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**Two Occasional Pieces
“Big Red”
and
“October Surprise”**

Presented to the SpheX Club of Lynchburg, Virginia
April 2, 2009

By Marc A. Schewel

These two “occasional pieces” from his blog were given by Mr. Schewel, when the club’s previously scheduled speaker could not appear due to an unexpected medical condition.

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Marc Schewel is a native of Lynchburg, VA. He graduated from E. C. Glass High School in 1965 and from Washington and Lee University in Lexington, VA in 1969.

Except for a brief teaching tenure at Appomattox High School, Mr. Schewel has worked all his adult life at Schewel Furniture Company, where he is currently president. Schewel Furniture Company is a retail furniture chain with 50 stores in Virginia, North Carolina, and West Virginia. Mr. Schewel and his brother and sister are the fourth generation to own and operate this family business which celebrated its 110th anniversary in 2007.

Mr. Schewel is involved in numerous community service activities. He is currently Chairman of the Lynchburg Jewish Community Council and the Alliance for Families and Children. He is past chairman of the New Vistas School Board of Trustees, past President of the YMCA, past President of the Southern Home Furnishings Association, past Chairman of the National Conference for Community and Justice, and past Chairman of the Salvation Army Advisory Board. He currently serves on the Boards of Randolph College, the Salvation Army, Centra Health, the YMCA, and the United Way of Central Virginia.

Mr. Schewel is a recipient of the John Willis Award of Merit, the NCCJ Humanitarian Award, the Mayor’s Award of Excellence, the George Taylor Stewart Award, and the Paul Harris Fellow Award.

Mr. Schewel is married to Margaret Hiller Strain, formerly of Wilmington, DE. He is the father of three children: David, 33; Sara, 31, and Matthew, 27, and of two stepdaughters: Kali Strain, 26, and Adreienne Strain, 24. In his spare time Mr. Schewel enjoys running, reading, and writing on his blog, “My Occasional Pieces.”

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MY OCCASIONAL PIECES

SATURDAY, MAY 10, 2008

Big Red



One morning last week, exiting the YMCA, I found my Taurus wedged between a Ford Expedition and a Lincoln Navigator. It was like being in a tunnel, since my roof barely nudged the bottom of their side windows. The fact that I even noticed this and then grimaced in disgust is symptomatic of my current obsession with these heavyweights of the highway -- commonly known as sport utility vehicles, or, in carspeak, suvs. (I refuse to dignify the acronym by capitalizing it.)

This distraction materialized about ten days ago during a pleasant drive in that very same Taurus to a meeting in Greensboro, N.C., when the conversation among my advertising director, my case goods buyer, and me drifted to the current price of gasoline, prompted no doubt by its all-too-frequent, in-your-face roadside display, which, like a boxer's relentless jab, stings a little more with each successive round.

I made the bold statement that the American public is merely paying

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ABOUT ME

MARC SCHEWEL

I try to write literary autobiographical essays that others will find interesting.

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the price for a luxury it couldn't afford, fifty years of cheap oil, upon which its culture and economy has been precariously constructed like a house of cards and buttressed by governmental myopia. "It amuses me how politicians and pundits patriotically fly the flag of energy independence, yet promote policies which encourage consumption and deter conservation," I said. Of course, my companions asked for specifics.

"First of all," I said, "zoning regulations, by prohibiting mixed residential and business land usage, have created communities and a lifestyle dependent on the automobile. Americans have been shoehorned -- admittedly, by choice -- into footprints which require them to drive from their home to just about every destination: their place of work, the grocery store, their children's school, and their favorite department or discount store.

"Secondly, when gas prices were artificially low -- below the rate of inflation -- which they have been for thirty years, since the oil spike of the seventies, the federal government should have gradually raised gasoline taxes, which not only would have had the effect of suppressing demand, but also would have generated revenues which could have been invested in mass transit systems and alternative energy sources. Higher gas prices would have made both of these options more economically viable and attractive to public and private investors.

