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## **Forty Years after the Mayflowers**

**Baltimore, Johnny U, and Heritage Relocations in the NFL**

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### **About the Author**

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### **Key Terms**

Art Modell, Baltimore Colts, Baltimore Ravens, Barry Levinson, Cleveland Browns, Franchise Relocations, Heritage Relocations, Homecomings, Jim Irsay, Johnny Unitas, National Football League, Rings of Honor, Robert Irsay, Steve Bisciotti

### **Executive Summary**

Baltimore lost the Colts in 1984 and acquired the Ravens in 1996. Along the way it mounted an extraordinary and complicated effort to protect Colts heritage and shape a successor franchise into a legitimate home team. Landmarks include the failure to regain Colts Colors but also the reacquisition of the Super Bowl V trophy, continuation of Colts institutions and homecomings at Memorial Stadium, Art Modell's decision to leave the Browns nickname in Cleveland, the statue of Johnny Unitas outside the Ravens' M&T Bank stadium, and inductions of Baltimore Colts to the Ravens Ring of Honor. Of most importance, the loyalty of Unitas and other alumni to the city vindicated ordinary fans who believed in their home team. These landmarks and their impact on other cities added a political dimension to Baltimore's identity as a football town willing and able to challenge heritage relocations in the National Football League.

### **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 because a team's identity is bound to its home city.<sup>1</sup> Rational or not, the long confrontation between

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<sup>1</sup> James Jeffrey, "Columbus Crew: Two US Cities Fight Over One Football Team," BBC.com, 26 May 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44259849>.

Baltimore, Maryland, and the National Football League pit a home team definition of a franchise as a college-like social institution, replete with band, alumni, and homecomings, against a legalistic definition of a franchise as a privately-owned business with trademarks. These definitions coexisted in Baltimore until Robert Irsay moved his franchise, the Colts, to Indianapolis, Indiana on a snowy night in 1984 immortalized on YouTube.

Political science has yet to capture the substance and theoretical importance of what happened next. I basically argue that Baltimore and Baltimore Colts alumni, both in many ways personified by the late John Unitas, forced NFL owners and executives to grapple with previously obscure differences between *franchise* and *heritage relocations*, and between *pro forma* and *popular* symbols of heritage. Again, to my knowledge no political scientist has put this all together yet so some clarifications are in order. I limit my definition of *franchise relocations* to changes in home territories engineered by owners and recognized by the NFL.<sup>2</sup> I define *heritage* as a social inheritance, built on thrilling victories and agonizing defeats, that gives a community an identity and place on the colloquial map.<sup>3</sup> *Heritage relocations*, which are often and inaccurately confused with *franchise relocations*, are attempts by NFL owners to carry symbols of this heritage to new home territories. Heritage relocations, not franchise relocations, are the cause of *heritage politics*, a struggle among various actors for power and authority over these symbols up to and including the opinions and behavior of retired athletes. *Pro forma* symbols include capital-C Colors (trademarks, nicknames, logos, uniforms) and capital-H History (content of annual media guides published by franchises and recognized by the NFL) legally owned by clubs. *Popular* symbols, by contrast, include public ceremonies, homecomings, and other social interactions with alumni who played for a franchise before it moved. Finally, *Baltimore* refers here to members of the community who supported professional football for the city after 1984 and challenged the NFL on heritage relocations.

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<sup>2</sup> A relocation that exceeds seventy-five miles normally qualifies as a change in home territory. *Constitution and Bylaws of the National Football League*, 1 February 1970, revised 2006, 12-13.

<sup>3</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

Academic works have also overlooked how symbolic Rings of Honor (ROH) affixed to home stadiums, the NFL version of classical pantheons, reveal who owners are willing and able to honor in cities where franchises and communities have not always been together. As pro forma symbols, owners can add any name they choose. As popular symbols, owners cannot compel inductees to take part in gameday ceremonies, which are homecomings only if inductees played for that city. Likewise, owners cannot force fans and media to embrace inductees who played elsewhere and could remind loyalists that their putative home team is really private property.

Social conservatism and populism, both of which make academics skittish, offer the best frameworks to understand heritage politics. NFL franchise owners are elites, not universally evil but still capable of sowing chaos by running a team into the ground even without relocating. An owner who actually relocates a beloved home team's Colors and History poses an existential threat to a city's identity and place on the map. What can a community do in response? What about football heroes? Do they follow the owner or stay with ordinary fans?

## **2. A Place on the Map**

Several overlapping factors explain why after 1984 so many people in Baltimore refused or could not get over the Colts, accept a new team named Browns, or separate the Colts from the Ravens.

Major league franchises had rebranded or adopted legacy nicknames when they arrived in Baltimore, which set a precedent for local expectations regarding the Colors and Histories controlled by the Irsay family and Art Modell. 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>4</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 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 bylaws and created franchise free agency, which has empowered owners to extract concessions from cities desperate to keep or get franchises.<sup>5</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. Of most importance, Irsay retained rights to the Colors, History, and iconic horseshoe logo that dates to the 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The league counts Super Bowls using Roman numerals. The Colts won Super Bowl V in January 1971 after a regular season that began in September 1970.

<sup>5</sup> Michael MacCambridge, *America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 341-55; 388-401.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Morgan, *Glory for Sale: Fans, Dollars, and the New NFL* (Baltimore: Bancroft Press, 1997), 97-128.



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

Twenty years after the Mayflowers historian Michael MacCambridge restated the national and local importance of Baltimore and the Colts to the sport in *America's Game*, a seminal work that featured *the* photo of Unitas (Figure 2) on the cover and was distributed to league employees by Commissioner Paul Tagliabue.<sup>7</sup> MacCambridge placed Unitas and the Colts at beginning, middle, and end of professional football's first Golden Age, namely the 1958 championship game that put the sport on the map, Super Bowl III which legitimized the NFL-American Football League merger, and controversial relocations by Davis and Irsay 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. Baltimore fans did earn a reputation *before* the 1958 title game against the NFL flagship New York Giants, who recognized their enthusiasm in the game program.<sup>8</sup> True to

<sup>7</sup> MacCambridge, email, 19 March 2012.

