner* to illustrate what could not develop locally unless Jim Irsay committed to Indiana.<sup>119</sup> Other symbols controlled by Jim Irsay, including tenth, thirtieth, thirty-fifth, and fortieth anniversary patches, commemorated only the Indianapolis era. Following Super Bowl XLI, U.S. Representative Julia Carson congratulated the team for giving Indiana its first-ever championship.<sup>120</sup> Jim Irsay then ordered just one replica Lombardi Trophy for organization rings rather than two for both franchise victories.<sup>121</sup> Before Indianapolis hosted Super Bowl XLVI journalist Zak Keefer argued Berry, as a Baltimore Colt, should not represent the franchise.<sup>122</sup> Lucas Oil Stadium did not hang banners marking the Baltimore era at a game against the Green Bay Packers in 2012; online images suggest this remains the norm. Executive Craig Kelley dismissed the possibility of a Unitas statue in 2014.<sup>123</sup> Jim Irsay commissioned one of Manning in 2017 and authorized a logo involving the Indiana map in 2020.<sup>124</sup> Journalist Joel Erickson in 2021 described how Hall of Famer Manning forged a separate identity for Indianapolis, which solved a problem created by photos of Unitas at team facilities.<sup>125</sup>

The bottom line is that Jim Irsay has not closed the gap between the presence of Baltimore Colts in franchise History and their absence from his Ring of Honor. On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of relocation he posted "Surreal night 40 years ago on this date. I'm glad things worked out well for both cities."<sup>126</sup> This post could only refer to the fact that both have franchises. The "For the Shoe" subtitle of the 2024 media guide continued the ambiguity. The ROH has Baltimore-era content including Chris Hinton and Ted Marchibroda, who played and coached in both cities, but also "Colts Nation" defined as fans since 1953.<sup>127</sup> The late Unitas is still a one-person bottleneck. A posthumous induction of him or a living Baltimore Colt would change a tradition that dates to 1996 and rekindle questions about why the Irsays could not honor Unitas in life or remove him from the media guide. Nor does the ROH include Indiana native Weeb Ewbank, Hall

of Fame coach of the 1958 Colts and Super Bowl III New York Jets. In 2014 the Indiana Football Hall of Fame in Richmond devoted a room to Ewbank that included news clippings of him and Unitas. The absence of Ewbank, who might have bridged the gap between the two cities, deepens the impression that the popular heritage of the Indianapolis Colts does not include Baltimore.

## **5. New Legacy**

Baltimore's ability to confront the NFL and disrupt the status quo on heritage relocations after a snowy night in 1984 added a political dimension to its history as a football town. Homecomings and Rings of Honor in particular demonstrated that John Unitas and the Baltimore Colts, as a social institution, never left their original city even though legal control of the horseshoe logo they made famous did. It *was* irrational to expect Unitas et al. to condone the Robert Irsay relocation after they had become so connected to Baltimore, but their willingness to do the right thing rewarded ordinary fans in a way few cities experience. The same idealism and continuity created the brief but decisive skirmish with Art Modell in 1995-96 and the Ravens' relationships with Baltimore Colts. But popular anger over the horseshoe was, and is, genuine. Without question the realistic threat lurks that casual and novice followers, even in Baltimore, could see Unitas as an Indianapolis Colt. Moreover, pro forma heritage relocations are still the league norm even though popular heritage relocations are more complicated. These problems show that the core threat of relocations is to strip a community not of a property but a home team.

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