"And, finally, bowing to pressure from manufacturers and labor unions, Congress failed to require higher gas mileage for automobiles sold in the United States, which consequently continue to guzzle gasoline at excessive rates. This flawed policy was further exacerbated by allowing the Corporate Average Fuel Economy (CAFE) for vehicles classified as light trucks to be set at a level 20 per cent lower than the CAFE for cars (20.7 mpg compared to 25.7 mpg) - and by allowing suvs of all shapes and sizes to be so classified -- a revelation which would probably surprise many of their owners, whose luxuriously-appointed tanks -- at least in their minds -- bear faint resemblance to a hog farmer's pick-up. The federal government's insistence on preserving strict (and higher -- but not high enough) gas-mileage standards for cars (as opposed to light trucks) while not raising gasoline taxes paved the way for the surfeit of gas-hungry suvs on America's highways. (Bradsher, p. 42)

"The sport utility vehicle," I humbly concluded, "is, in my opinion, the most egregious, indulgent, and extravagant manifestation of America's addiction to cheap oil, and one of the most obscene frauds ever perpetrated on a gullible public."

This conversation had three sequels. I began noticing suvs everywhere I turned. I checked out a book from the library (Barnes and Noble didn't have a copy, naturally) which I had spotted in an airport bookstore about a year ago: "High and Mighty: SUVs -- The World's Most Dangerous Vehicles and How They Got That Way," by Keith Bradsher. And I remembered Big Red.

I have never shared the love of so many of my friends and acquaintances for suvs. I have never considered them attractive or comfortable, and, for an object which is supposedly an expression of one's individuality, I find that they exude a soporific similarity -- big, boxy, and boring. I take pride in my ability to identify generations of Camrys, Altimas, Fusions, Tauruses, Accords, Impalas, Malibus, Three Hundreds, CTS's, LS430's, 530's, and C320's, but it is indeed a daunting task to try to distinguish among the variety of suvs that stalk me these days: execrable Explorers, esurient Escalades, chauvinistic Cherokees, domineering Durangos, sinister Suburbans, terrifying Tahoes, ferocious Four Runners, mordant Mountaineers, predatory Pathfinders, noxious Navigators, and -- for lack of any better alliterative adjective -- yucky Yukons -- to name a few.

Like a defenseless quarterback whose pocket has collapsed, I am surrounded by these blitzing behemoths. Every morning the diminutive 4'10" lady who lives across the street climbs aboard her wide-bodied white Trailblazer to drive to work. Two of my neighbors -- neither of whom have any children at home to fill up the rear seats or cargo area -- each own a pair of suvs: one a Mercedes M-Class and an Explorer; the other a Navigator and a Liberty. A week ago I was flabbergasted by the sheer size and menacing appearance of a black Cadillac Escalade ESV taking up two parking spaces on Main Street, only to be similarly mesmerized at seeing its monstrous twin (white this time) lurking in front of the Atlantis Hotel on Paradise Island, where, by the way, the herd of suvs guzzling \$6-a-gallon gas and prowling its narrow, pedestrian-lined streets seems ridiculously wasteful and dangerous. And last Wednesday, as we were leaving a meeting at Lynchburg College, I was commiserating with a friend on how the high price of gasoline was affecting our

businesses, only to be disillusioned and dumstruck when he hoisted his 250-lb frame into a 2008 Navigator, beside which my 1983 RX-7 looked like a peanut.

Four-dollar-a-gallon gas may finally be putting the brakes on America's incorrigible infatuation with the SUV. Chevrolet Trail Blazer sales slumped 73% in April, while Ford's SUV sales dropped 36% -- although consumers have been known to re-embrace bigness once their initial shock at the pump dissipates and prices stabilize. Regardless of new SUV sales, there will continue to be millions on the highway as their penetration of the new vehicle market approached 20% -- three million a year -- over the past decade.

The introduction of the four-door Jeep Cherokee in 1984 launched the SUV boom, which, coincidentally, was the same year automakers were required to raise the average fuel economy of its cars to 27.5 mpg (up from 13 mpg in 1975 and 18 mpg in 1978). To meet these standards, front and back ends were shrunk to reduce weight, and profiles were lowered to improve aerodynamics. Middle-class families craving their traditional, roomy, full-size sedans flocked to the Cherokee and to the Ford and Chevrolet clones -- the Explorer and Blazer -- which followed on its heels in 1990. These vehicles -- along with Chrysler's popular minivans -- could be certified as light trucks as long as they "had a flat floor extending from behind the front seat to the back of the vehicle, with seats that could be removed with simple tools," and, as such, were permitted an average fuel economy of 20.5 (later 20.7) mpg. (Bradsher, pp.38-39)