<sup>8</sup> New York Giants, *Official Program: New York Giants vs. Baltimore Colts Yankee Stadium* 33, 8, (New York: Harry M. Stevens, 1958) 3, 19.

form, many fans and members of the Colts marching band 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>9</sup> Such behavior was remarkable for the NFL at the time. Extraordinary fan support offers the simplest explanation — reciprocity — for the extraordinary loyalty of Uitas et al. to that city after 1984. MacCambridge invoked Barry Levinson’s autobiographical film *Diner* (1982) to capture the home team bond that, from a national perspective, appeared broken by the Irsay relocation until 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 Uitas stood on the Ravens sideline for the first-ever visit to Baltimore by the Indianapolis Colts in 1998. MacCambridge nonetheless condemned Art Modell’s relocation of his franchise to Baltimore in 1996 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 Colors and History 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 in particular captured the wild vendetta ride of the Canadian Football League (CFL) and early Ravens eras for fans who saw the rebirth of professional football as a victory over the NFL.<sup>11</sup>

MacCambridge, Nathan, and Kupfer suggest the presence of a multi-generational canon that explains the city’s sense of right and the paradoxical hostility and desire to rejoin the NFL after 1984. Before Irsay arrived in 1972 the canon had already identified the Colts as a Baltimore institution, the 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. After 1984 the

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<sup>9</sup> *New York Times*, “FANS MOB COLTS’ BUS; Unruly Crowd of 30,000 Hails Team on Return Home,” 29 December 1958, 25.

<sup>10</sup> MacCambridge, *America’s*, xii; 112; 350; 412-13; 396-400.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel A. Nathan, “Baltimore Blues: The Colts and Civic Identity,” in *Rooting for the Home Team: Sport, Community, and Identity* ed. Nathan (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 108-24; Charles Kupfer, “Crabs in the Grey Cup: Baltimore’s Canadian Football Sojourn, 1994–95,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 24, no 1 (2007): 49-66; Kupfer, “The Ravens’ Flight to Normalcy: How Winning Restored Baltimore’s Football Culture,” in *Baltimore Sports: Stories from Charm City*, ed. Nathan (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 263-80.

canon held that the NFL violated this special relationship by allowing Irsay to not just leave 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.

The canon owes much to local media. Interestingly, formal recognition of Baltimore journalists from national peers began during the Irsay era. Both John Steadman (1975) and Cameron Snyder (1982) won the Professional Football Hall of Fame - Bill Nunn Jr. Award, Snyder after Irsay questioned his ethics.<sup>12</sup> Vito Stellino (1989) won the Nunn award in the aftermath of relocation.<sup>13</sup> Sam Lacy (1998) and Steadman (2001) later won the Associated Press Red Smith award.<sup>14</sup> Steadman clearly embraced the role of watchdog against abuses of power by franchise owners like Irsay.<sup>15</sup> But Lacy implicitly criticized Steadman for driving relations with Irsay past the breaking point.<sup>16</sup> Decades later journalist Michael Olesker basically agreed.<sup>17</sup> Taking stock, 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>18</sup> Yet Brooklyn never acquired a new baseball team, while in Baltimore, reflecting on the past became inseparable from protecting Colts heritage for the future. Even with Irsay gone, Steadman's obsessions with the Colts and the city's moral compass kept heritage on the agenda and put him on a collision course with Modell.

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<sup>12</sup> Cameron C. Snyder, "Writer Disputes Irsay's Story," *Baltimore Sun*, 14 April 1980, C8.

<sup>13</sup> Pro Football Writers of America, "Bill Nunn Jr. Award," <https://www.profootballwriters.org/off-field-awards/pfwa-bill-nunn-jr-award>.

<sup>14</sup> Associated Press Sports Editors, "Red Smith Award," <https://apsportseditors.com/red-smith-award/>.

<sup>15</sup> Dennis Gildea, "Sam Lacy and John Steadman: Empathy and a Conscience on the Sports Page," in *Baltimore Sports*, 155-66.

<sup>16</sup> Sam Lacy, "Time To Quit Crying and Share the Blame for Loss of the Colts," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 April 1984, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Olesker, *The Colts' Baltimore: A City and Its Love Affair in the 1950s* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>18</sup> MacCambridge, *America's*, 527. MacCambridge noted Art Donovan and Bob Drury n. 37; John Steadman n. 38; William Gildea n. 42; Vince Bagli and Norman Macht n. 48; and Ted Patterson n. 75.

