

Bill Newman, bishop and jock, not necessarily in that order

The late Tom Steadman and I nearly came to blows one night at the Babe Ruth Museum.

It was a year or two after the 2001 death of his brother, John, the legendary sports columnist for the News American and then the Evening Sun, may all rest in peace. Talk turned to the University of Notre Dame. The Steadmans worshipped the Fighting Irish. From the day in 1966 when Ara Parseghian had Notre Dame take a knee against Michigan State and Bubba Smith in a tie game to preserve its No. 1 ranking, my father's words about the lack of courage in that coach – and by extension, his program – rang in my head. As the banter got louder, Tom and I both had our Irish up a tad too much.

It was probably a decade before I saw him again, at a 2012 viewing for his sister-in-law, Mary Lee, John's widow. Tom read the Catholic Review, knew I worked there, and wanted me to know one thing: "Bill Newman was a better baseball player than my brother John."

Like the Steadmans, Bishop William C. Newman, who died May 20, came from a family that worshipped at Blessed Sacrament Parish, on Old York Road. John Steadman, two years older than his brother Tom and one year older than Bishop Newman, played minor league baseball before he became a publicist and newspaperman. While Bishop Newman passed on a similar opportunity to play pro ball, he never lost their shared passion for competitive sport.

Patricia Olin, one of his 24 nieces and nephews, loaned me a scrapbook her uncle began in 1946, the year he graduated from Calvert Hall. The Sun of Feb. 9, 1946, recounts his free throw with 45 seconds remaining that lifted the Cardinals to a 25-24 victory over unbeaten and two-time MSA champion St. Paul's.

On the same page in his scrapbook, a Calvert Hall roundup in a Baltimore daily reads: "Big Bill Newman, center on the basketball squad, takes top billing this week.

Besides being an able courtman, Bill also plays varsity baseball, holding down first base for the CHC nine. He hails from Blessed Sacrament along with a whole string of other athletes from that parish. Bill has been an honor student for four years and is secretary of the '46 Graduating Class. One of the most popular fellows around school, he has that never-say-die spirit and a will-to-win that would add spark to any team. Last week Newman appeared on Station WCBM as a guest of sports commentator Eddie Fenton, along with Joe Feinour and Dominic Antonelli, on the 'Scholastic Sports Parade.'"

That spring, Calvert Hall baseball took a backseat to Loyola High, which waited 71 years before claiming another championship in the sport this week. There are a few items about scholastic baseball in the scrapbook, and a lot about the Baltimore Brigade team that won the All-American Amateur Baseball Association junior championship, the AAABA having been formed by aeronautic pioneer Glenn L. Martin.

In a 10-7 win over Washington, before 3,000 on the Ellipse in the nation's capital, Bill Newman had two hits and scored four runs. Tom Steadman, a year behind him at Calvert Hall, came in to pitch relief in the sixth inning to clinch the win and the championship.

The scrapbook includes several copies of Bill Newman's birth certificate, a reminder of an era when players carried ID to prove their age. The very last keepsake is a July 1946 formal invitation to the ordination of Father Joseph M. Scannell. It includes a ticket in Pew 41, and a handwritten note from the priest-to-be: *"It won't be long, Bill. Remember me and I hope to hear from you. Bud."*

Bill Newman began his seminary studies that fall, but did not stop playing baseball, as recalled by Jim Henneman, another jock from Blessed Sacrament and Calvert Hall, class of 1953.

"I was a bat boy for Scherer Lumber Co., a team he played for while he was in seminary," said Henneman, who became a colleague of John Steadman's and still writes for Press Box. "He had the great respect of his teammates. I remember one time being in a car and picking up Bill to go to a game, and the driver, Ed Woelper, cautioning everybody to clean up their language.

“He (Bishop Newman) was a very good hitting first baseman, a righty with power.”

Bishop Newman attended Baltimore Brigade reunions, and kept the minutes of a 1990 gathering that noted: “After a couple of hours of drinks and conversation, Bishop Newman favored the gathered group with a blessing.”

His first assignment of any length was at St. Elizabeth of Hungary in Highlandtown, where the 4-year-old parishioners included Trish (Williams) Cook. When she graduated from Archbishop Keough High School in 1969, she said, “he handed me my diploma.” Cook became a celebrated basketball coach at her alma mater, and several times when her teams played at Notre Dame Prep, Bishop Newman came to watch.

“Year later, he married my husband and I,” Cook said. “Whenever I saw him, we talked baseball.”

Bishop Newman was not afraid to fraternize with the sporting enemy. For decades, morning Mass on Thanksgiving Day before the Calvert Hall-Loyola football game at the Homeland household of Bill and Joanna Baird was a tradition. At first, it was celebrated by Cardinal Lawrence Shehan, her uncle. Later, Bishop Newman accepted the honor, celebrating Mass for a family that sent all six of its sons to Loyola Blakefield.

“I told him,” said Bill Baird, Loyola ’57, “he could celebrate Mass if he didn’t root for Calvert Hall. Seriously, he was a close friend, and we knew he loved sports.”