During the 1990s, the popularity of SUVs exploded, abetted by faulty governmental policies. In 1990, automakers, car dealers, and the UAW joined forces to engineer the defeat of a bill sponsored by Nebraska Senator Bill Bryan that would have raised the Corporate Average Fuel Economy for cars to 38.5 mpg and for light trucks to 28.7 mpg; Bryan was concerned about the nation's reliance on imported oil, about global warming, and about the poor fuel economy of cars being driven huge distances by his Nebraska constituents. Two years later the UAW pressured then-candidate Bill Clinton to back away from his campaign pledge "to raise the average goal for automakers to 45 miles per gallon." (Bradsher, pp.62-68)

In 1984 Congress limited the tax deduction on vehicles used by the self-employed and the owners of small businesses to \$17,500 and

increased their write-off period from three to five years. Light trucks with a gross weight over 6000 lbs., however, were exempt; buyers could still write off their entire purchase price, and as much as half the first year. (In 2004, the write-off for cars was capped at \$10,610 and for light trucks at \$25,000.) In 1990, Congress exempted those same light trucks from a ten per cent luxury tax imposed on vehicles costing more than \$30,000. Tax incentives to increase the size and weight of suvs were now firmly in place. (Bradsher, pp. 73-74)

Congress granted suvs another legislative perquisite in the Clean Air Act of 1990. Beginning in 1994, new cars were restricted to 0.4 grams of nitrogen oxide emissions per mile, while light trucks were allowed 0.7 grams and some full-size suvs and pick-ups 1.1 grams. This special treatment encouraged automakers to build larger, fully-loaded suvs with bigger engines (which could legally spew more pollutants into the atmosphere); the suv share of the extremely profitable luxury market grew exponentially from 5% in 1990 to 56% in 1996. (Bradsher, pp. 75-77)

In his book "High and Mighty," author Bradsher verifies what I have long suspected: that suvs -- which, by definition, have four-wheel drive and are capable of operation off-road, where, incidentally, only ten per cent of their owners ever take them -- are less comfortable than cars and less practical for everyday use. They must have tall wide wheel wells to accomodate severe bouncing during off-road driving and underbodies (and passenger compartment floors) high enough to avoid off-road obstacles -- both of which reduce usable space inside the vehicle. (Bradsher, p.52) Automakers have addressed this problem by making suvs bigger and heavier, an elaboration which is greatly facilitated by their manufacturing process.

While almost all cars today have a unit body -- that is, the underbody, sides, and roof form a single unit -- suvs and light trucks employ a body-on-frame architecture -- except for the Jeep Cherokee, which has a "uniframe." Two square, hollow, sixteen-foot steel rails placed three feet apart and laced with seven crossbeams constitute the frame or foundation, to which are attached the suspension, wheels, fuel tank, fuel lines, and brakes. The truck's sides, hood, and roof are assembled and welded separately to form the body, in which are installed head- and tail-lights, steering wheel, seats, dashboard, windows, and carpeting. Ultimately, body meets

frame, and the two are attached with twelve thick steel screws and bolts. (Bradsher, pp. 85-86)

The result is a vehicle that is heavy, rigid, capable of towing a lot of weight -- and tons of trouble. The steel rails in the underbody are stiffer and less yielding than a car body's side and front panels. While outweighing cars and minivans by as much as four thousand pounds, the suv has scarcely more sheet metal to cushion this weight upon impact. Its larger engine barely crumples in a crash and absorbs little energy. These factors make it more dangerous than other vehicles in front end collisions, although its height does provide more interior protection when it is hit from the side. "Suv occupants have as high a death rate as car occupants or even higher" -- by 11 per cent, according to a 2004 NHTSA report. "The reason lies in the nemesis of high-riding vehicles: rollovers." (Bradsher, pp. 145-148)

The higher a vehicle's center of gravity in relation to its wheel track -- the distance left to right between its wheels -- the more likely it is to flip over in a crash. And all suvs have this design flaw. In the 1990s, suvs rolled over three times more often than cars, five times per 100 crashes compared to 1.7 times per 100 crashes. More recently, this ratio has fallen to two-to-one, an improvement attributable to the increased size of many models and to the installation of a stability control device. This device helps prevent rollovers on flat surfaces, but is not effective when a car is tripped, which is the cause of ninety per cent of rollovers. (Bradsher, pp. 150-151)