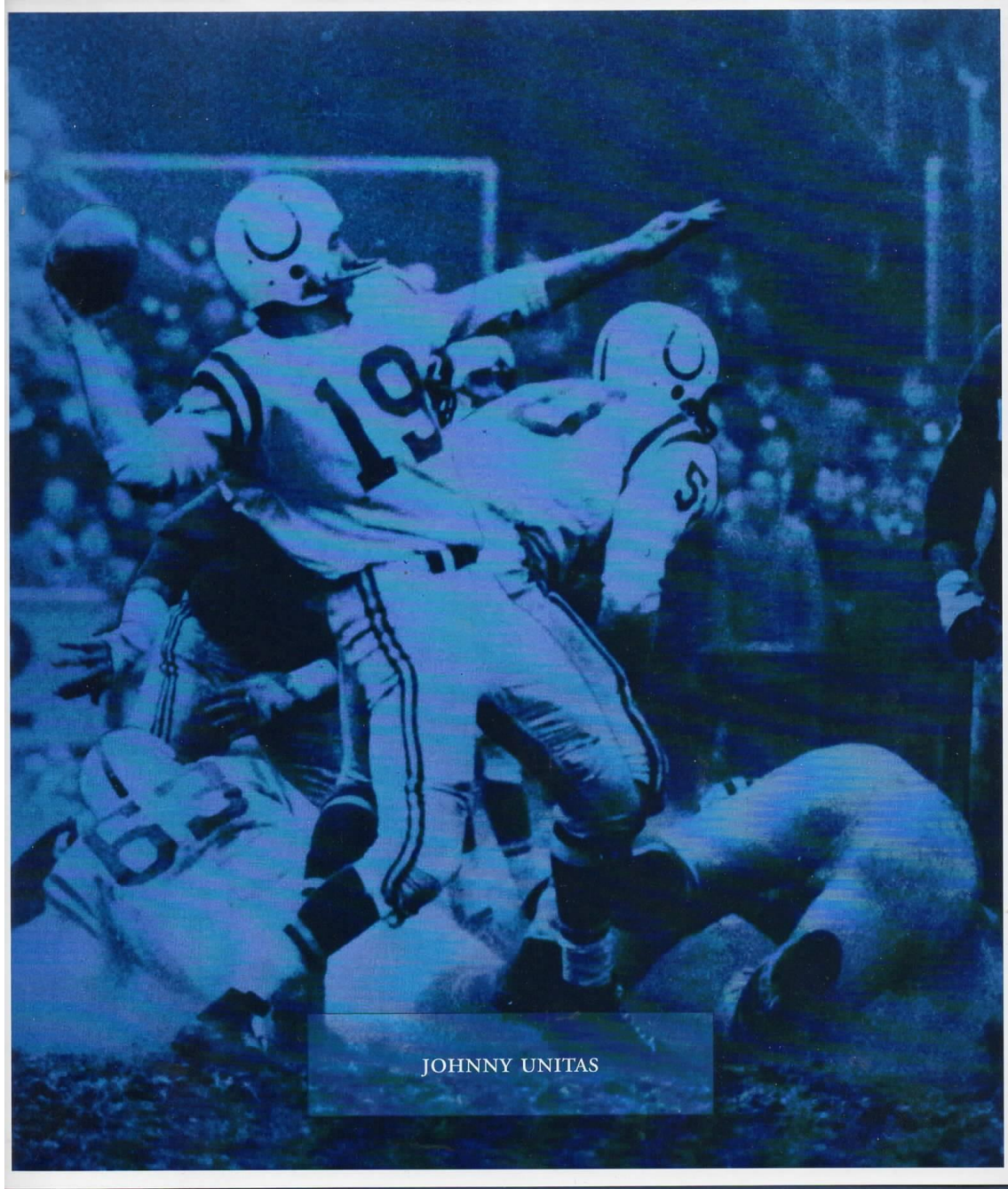
Unitas, who played for the Colts from 1956 to 1972, retired to Baltimore, and died in 2002, remains central to the canon, Baltimore's place on the map, and historical rage and disbelief at claims that the Colts legacy, much less the lived history and shared memories of a community, boil down to trademarks that belong to the Irsay family or Indianapolis. Biographers have described Unitas as unflinching, unpretentious, and undiplomatic, not always beloved but often held in awe by fans and peers.<sup>19</sup> On the field Unitas helped establish quarterback as the marquee position in American sports. The NFL, which dates its origins to 1920, selected a fiftieth anniversary team in 1969 that included just one player for each on-field position. Unitas made the team, along with fellow Colts John Mackey and Gino Marchetti. The NFL named Unitas the first-ever recipient of the Walter Payton Man of the Year Award in 1970 to recognize his contributions to the sport. Decades later in 1994 a new crop of selectors named Unitas, Raymond Berry, Ted Hendricks, Marchetti, and Jim Parker to the NFL 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary team. Yet another panel named Unitas, Berry, Hendricks, Mackey, Marchetti, Lenny Moore, and Parker, as well as Baltimore Ravens Ray Lewis, Jonathan Ogden, Ed Reed, and Rod Woodson, to the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary team in 2019.<sup>20</sup> Along with Baltimore Colt Art Donovan, all of these individuals have been inducted to the Professional Football Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio. *Encyclopedia Britannica* continues to link the development of the sport to Unitas' hardscrabble biography, the 1958 title game, and Super Bowl III.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jack Gilden, *Collision of Wills: Johnny Unitas, Don Shula, and the Rise of the Modern NFL* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018); Tom Callahan, *Johnny U: The Life and Times of John Unitas* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> *Official 2024 National Football League Record & Fact Book* (National Football League, 2024), 807-08; 537; NFL.com, "NFL 100 All-Time Team," <https://www.nfl.com/100/all-time-team/roster.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Editors, "Johnny Unitas," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15 September 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Johnny-Unitas>, accessed 22 December 2024.



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

The dramatic photograph of Unitas in 1958 hints at his political value off the field to owners, like the Irsay family and Modell, who relocated and needed legitimacy. 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

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 once employed them.

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

The alignment of Baltimore Colts alumni with the city crystalized as the Mayflowers left town in March 1984. Unitas and others condemned Robert 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 Times* 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>

In 1985 the United States Football League Stars became the first franchise to succeed the Colts. Owner Myles Tanenbaum relocated the franchise from Philadelphia and stated he could not adopt the Colts nickname until his team had “earned” it.<sup>26</sup> Unitas declared his support, and Colts alumni Lydell Mitchell, Tom Matte, and Sam Havrilak appeared at the first game in College Park, Maryland.<sup>27</sup> The lone Colts reference in the Stars media guide involved Matte, a broadcaster for the team.<sup>28</sup> The Stars won the USFL championship that summer and would have moved into Memorial Stadium had the league survived.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *Baltimore Sun* and *News American*, 29-31 March 1984.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Justice, “Orioles Share Loss of Colts with Loyal Fans and the City,” *Baltimore Sun*, 30 March 1984, C1.

<sup>24</sup> Dave Anderson, “Twelve Vans to Indianapolis,” *New York Times*, 1 April 1984, 355.

<sup>25</sup> Howard Cosell with Peter Bonventre, *I Never Played the Game* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 117.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Reimer, “Stars' Owner Shows Reverence for Colts' Cherished Tradition,” *Baltimore Sun*, 2 November 1984, 1E.

<sup>27</sup> Cameron C. Snyder, “Council of Colt Corrals Vote to Become Council of Stars,” *Baltimore Sun*, 20 February 1985, 3G; Alan Goldstein, “Stars Drub Generals for First Victory, 29-9: 31,027 see Bryant Run for 136 yards,” *Baltimore Sun*, 18 March 1985, 1C.

<sup>28</sup> *1985 Media Guide* (Baltimore Stars, 1985), 22.

<sup>29</sup> *Baltimore Sun*, “Championship Orphans,” 16 July 1985, 10A.

As the USFL and litigation to recover the Colts floundered in December 1985, Unitas suggested a compromise in an opinion piece by John 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>30</sup>

Irsay refused, but *New York Times* reported Unitas' comments.<sup>31</sup> Irsay agreed to consider returning the Colts nickname, and did return the Super Bowl V Vince Lombardi Trophy and other memorabilia to Mayor William Donald Schaefer in 1986, to settle lawsuits.<sup>32</sup> Steadman dismissed the trophy because the original had been pilfered from Irsay by Carroll Rosenbloom.<sup>33</sup> Unitas said "I just think it's tremendous just to get Irsay the hell out of the way" of the search for a new team.<sup>34</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 social clubs stayed operational. Likewise, the Baltimore Colts' Ed Block Courage award transitioned to a league-wide honor that invited recipients, including Indianapolis Colts, to annual ceremonies in Baltimore.<sup>35</sup> Unitas founded the Golden Arm Award for college quarterbacks in 1987.<sup>36</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 Baltimore Colts fans and players.<sup>37</sup> A history by Steadman on the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1958 restated Double Victory and included an

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<sup>30</sup> John Steadman, "Colts Records Belong to Baltimore," *Baltimore News-American*, 27 December 1985, D1.

