

Take me out to the ballgame: Oriole Park through the eyes of the team's biggest fan



For those who moonlight as the Oriole Bird, mascot of the Baltimore Orioles, making people smile brings great joy. (Tom McCarthy Jr. | CR Staff)

By Elizabeth Lowe

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Before the first pitch at a home game, Steve Butz walks into the Jamie Parker Room at Oriole Park at Camden Yards to stretch and change into his uniform.

The 39-year-old isn't preparing to take the pitcher's mound or swing a bat.

He is one of four men who moonlight as the Oriole Bird, the Major League Baseball team's ambassador and cheerleader.

As the mercury soared into the mid-90s one night in early July, Butz donned the familiar orange and black furry costume, walked out of the locker room, bounded up a flight of stairs wearing enormous shoes and then onto the concourse as he assumed the Bird's persona.

"Heading out on the concourse, it's like, 'OK here we go,' " Butz said. "You go out there and have fun."

Butz, who earned a doctorate in clinical psychology from Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, is a clinical geropsychologist for the Veterans Administration Maryland Healthcare System. He said his part-time job is a stress reliever.

"When I put the costume on I feel like I become the Oriole Bird," he said. "My demeanor and everything changes."

Dressed as the Bird, Butz sashayed through the park, high-fived and fist-bumped Orioles fans and employees. He danced, signed autographs and playfully posed for numerous photos with children and adults. The Bird doesn't speak, but whistles.

The act elicited smiles from nearly everyone Butz as the Bird encountered, including a tween girl who exclaimed, "I like the Bird, he's cool."

This is Butz' 13th season as the Bird.

"After all these years it is still fun and, to some degree, it still feels new," said the parishioner of St. Joseph in Cockeysville. "Even now it's hard to believe that I have this job. I have a lot of fun. You could technically say I am the Orioles biggest fan."

Michael Nitti, one of Butz's colleagues, said being a professional sports team's mascot is his hobby.

"It's something I care a lot about," said Nitti, a parishioner of St. Casimir in Canton and the multimedia communications coordinator at Loyola Blakefield in Towson. "You get a job as a professional mascot and you're not going to turn it down. I was in awe that it would even happen."

While being the Bird is fun, both men admit hot summer days are tiring.

"People might not realize there's a human behind that suit and he's walking around and staying in character," said Nitti, in his third season as the Bird. "It's physically draining, but I love doing it. It is a hard job to nail."

Both Nitti and Butz came to the Orioles with mascot experience.

Nitti performed as Doc for the Towson University Tigers from 2008 to 2012. Butz was True Grit for the University of Maryland, Baltimore County Retrievers from 1994 to 1997.

In addition to attending baseball games, the Bird makes appearances at private parties, fundraisers and community events. A mascot's job is easier when the team is winning, and the Orioles held a 4-game lead in the AL East coming out of the All-Star break.

"Now that they (the Orioles) have been winning the last few years, the crowds are more into the game, they're more into the Bird," he said. "The enthusiasm is there."

Butz and Nitti relish when the Bird makes children smile.

"I'm a sucker for little kids, little girls with their dads," said Nitti, 23. "You want to stop and see every kid."

"To see the smiles on the kid's faces, to know you helped make their night, it's a really nice feeling," Butz said. "The majority of the children light up. They love the Bird."

In costume, Butz said it's easy to act goofy and dance. He particularly enjoys the seventh-inning stretch, when the Bird stands on the dugout during John Denver's "Thank God I'm a Country Boy." He likes to rally the crowds, lead fans in cheers and spell O-R-I-O-L-E-S.

"There's so many things about the Bird that are just fun," Butz said. "You're like a mini celebrity that nobody knows. At the end of the day, I pass those same people walking out of the stadium and they have no idea who I am."

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