"Tripping occurs when a vehicle strikes a curb, guard rail, lower riding car, or other obstacle, and then flips over." It can also take place when one side of the vehicle slips from a low friction surface like pavement onto a high friction surface like a gravel road shoulder. An suv's mediocre handling (and, in older models, inferior brakes) can make it difficult to keep on the road in certain adverse conditions or emergency situations; once "tripped," its high center of gravity increases the odds of a rollover. (Bradsher, pp.151-152)

Needless to say, this type of accident is extremely hazardous. Rollovers total less than one per cent of the crashes in the United States, but are the cause of a quarter of the traffic deaths -- more than from side and rear impacts combined. In the 1990s, the Ford Explorer had a rollover death rate of 39 per million registered vehicles compared to 14 per million registered midsize cars (and 15

per million registered Jeep Cherokees, whose uniframe design makes it the safest of all suvs). In addition, two state studies indicated that rollovers, which put extraordinary strain on necks and spines, may account for three-quarters of those states' traffic-related cases of paralysis. (Bradsher, pp. 161,151)

The weight and design of suvs make them lethal weapons in collisions with lighter, lower vehicles. In such a crash, the heavier vehicle tends to transfer the violence of the impact -- and the injuries and the fatalities -- to the lighter vehicle, and even more forcefully if it has an elevated, rigid front end that does not crumple easily when struck. (Bradsher, pp.169-170)

Cars are required to have bumpers 16 to 20 inches off the ground; suvs and other light trucks are exempt from this rule, and automakers have mounted their bumpers considerably higher. (Bradsher, p.184) If one measures the height of a vehicle's bottom exterior panel below the doors, suvs have the highest average height, 15.4 inches, while subcompact cars the lowest, 6.9 inches. "Suv sit almost eight inches higher than mid-sized cars -- a geometric incompatibility that permits the suv to override any side structure in a car and directly strike its occupants." (Bradsher, p. 188.)

Indeed, suvs' crash incompatibility with other vehicles, based on their aggressive design, is borne out by statistics. In 2003 and 2004, light trucks (suv, vans, and pick-ups) were involved in 30% more fatal crashes per 100,00 miles than cars. In 2004, they were involved in fatal two-vehicle crashes with passenger cars at nearly three times the rate of passenger cars. (Wikipedia, Criticism of SUVs) Tests have shown that when an suv hits a car in the side, the driver of the struck car is almost five times more likely to be killed than if he had been struck by another passenger car. (Bradsher, p. 188)

The shape, height, and stiffness of suvs make them more dangerous in pedestrian collisions. Cars typically hit pedestrians low and flip them onto their hoods, which are soft enough to minimize serious injury. The tall, stiff front ends of suvs tend to strike children and short adults in the chest or head, and, in some cases, run over them. Suv will more often back over people in driveways, especially children, who are not tall enough to be seen out their rear windows. From 1995 to 2000, large suvs killed 10.6% of the pedestrians they hit in the United States, while minivans and cars killed 5% (and mid-

sized and small suvs 6.6%). (Bradsher, pp. 231-234)

Drivers who believe themselves invulnerable are the most careless, and the common misconception that an suv's ride height and four-wheel drive make it safer than other vehicles only compounds its structural deficiencies. The former's expanded sight lines and feeling of control are merely corollaries of the vehicle's dangerously high center of gravity. The latter is "a fairly modest technology of little use to the average motorist" -- and treacherous to those who overestimate its capabilities. (Bradsher, p.128)

Four-wheel drive enables a vehicle to "track," that is, to keep moving forward on a slippery surface; it is useful for plowing through deep snow or mud, descending a steep, unpaved path without applying the brakes, and accelerating on icy, snowy roads -- conditions which occur so rarely around here that suv owners have been known to stage rallies at the first sign of frozen precipitation. An unintended consequence of this amenity is that the driver may not realize a road is slippery until he tries to apply the brakes, in which case his four-wheel drive is doing him more harm than good. (Bradsher, pp.130-131)