<sup>31</sup> "Unitas Upset," *New York Times*, 28 December 1985, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Babe Ruth Birthplace Museum, <https://baberuthmuseum.org/babe-ruth-birthplace-museum>.

<sup>33</sup> Steadman, "City Loses in Dealings with Irsay," *Baltimore News-American*, 18 March 1986, C1.

<sup>34</sup> "Colts Settlement," *Baltimore News-American*, 19 March 1986, 4A.

<sup>35</sup> Ed Block Courage Award Foundation, <https://www.edblock.org>.

<sup>36</sup> Johnny Unitas Golden Arm Award, <https://goldenarmfoundation.com>.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur J. Donovan Jr. and Bob Drury, *Fatso: Football When Men Were Really Men* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 217; 131-40.

introduction from Commissioner Pete Rozelle, who recalled Memorial Stadium as an exceptional venue for professional football in the 1950s.<sup>38</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>39</sup> Another involved a homecoming celebration in 1992 for John Mackey, who joined the Colts in 1963 and had been selected for the 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>40</sup> Unitas and Moore contributed to Baltimore's doomed expansion application in 1993.<sup>41</sup>

The CFL team that played two summer-fall seasons at Memorial Stadium was the second franchise to succeed the Colts. The 1994 schedule coincided with the acclaimed memoir from journalist William Gildea, who recalled traveling to Yankee Stadium in 1958 and a city that needed the Colts.<sup>42</sup> The NFL celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary that year. NFL Films' *75 Seasons* inserted a clip from Barry Levinson's *Diner* and framed the college-like relationship between Baltimore and the Colts in the 1950s as critical for the sport.<sup>43</sup> Owner Jim Speros understood local expectations and recognized the Colts legacy in his media guide.<sup>44</sup> A federal court also recognized the achievements of the "Baltimore Colts" but struck down Speros' "CFL Colts" nickname on 12 August as a violation of the Indianapolis Colts' trademarks.<sup>45</sup> Speros unveiled a

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<sup>38</sup> Steadman, *Greatest Football Game Ever Played: When the Baltimore Colts and New York Giants Faced Sudden Death* (Stevensville, Maryland: Press Box, 1988), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Bill Free, "Colts and Jets To Replay Super Bowl III - in Flag Football for Charity," *Baltimore Sun*, 22 September 1989, 13C.

<sup>40</sup> Mike Jensen, "Night of Nostalgia at Memorial Stadium," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 28 August 1992, C1.

<sup>41</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 179-96.

<sup>42</sup> William Gildea, *When the Colts Belonged to Baltimore: A Father and a Son, a Team and a Time* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> *75 Seasons: 1920-1995* (New York: Polygram, 1994), VHS.

<sup>44</sup> *1994 Media Guide Inaugural Season* (Baltimore CFL Colts, 1994), 4-5.

<sup>45</sup> Indianapolis Colts Inc v. Metropolitan Baltimore Football Club Limited Partnership, 34 F. 3d 410, 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit, 12 August 1994, <https://openjurist.org/34/f3d/410/indianapolis-colts-inc-v-metropolitan-baltimore-football-club-limited-partnership-l>.

Ring of Honor at Memorial Stadium anyway on 20 August. Inaugural members included Donovan, Moore, and Unitas, joined later by Mackey, Parker, Orioles Palmer, Frank Robinson, Brooks Robinson, and broadcaster Chuck Thompson.<sup>46</sup>

In retrospect, Speros set a precedent for NFL owners involved in relocations in Table 1 to figure out if they should, or could, recognize the histories of their fanbases, franchises, or both. Indianapolis created a ROH in 1996 but has not inducted Unitas or any other Baltimore-only Colts. The St. Louis Rams honored alumni from two cities and two franchises. Today's Ravens and Browns inducted Baltimore Colts and original Cleveland Browns. The Cardinals and Titans, by contrast, have inductees who played for those franchises before they moved to Arizona and Tennessee. Likewise, the Texans have not inducted any Houston Oilers. Interestingly, as of 2024 the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers had 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>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Alan Goldstein, "Donovan, Moore, Unitas Inducted into 'Ring of Honor,'" *Baltimore Sun*, 21 August 1994, 10C; Mike Farabaugh, "VIPs Take Farewell Tour of Baltimore's Fabled Field of Memories; Stadium Artifacts Identified by Experts," *Baltimore Sun*, 12 March 2000, 3B.

<sup>47</sup> *LV Raiders 1960-2024* (Las Vegas Raiders, 2024), 449-61.

**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, 2024), 495; *2024 Cleveland Browns Media Guide* (Cleveland Browns, 2024), 256; *2024 Media Guide* (Houston Texans, 2024), 151-52.

The 1995 CFL season offered more heritage. Journalists Vince Bagli and Norman Macht published an oral history with dozens of former 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 Carroll Rosenbloom urged players to become part of the community. Others held Irsay accountable for the decline of the team.<sup>48</sup> Speros, who had renamed his franchise the Stallions, hosted a Colts Super Bowl V homecoming.<sup>49</sup> The Stallions won the CFL Grey Cup but moved to Montreal after the arrival of Art Modell and adopted the legacy 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.**

<sup>48</sup> Vince Bagli and Norman L. Macht, *Sundays at 2:00 with the Baltimore Colts* (Centreville, Maryland: Tidewater Publishers, 1995), xi; 16; 35; 71; 90; 104; 125; 135; 160; 176; 186; 197; 207; 211; 222.

<sup>49</sup> Ken Murray and Gary Lambrecht, "Fans Get the Big Picture Thanks to Memorial Stadium Upgrades," *Baltimore Sun*, 18 June 1995, 19D.

Heritage politics now ambushed an unsuspecting 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 known football cities, an NFL 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 Baltimore to 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>50</sup> On 7 November journalists John Eisenberg, Ken Murray, and Michael Olesker condemned the deal.<sup>51</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>52</sup> But Ken Rosenthal suggested new Colors would preserve the city's moral separation from Indianapolis.<sup>53</sup> William Donald Schaefer also advised Modell to change nicknames.<sup>54</sup> On 22 November *Baltimore Sun* editors endorsed the idea.<sup>55</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

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<sup>50</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 282.

<sup>51</sup> John Eisenberg, "The Gloating Was Nothing To Cheer About," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 November 1995, 1D; Murray, "Modell's Exit Ramp Eerily Close to Irsay's: Colts Left Town for Same Reasons Browns Departed," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 November 1995, 1D; Olesker, "Revenge Lacks Sweetness, Brings Whiff of Hypocrisy," *Baltimore Sun* 7 November 1995, 1B.

<sup>52</sup> Steadman, "In the NFL's New Game, This City Has Gone from Martyr to Pawn," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 November 1995, 3D.

<sup>53</sup> Ken Rosenthal, "They're Baltimore's Browns: What's in a Name? Shame, If It's Stolen," *Baltimore Sun*, 7 November 1995, 1D.

<sup>54</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 277.

<sup>55</sup> "Telling the Browns from the Colts: A City's Identity: Let the Teams Move, But Leave the Names Behind," *Baltimore Sun*, 22 November 1995, 16A.

understood Baltimore well and had vowed in 1994 to avoid a Mayflower scenario.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, on 8 November 1995 journalist Pat Galbincea conceded the Browns nickname based on the federal ruling against Speros.<sup>57</sup> Grant Segall and Robert Vickers, however, reported Rosenthal's proposal on 10 November.<sup>58</sup>

Maryland's 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>59</sup>

Unitas also told *New York Times* "(former Commissioner Pete) 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>60</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 a franchise there by 1999.

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<sup>56</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 230.

<sup>57</sup> Pat Galbincea, "As Modell Goes, So Goes the Name," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 8 November 1995, 8D.

<sup>58</sup> Grant Segall and Robert Vickers, "Take Team, Leave Name Behind, Modell Is Urged," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 10 November 1995, 1A.

<sup>59</sup> T.J. Simers, "Scratch These Colts: Unitas and Matte Don't Think About How Their Former Team Is Doing, Because They Don't Consider Indianapolis Their Former Team," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 January 1996, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1996-01-13-sp-24143-story.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Harvey Araton, "Unitas and Company Sever Ties with the Present," *New York Times*, 14 January 1996, 256.

Tagliabue's final report again linked Baltimore to Cleveland as football towns.<sup>61</sup> Modell understood the hostility to heritage relocations in both cities and insisted he wanted Browns symbols to stay in Cleveland.<sup>62</sup>

Modell's decision remains an anomaly today. Only Bud Adams, who had 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>63</sup> The otherwise seamless relocations of nicknames in Table 2 contrast with the fractured and cancelled ROH in Table 1 and illustrate the more complicated politics of ROH. Of course, neither Table includes franchises that did not move after 1980 because their owners extorted public authorities into building new stadiums.

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<sup>61</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 291.

<sup>62</sup> Mary Kay Cabot, "Art Modell's Decision To Move Cleveland Browns Haunted Him for Rest of Life," *Cleveland.com*, 7 September 2012, [https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2012/09/art\\_modell\\_never\\_really\\_recover.html#incart\\_river](https://www.cleveland.com/browns/2012/09/art_modell_never_really_recover.html#incart_river).

<sup>63</sup> Matt Young, "Oilers Throwback Jerseys Revealed for '23," *Houston Chronicle*, 25 July 2023, B2.

**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.

Back in Baltimore Modell's Ravens, the third franchise to succeed the Colts, struggled to overcome controversial origins, a generation gap, and fans who still wanted the Baltimore Colts. But Unitas et al. lacked an NFL affiliate they considered legitimate, while Modell needed legitimacy and a stable transition. Modell demonstrated an understanding of his new home by promising to restore Colts heritage and adopting the Ravens nickname from a *Sun* poll.<sup>64</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>65</sup> The Ravens even transplanted grass from Memorial Stadium to

<sup>64</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 292-3.

<sup>65</sup> Morgan, "Colts' Baltimore Hits Win Spot in Ravens' Book; Records To Be Included in Team's Media Guide," *Baltimore Sun*, 28 June 1996, 1D. The last combined Colts-Ravens records appeared in the *2008 Fan and Media Guide* (Baltimore Ravens, 2008), 392-94.

today's M&T Bank stadium in 1998.<sup>66</sup> They did not however 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>67</sup> Irsay's son Jim, who now ran that franchise, refused to sell rights to the horseshoe logo.<sup>68</sup> John Eisenberg predicted the Ravens could escape the Colts' shadow once they left Memorial Stadium. He recommended they not induct any Colts into a future ROH.<sup>69</sup>

But the Indianapolis Colts still blotted the landscape and occasionally played the Ravens *in Baltimore*. This made it harder to forget the Irsays and easier to back the Ravens, who defeated Indianapolis on the latter's first visit in 1998. Vito Stellino, he of the Bill Nunn award, condemned the Indianapolis media guide, fans unleashed a frenzied anti-homecoming on Colts rookie Peyton Manning and Jim Irsay, and Unitas watched from the Ravens sideline.<sup>70</sup> Before the 1999 season ESPN captured the roar of the crowd whenever live stadium video switched to Unitas at a Ravens game. 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>71</sup>

Gildea, however, had found customers at Club 4100, a haunt for old Colts and fans, who could not oppose the "horseshoe" in 1998.<sup>72</sup> In 1999 Indianapolis journalist George Stuteville reported patrons at Club 4100 cheering for Indianapolis against Washington, though he did not

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<sup>66</sup> Keith Eggener, "The Demolition and Afterlife of Baltimore Memorial Stadium," *Places Journal*, October 2012, <https://doi.org/10.22269/121022>.

<sup>67</sup> Mike Littwin, "It's Just Not the Same: Although Baltimoreans Still Pine for Johnny U and the Old Colts, They're Glad To Have the Ravens," *Sports Illustrated*, 23 December 1996, 106; Steadman, "With All That Colts Have Meant, 'Send-Off' Was a Wound to Heart," *Baltimore Sun*, 21 December 1997, 2C.

<sup>68</sup> Vito Stellino, "Horseshoes Not Likely To Depart Indianapolis," *Baltimore Sun*, 15 June 1997, C10.

<sup>69</sup> Eisenberg, "New Stadium Lays To Rest Ghosts of Past," *Baltimore Sun*, 9 August 1998, 1E.

<sup>70</sup> Stellino, "Indianapolis Can't Claim Legacy of Beloved Colts," *Baltimore Sun*, 28 November 1998, 7E.

<sup>71</sup> *Sports Century: Johnny Unitas*, directed by Chip Rivas (ESPN, 1999).

<sup>72</sup> Gildea, "Root, Root, Root for the Old Team: With Colts in Baltimore, Fans Strike Up the Bond," *Washington Post*, 30 November 1998, A1.

consider if they were rooting more against the local rival Redskins than for the Colts.<sup>73</sup> *That same week* Modell agreed to cede control of the Ravens to Baltimorean Steve Bisciotti. Michael 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>74</sup> It is notable that journalist Ted Patterson included the Ravens in his illustrated history of local football published before their victory in Super Bowl XXXV in January 2001.<sup>75</sup>



**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.**

<sup>73</sup> George Stuteville, "'99 Success Divides Fans of Old Colts," *Indianapolis Star*, 21 December 1999, A1.