"Four-wheel drive provides no benefit whatsoever when the driver hits the brakes, because the engine immediately stops supplying power to the wheels. Indeed, suvs tend to have longer stopping distances than cars." They are heavier and higher off the road, which means their weight leans forward more and their front tires have to do most of the work. (Bradsher, p.129) Many are equipped with "macho" tires, whose wide, deep grooves have less traction on a paved road. (Bradsher, p.133)

Four-wheel drive does not help an suv turn when it is traversing a slippery surface. "Once the tires start slipping sideways, it makes little difference whether the engine is driving four wheels or two." (Bradsher, p.129)

Suvs are not as agile or maneuverable as cars. With their high centers of gravity and off-road tires, they lumber around curves awkwardly. What is merely an inconvenience on winding roads "can turn deadly when a motorist must swerve to avoid another vehicle, a pedestrian, or some other hazard." (Bradsher, pp.141-142) "The bottom line is that in every measurement of dynamic ability on

pavement, cars outperform trucks," wrote Csaba Csere, editor-in-chief of Car and Driver magazine, in 1998." (Bradsher, p. 143)

Suvs obstruct visibility on city streets and highways. Their height often prevents a trailing car driver from seeing through to traffic ahead. Their higher-mounted headlights cast a bright glare on incoming cars and in rear-view mirrors. They are too big and heavy for some aging roads and bridges. They make traffic congestion worse; in traveling through an intersection, a large suv takes up as much space as 1.41 cars, a mid-size as much as 1.14 cars, and a small suv as much as 1.07 cars. They are magnets for thieves and carjackers. (Bradsher, pp. 224-230)

It is no secret why automakers want to sell suvs; they are their most profitable product. Analysts estimated that in 1998 Ford was making a fat \$12,000 on every Expedition it sold at \$36,000 and \$15,000 on every \$45,000 Navigator. (Bradsher, pp. 84-85) That year its Wayne, Michigan, Truck Plant alone cranked out almost 300,000 of these luxury four-wheelers, grossing \$11 billion and earning \$3.7 billion in pre-tax profits. (Of course, since then, FMC has fallen on harder times.) (Bradsher, pp.88-89)

But why is it that so many people lust for these unattractive, inefficient, impractical, and dangerous vehicles?

G. C. Rapaille, a psychological consultant to the auto industry, says Americans -- inundated daily with violent images on television, video games, and the Internet -- are increasingly fearful of crime. "People buy suvs," he tells automakers, "because they want to look as menacing as possible to allay their fears of crime and violence." This instinct for survival is further illustrated by their willingness "to put other drivers at risk in order to diminish the odds that they will be injured in a crash . . . But suvs cannot just look macho and aggressive on the outside, Rapaille believes. Inside they must be as gentle, feminine, and luxurious as possible" -- to reflect their passengers' complementary instinct for reproduction. (Bradsher, pp. 95-100)

Research indicates that suv buyers are more concerned with how others see them than with what is practical. Honda executive Thomas Elliott says, "They are buying the image first, and then the functionality." Ed Golden, a design director for Ford, says, "It's an image vehicle, an suv. It says something about your lifestyle."

(Bradsher, p.103)

That image is all about control, preparedness, and eternal adolescence. Suv owners want to make the statement that "I'm in control of the people around me," says GM engineer Fred Schaafsma. "Providing that feeling of control is why automakers mount the seats in sport utilities higher than the seats in minivans," a feature that appeals more to women than men. (Bradsher, p.104)

Four-wheel drive reinforces the image of preparedness. According to Ford strategist Jim Bulin, it says "the weather is not going to get in my way; the curbs are not going to get in my way; other vehicles that ride lower to the road are not going to get in my way." (Bradsher, p.106)

Owning an suv provides baby boomers the reassurance that they haven't really changed that much from the days of their youth. "It says: I'm adventurous . . . I'm still virile." (Bradsher, p. 106)

Perhaps no one expresses this passion better than April, the popular homecoming princess sitting at the wheel of her family's red Suburban in the parking lot of her Los Angeles high school. "I love big trucks because they just look cool and have big tires," she says, speaking for the next generation of suv owners. "I'll go behind bushes and along the railroad tracks . . . I drive to school every day. I feel safe. I feel like I'm the queen of the road because I'm up high and can see everything for miles . . . Up here I'm probably six foot ten . . . I love it. It just makes me feel powerful. If someone disses me, I can tailgate the crap out of them." (Bradsher, pp.342-343)

I'm not sure if that's what my eighteen-year-old son, David, was thinking when he convinced my wife Maggie (and me) to fork out \$10,000 for a 1990 (?) Jeep Cherokee Wrangler fourteen years ago. I had tried for months to sell him on the virtues -- fuel efficiency, handling, performance -- of a stodgy low-slung Legacy, Taurus, or Camry, a wheel-spinning exercise in futility, as he had his sights as stubbornly fixated on an suv as I had had on a muscle car thirty years earlier. The quest for the perfect ride took his stepmother and him west, naturally, to Roanoke; the return trip would add the first sixty of many more miles to an odometer already registering a bloated eighty thousand, the bearer of which my cynical wife would immediately christen with the licentious tag "Big Red."

It wasn't all that big, and some panels were as gray-speckled as a middle-aged parent, but it was what number-one son wanted, and he embraced it like (or instead of) a steady girl friend, ignoring some rather obvious blemishes: an unresponsive steering mechanism as loose as a yo-yo; a rough ride that bucked like an angry bronco (no pun intended); a passenger side door that jammed like a pickle jar; and the lingering odor of stale cigarette smoke.

If I had known then what I know now -- the esoteric vocabulary of trippings, rollovers, high centers of gravity, and crash compatibilities -- I would never have permitted my son to overburden this abomination on wheels with all his college paraphernalia (and a few articles of clothing) and motor nine hundred miles to Northwestern University -- not once, but several times during the course of his remaining two or three years there. I am amazed that it managed to survive the snow, sleet, hail, and ice of those brutal Chicago winters with no more dents and bruises than it already flaunted; and I never even thought to inquire of my son if the much-abused four-wheel drive had, after all, demonstrated its utility.

In our economically-minded family, automobiles are passed from sibling to sibling -- and, in some cases, from generation to generation. Therefore, upon David's relocating to New York City, where, according to the decider, me, he did not need a car, at least initially, "Big Red" was bequeathed to his sister Sara for a brief spell, and from her to his stepsister Kali, who was so enamored of it that she later cajoled her mother and me into purchasing a black iteration for her own exclusive use. Meanwhile, "Big Red's" penchant for urban life reasserted itself; David insisted he needed a means of transportation for various extra-city junkets and summarily reclaimed his prize.

The Jeep's reputation as a prime target of grand theft auto was sadly confirmed one night when some youthful but savvy lawbreakers managed to dislodge the foolproof steering wheel lock -- ominously trademarked "The Club" -- hotwired the ignition, and took themselves on a spirited joyride through the streets of the Upper East Side. When the engine quietly expired from fuel exhaustion, they abandoned their booty to a fate unknown -- until New York's finest identified and located the rightful owner.

The cost of recovering the vehicle from impoundment and storage probably exceeded its market value, but sentimentality and nostalgia trumped all rational thinking. It was still in one piece, but for David the sweetness of first love had suddenly turned sour, and, like an experienced bachelor, he set his sights on a more mature running mate. Coincidentally, his younger stepsister, Adrienne, had by now graduated to driving age; he pawned "Big Red" off for the fourth time and replaced it with a nondescript white Taurus, itself a veteran of 100,000 miles, which I purchased for him off a Schewel lease.

Adrienne was always astute beyond her years (she wasn't called "A" for nothing), not one to be lulled into complacency by a fresh coat of paint -- and never reticent. From her first settling in behind the wheel, she volubly disparaged the Jeep's high-riding instability, its tendency to lean into every turn, its loopy steering, and its collapsible brakes. But she bravely soldiered on, driving it to school, softball, tennis, and track -- she was always a three-letter threat -- and occasionally out of town.

Thus it should have come as no surprise when I received a jarring telephone call from my remarkably-composed wife one dreary late-summer afternoon, informing me that Adrienne was in serious condition in a Petersburg hospital, that she was on her way to Petersburg herself, and that I should follow as soon as possible. Adrienne had been returning from a family vacation in Nags Head, and, indeed, the accident waiting to happen had happened.

A light rain had dampened the road, and apparently the Jeep fishtailed. Its left wheels slipped off the low-friction surface of the pavement and encountered the higher-friction surface of the shoulder. When Adrienne tried to regain the pavement, she overcorrected, aided no doubt by the villainous steering; the vehicle tripped, rolled over across the highway, bounced into a ravine, and came to a stop only after its roof struck a tree, scraping off fifteen feet of bark.