<sup>74</sup> Olesker, "Local Pride in Ravens Might Be within Reach," *Baltimore Sun*, 21 December 1999, 1B.

<sup>75</sup> Ted Patterson, *Football in Baltimore: History and Memorabilia from Colts to Ravens* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).

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>76</sup> Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, joining the bandwagon with the narrative he developed during the Modell controversy, compared the Ravens to the Colts.<sup>77</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 proclaimed that the Super Bowl trophy belonged to the people of Maryland.<sup>78</sup> A symbolic resolution by U.S. Senator from Maryland Paul Sarbanes linked the Ravens to the Colts.<sup>79</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. Uinitas died in September 2002. That October, the Ravens dedicated a statue of Uinitas and inducted every Baltimore Colt player in the Hall of Fame to their ROH, a common practice for individual NFL franchises but not across franchises, which has been the case in Baltimore since 1994. Participants at the ceremony included Uinitas' widow from his second marriage, Raymond Berry, Art Donovan, John Mackey, Lenny Moore, and Jim Parker. All except Berry had retired in Baltimore. Ted Hendricks and Gino Marchetti did not attend.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Gildea, “Big Man Is Loose as a Goose: Colts Had Donovan, Ravens Have Siragusa; All's Well in Baltimore,” *Washington Post*, 22 January 2001, D1.

<sup>77</sup> Peter Schmuck, “‘Museum’ Still Hanging over Tagliabue: Five Years after Remark, Commissioner Remains Anathema in Baltimore,” *Baltimore Sun*, 27 January 2001, 4D.

<sup>78</sup> “Super Bowl XXXV,” *Super Bowl Classics*, NFL Network, July 2020.

<sup>79</sup> “S.Res. 15 (107th): A Resolution Congratulating the Baltimore Ravens for Winning the Super Bowl XXXV,” 30 January 2001, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/107/sres15>.

<sup>80</sup> Murray, “Uinitas Statue Unveiled at Ceremony Honoring Colts Hall of Fame Players; No. 19, Seven Teammates Inducted into Ring of Honor,” *Baltimore Sun*, 21 October 2002, 10D.



**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 led Barry Levinson to explain why time alone has been insufficient for die-hard fans to get closure. The problem has 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, and empower hostile actors who wanted to belittle or wipe the Baltimore Colts and their fans from the map.<sup>81</sup> Levinson himself acknowledged the disorientation of having “two Colts:” the home team Ravens and the opponent wearing the “horseshoe.”<sup>82</sup> Yet before the game, Indianapolis journalist Mark Alesia reported the owners of Club 4100 refused to mount a Peyton Manning

<sup>81</sup> Barry Levinson, “Barry Levinson’s Colts Feelings Run Deep,” *Baltimore Sun*, 11 January 2007, 1C.

<sup>82</sup> “Barry Levinson, a Baltimore Football Booster,” NPR.org, 13 January 2007, <https://www.npr.org/2007/01/13/6851907/barry-levinson-a-baltimore-football-booster>.

jersey gifted by Jim Irsay.<sup>83</sup> After the game the Super Bowl V trophy, alumni ceremonies, Unitas statue, and ROH stayed in the city even though the Ravens lost — all subtle evidence of the independence of that heritage 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>84</sup> In 2008 about 80 Colts and Ravens alumni, primarily from Super Bowl V and Super Bowl XXV, participated in an off-season paid autograph event.<sup>85</sup>

Facts-on-the-ground continued to belie the loss of the Baltimore Colts as actual people. Fiftieth anniversary commemorations of the 1958 championship centered on Baltimore. Authors from Baltimore and New York published a collection of essays and memorabilia titled *Sudden Life: 50 Years Ago, A Baltimore Victory Created the Modern NFL*.<sup>86</sup> M&T Bank hosted a gala for fans, Colts, and New York Giants, and Berry, Donovan, Moore, and others appeared at the Ravens game on 28 December 2008 against the Jacksonville Jaguars.<sup>87</sup> 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 but never lost social connections to their Colts and each other.<sup>88</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 Unitas. Gildea and Olesker reflected on the canon and Double Victory, and Vince Bagli marveled that fans loved the Ravens like they had the Colts. Levinson filmed at Club 4100 and the *Almost Religion* exhibit of the Sports Legends Museum at Camden Yards, and closed with Ziemann's Marching Ravens moving through Unitas Plaza. In 2010 *Sports Illustrated's* Frank Deford, a

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<sup>83</sup> Mark Alesia, "Enemy Territory," *Indianapolis Star*, 13 January 2007, A1.

<sup>84</sup> Jamison Hensley, "Piece of History; He Confirms He's Buyer of Unitas Souvenirs; Ravens Owner Steve Bisciotti," *Baltimore Sun*, 27 March 2007, 1E.

<sup>85</sup> Mike Klingaman, "Autograph Event Mixes Past, Present," *Baltimore Sun*, 28 March 2008, Z18.

<sup>86</sup> *Sudden Life: 50 Years Ago, A Baltimore Victory Created the Modern NFL* (Baltimore: Press Box Legends, 2008).

<sup>87</sup> Bill Ordine, "Nothing Like It: Memories of '58; No Other Event in Baltimore Sports Has Come Close to 'Greatest Game,'" *Baltimore Sun*, 27 December 2008, D1.

<sup>88</sup> *The Band That Wouldn't Die*, directed by Barry Levinson (ESPN Films, 2009).

Baltimore native who would win the Red Smith award in 2012, remembered Uinitas to 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 Uinitas 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. Uinitas belonged to us. Absolutely. Completely.<sup>89</sup>

Deford did not mention the Irsay relocation, but by that point he did not need to because Uinitas' personal loyalty to the city had become etched in stone.

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>90</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>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> "#6: Johnny Uinitas," *Top 100: NFL's Greatest Players* (2010) <https://youtu.be/TGyVikPijCc>.

<sup>90</sup> Hillel Kuttler, "Ravens Maintain a History Longer Than Their Existence," *New York Times*, 25 January 2013, B12.

<sup>91</sup> Jeff Zrebiec, "Ravens Owner Steve Bisciotti Confident That Joe Flacco Deal Gets Done," *Baltimore Sun*, 31 January 2013, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/ravens/bal-bisciotti-confident-flacco-deal-gets-done-20130131-story.html>.

Following a raucous victory parade John Eisenberg argued the Ravens had eclipsed the Colts.<sup>92</sup> Similar to Sarbanes in 2001, U.S. Senator Benjamin Cardin counted Super Bowl XLVII as the third for Baltimore as a city.<sup>93</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 when they debuted in 1996. He installed a statue of Lewis next to Unitas' in 2014. Ziemann credited the Marching Band, Corrals, Colts alumni, and Schaefer for bridging the gap to the Ravens and praised Modell for recognizing Colts history.<sup>94</sup> Ravens fans had themselves lived up to the past by creating an unusually strong home field advantage.<sup>95</sup> Gino Marchetti, however, believed Modell barred him from Ravens events for once mauling a Cleveland quarterback.<sup>96</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>97</sup> The Ravens hosted Colts alumni and their families for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 1958.<sup>98</sup>

Unitas et al. set a precedent for other greats mixed up in heritage relocations across the league 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>99</sup> Several Los Angeles Rams and St. Louis Cardinals attended their inaugurations to the

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<sup>92</sup> Eisenberg, "Baltimore's Love for Ravens Has Surpassed Colts," BaltimoreRavens.com, 5 February 2013, <https://www.baltimoreravens.com/news/eisenberg-baltimore-s-love-for-ravens-has-surpassed-colts-9540294>.

<sup>93</sup> "S.Res. 35 (113th): A Resolution Congratulating the Baltimore Ravens for Winning Super Bowl XLVII," 14 February 2013, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/113/sres35>.

<sup>94</sup> Hensley, "30 Years on, Baltimore Better without Colts," ESPN.com, 28 March 2014, [https://www.espn.com/blog/baltimore-ravens/post/\\_/id/8002/30-years-later-baltimore-better-without-colts](https://www.espn.com/blog/baltimore-ravens/post/_/id/8002/30-years-later-baltimore-better-without-colts).

<sup>95</sup> "Which Team Has the Best Home-Field Advantage?" *Time* 186, no. 1-2 (6-13 July 2015), 48-9. Fan-initiated organizations, forums, publications, channels, etc. related to heritage politics are vast and deserve separate analysis.

<sup>96</sup> Klingaman, "Gino Marchetti, Baltimore Colts Legend and Pro Football Hall of Famer, Dies at 93," *Baltimore Sun*, 30 April 2019, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/nfl/bs-sp-colts-marchetti-obit-20190430-story.html>.

<sup>97</sup> "Cleveland Browns 33, Ravens 30 (OT)," BaltimoreSun.com, 11 October 2015, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/sports/ravens/bal-ravens-vs-cleveland-browns-pictures-20151011-photogallery.html>.

<sup>98</sup> Edward Lee, "Suggs Sets Record for Games Played; Outside Linebacker Breaks Team Mark with 229th Game of Career; Lewis Out Again," *Baltimore Sun*, 31 December 2018, D3.

<sup>99</sup> Tony Grossi, "Martin Would Look Good with Browns Right Now," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 20 August 2000, 13C.

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>100</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>101</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>102</sup>

National platforms occasionally recognize Baltimore canon and the Ravens unusual history. A short and recent 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 reflected Baltimore.<sup>103</sup> When Belichick's Patriots played the Ravens in November 2019, *Sunday Night Football* broadcasters Al Michaels and Chris Collinsworth named Unitas and Lenny Moore to a Baltimore 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 defended 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 fleeing town in 1984.<sup>104</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>105</sup> The 2024 Ravens media guide, per usual, included a Baltimore Colts timeline and a photo of a young Bisciotti with Unitas at a Colts training camp.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Los Angeles Coliseum, "Memorial Court of Honor," <https://www.lacoliseum.com/memorial-court-of-honor/>.

<sup>101</sup> Mickey Herskowitz, "For Titans, Tradition Remains an Elusive Commodity," *Houston Chronicle*, 20 December 1999, sports 7.

<sup>102</sup> Young, "Oilers."

<sup>103</sup> "No. 26: 1958 Baltimore Colts," *NFL 100 Greatest Teams*, NFL.com, <https://www.nfl.com/videos/nfl-100-greatest-teams-no-26-1958-baltimore-colts>.

<sup>104</sup> *Bullies of Baltimore*, directed by Ken Rodgers and Jason Weber (ESPN Films, 2023).

<sup>105</sup> Mike Preston, "Baltimore a Football City Like No Other," *Baltimore Sun*, 30 March 2024, D1.

<sup>106</sup> *2024 Baltimore Ravens Media Guide* (Baltimore Ravens, 2024), 428; 8.

#### 4. Indianapolis

Heritage politics from home and abroad disrupted 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>107</sup>

Jim Irsay, however, appeared unable to stage popular heritage ceremonies involving Unitas and most other Baltimore Colts. In 1988 unidentified alumni declined to attend a 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary for the 1958 championship.<sup>108</sup> In 1994 Los Angeles journalist Bill Plaschke, noting that baseball's 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 described how John Ziemann's Marching Band, invited to perform by the Bills, harassed the visiting Indianapolis Colts at a game in Buffalo in 1993 and how Baltimore-based analyst Mel Kiper ridiculed them on ESPN in 1994. In response, an Indianapolis executive pledged to build a separate history.<sup>109</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>110</sup> Peyton Manning was disappointed that old Colts did not associate with the club when he arrived in 1998.<sup>111</sup> Commissioner Paul Tagliabue, upon the death of Unitas in 2002, prohibited Manning from paying tribute by wearing black high-tops.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Murray, "No Sense Kicking About It: Colts' Name Saddled in Indy Sell the Franchise Label? No Way, Says J. Irsay," *Baltimore Sun*, 19 August 1993, 1D.

<sup>108</sup> Rich Cimini, "Old Colts Sack AFC Champs: Baltimore Chops Any Ties to Indy," *New York Daily News*, 29 January 2007, 44.

<sup>109</sup> Bill Plaschke, "Look Back in Anger: Baltimore's Bitterness Over Departure of the Colts Hasn't Lessened," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 September 1994, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1994-09-24-sp-42474-story.html>.

<sup>110</sup> Mike Chappell, "'The Meeting' Big Everywhere But Here," *Indianapolis Star* 13 October 1996, C15.

<sup>111</sup> Callahan, *Johnny U*, 262.

<sup>112</sup> Bob Kravitz, "Manning Will Abide By Silly NFL Mandate," *Indianapolis Star*, 15 September 2002, C1.

The deaths of bitter antagonists Irsay (1997) John Steadman (2001) and John Unitas (2002) cleared the field slightly. The Indianapolis Colts 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>113</sup> Yet the quarterback of the 1975 team, Bert Jones, later called Baltimore their “home.”<sup>114</sup> Next, Berry represented the Colts franchise during Super Bowl XLVI events but later 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>115</sup> At a game against the Giants in 2018 Jim Irsay held a 1958 ceremony involving family from Unitas’ first marriage.<sup>116</sup> One week later Unitas’ second wife attended the 1958 ceremony in Baltimore.<sup>117</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 but otherwise unaffiliated with the NFL.<sup>118</sup>

Jim Irsay also appeared 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>119</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.

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<sup>113</sup> Chappell, “Irsay Has Special Feelings for '75 Colts,” *Indianapolis Star*, 9 November 2009, B6.

<sup>114</sup> Bruce Laird, “Thanks to Baltimore Colts Fans for Supporting Charitable Causes,” *Baltimore Sun* 12 March 2011, <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/bs-xpm-2011-03-12-bs-ed-colts-laird-20110312-story.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Raymond Berry with Wayne Stewart, *All the Moves I Had: A Football Life* (Guilford, Connecticut: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 173; 187.

<sup>116</sup> Indianapolis Colts, “Give it up for our honorary captains,” 23 December 2018, [twitter.com/colts/status/1076909706705289216](https://twitter.com/colts/status/1076909706705289216).

<sup>117</sup> Lee, “Suggs.”

<sup>118</sup> Donna S. Mullinix, “They Kicked Up Heels at Kick-Off Party,” *Indianapolis Star* 27 April 1993, C8.

<sup>119</sup> Morgan, *Glory*, 97-128.

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>120</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>121</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>122</sup> Jim Irsay then ordered just one replica Lombardi Trophy for organization rings rather than two for both franchise victories.<sup>123</sup> Before Indianapolis hosted Super Bowl XLVI journalist Zak Keefer argued Berry, as a Baltimore Colt, should not represent the franchise.<sup>124</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>125</sup> Jim Irsay commissioned one of Peyton Manning in 2017 and authorized a logo involving the Indiana map in 2020.<sup>126</sup> Journalist Joel

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<sup>120</sup> Bob Collins, "Why Pick on Indy, Johnny U?" *Indianapolis Star*, 29 December 1985, 2D.

<sup>121</sup> Kravitz, "Unitas' Death Begs Question: What Will This Irsay's Legacy Be?" *Indianapolis Star*, 13 September 2002, D1.

<sup>122</sup> "H.Res. 130 (110th): Congratulating the National Football League Champion Indianapolis Colts for Winning Super Bowl XLI and for Bringing the City of Indianapolis and the State of Indiana Their First Lombardi Trophy," 6 February 2007, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/110/hres130>.

<sup>123</sup> Associated Press, "Colts Emotional After Getting Super Bowl Rings on Silver Platter," 13 June 2007, <https://www.espn.com/nfl/news/story?id=2903767>.

<sup>124</sup> Zak Keefer, "Former Baltimore Colt Raymond Berry To Present Super Bowl XLVI Trophy," *Indianapolis Star*, 29 December 2011.

<sup>125</sup> "Colts Mailbag - April 23, 2014 (Part Two)," <https://www.colts.com/news/colts-mailbag-april-23-2014-part-two-12899191>.

<sup>126</sup> "New Colts Logos, Looks Join Iconic 'Horseshoe' for 2020 and Beyond," 13 April 2020, <https://www.colts.com/news/uniform-brand-update-2020>.

Erickson in 2021 described how Manning forged a separate identity for Indianapolis, which solved a problem symbolized by photos of Unitas at team facilities.<sup>127</sup>

The bottom line is that Jim Irsay, who died in 2025, did not close 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>128</sup> This post apparently referred to the fact that both cities had franchises. The ROH had Baltimore-era content including Chris Hinton and Ted Marchibroda, who respectively played and coached in both cities, but also “Colts Nation” defined as fans since 1953.<sup>129</sup> The late Unitas remains 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 did 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 with 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. Conclusion

Forty years after the Mayflowers the Irsay family’s change of home territories stands as a franchise relocation but only a partial heritage relocation despite decades of outreach to Unitas et al. Art Modell’s move to Baltimore in 1996 quickly developed into a franchise-only relocation and a forum for Baltimore Colts heritage. Today’s Cleveland Browns adopted the Colors, History, and alumni ceremonies abandoned by Modell in 1999, making the two historic Cleveland Browns different franchises but the same home team. And if the Ravens ever

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<sup>127</sup> Joel A. Erickson, “How Peyton Manning Became the Superstar the Colts Desperately Needed in Indianapolis,” *Indianapolis Star*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/nfl/colts/2021/08/06/peyton-manning-took-colts-new-heights-indianapolis/5388649001/>.

<sup>128</sup> Jim Irsay, “Surreal night 40 years ago,” <https://x.com/JimIrsay/status/1773372525256282148>, 28 March 2024.

<sup>129</sup> *2024 Media Guide: For the Shoe* (Indianapolis Colts, 2024), 485.

relocate, they would probably have to change their helmet logo, which has always featured the letter B.

Baltimore and Colts alumni were the catalysts. As a social institution the Baltimore Colts 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 Irsay relocation after they had become so connected to Baltimore. Still, their willingness to challenge the status quo vindicated ordinary fans, and the home team ideal, in a way few cities experience. Those ideals created the brief but decisive skirmish with Modell in 1995-96 and the Ravens' relationships with Baltimore Colts under both Modell and Steve Bisciotti. But without question a realistic threat lurks that casual and novice followers, even in Baltimore, could one day see Unitas as an Indianapolis Colt. Moreover, pro forma heritage relocations remain the league norm. All this should convince anyone who follows the NFL that the core threat of franchise free agency is to strip a community not of a property but a home team.

### **Afterword (January 2026)**

The Ravens celebrated their 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1975 Baltimore Colts at a game against the Browns in September 2025. Over a dozen Colts participated at the gameday ceremony including Joe Ehrmann, Dan Dickel, Ken Huff, Marshall Johnson, Derrel Luce, Tom MacLeod, Doug Nettles, Howard Stevens, Bob Van Dyne, Stan White, Bruce Laird, Roger Carr, Rick Volk, Lydell Mitchell, John Dutton, George Kunz, and Bert Jones.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Babe Ruth Museum, "Baltimore Ravens Honor 1975 Colts Legends Pre-Game," 9 October 2025, <https://youtu.be/d6MdpMiiMh8?si=c5-3Ry4FyWG0yIB2>.

## Recommended

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8. Stephen R. Lowe, *Kid on the Sandlot: Congress and Professional Sports, 1910-1992* (Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1995).
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