The gods of chance, peeking through the dense cloud cover, were merciful that day. Although one religiously and repeatedly praises the merits of seat-belt safety, one never knows if the youngsters are paying attention. Adrienne was tossed about like a rag doll, but, thanks to her obedient nature and the waist and shoulder harness, never left the front seat. Aside from shock, some nasty bruises, and a

bang-upped knee, from which she and her college athletic career never fully recovered, she emerged unscathed.

In spite of her drug-induced delirium, Adrienne was lucid enough to lament the loss of her sunglasses and begged me to try to locate them. I finally tracked down "Big Red" in a junkyard tucked away in the remote flatlands of Dinwiddie County. Gazing at the wreckage in uneasy contemplation, I felt perversely saddened at its demise (probably because I didn't have collision insurance), relieved that the frightful consummation of my failure to heed Adrienne's warnings had not been more disastrous, and amazed that she had escaped with such minor injuries. The driver's-side door had been cleanly amputated; the windshield and rear window had burst into smithereens; and the roof on the passenger's side had been crushed like cardboard. The interior was a miniature landfill of broken glass, twisted metal, and ripped cushioning, among which no sunglasses were discernible.

Having no use for the permanently-disabled vehicle at this point, and clueless as to its salvage value, I was at the mercy of the junkyard owner, a lean, grizzled, chain-smoking rustic. When he offered to buy what was left of "Big Red" for \$500, I speedily acquiesced, even though that amount hardly approached the inflated \$2000 he had charged me to tow the remains from the accident site. At least I could take comfort in the knowledge that one more roguish roadkiller had reached the end of its ignominious career without inflicting permanent damage to life or limb.

Jeep Cherokees and other suvs are much improved in design and safety since "Big Red" and its cousins were birthed in the late 1980's. And, rejecting this lengthy diatribe, millions of proud, lofty suv owners will no doubt defend their favored mode of transportation ad infinitum. But, in my opinion, to echo Keith Bradsher's concluding words, "For most families, suvs are poor substitutes for cars . . . As they have multiplied in the United States and beyond, they have fed an arms race that has made the world's roads less and less hospitable for car drivers, worsening a trend that hurts safety and the environment alike." (Bradsher, p. 426) But, maybe, before long, with gas prices steadily ticking upward, suv junkies will come to their senses, trade in their delusions of grandeur for practicality and economy, and bring this stiff-bodied war to a screeching halt.

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MY OCCASIONAL PIECES

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 31, 2007

October Surprise

Although my workout regimen on the Cybex equipment at the YMCA -- which I tackle two or three days a week -- is not particularly strenuous (I haven't increased the weights in ten years, nor do I subscribe to the well-substantiated theory that slower is better), I have a tendency to loiter between machines and daydream, examining bodies both shapely and not or gazing at one of the silent but scrawling televisions perched above the crowd.

I was in just such a pose about a week ago -- actually the eve of World Series Game One -- when I saw it, at least the end of it: ESPN's countdown of the ten most memorable moments in World Series history (filched from the Internet I later determined). I stood entranced, expectant, fascinated, wondering whether the mysterious individuals whose judgments on these matters are accepted as gospel had been sufficiently perspicacious to overcome their natural bias towards more recent, personally-witnessed events and anoint the proper champion.

And when, suddenly, it flashed up on the screen, the grand finale of the dramatic seventh game of the bizarre 1960 World Series, its grainy black-and-white footage flickering like an old newsreel, I could barely contain my emotions. "Yes!" I wanted to shout to the pained, perspiring, panting masses, immersed in their exertions (and i-pods) and oblivious to the ephemeral imagery on display. "Look up, sports fans. I was there -- at the greatest World Series game ever played," I silently exhorted, the hyperbole rolling off my silver tongue as glibly as if it were Howard Cosell's.

Those of you who may have read on this blog my defense of Barry Bonds and my lamentation on September will know by now that I am a baseball fan, infatuated and intrigued by (not to reprise myself): the perfect symmetry of the game -- nine positions, nine innings,

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ABOUT ME

MARC SCHEWEL

I try to write literary autobiographical essays that others will find interesting.

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three strikes, three outs, four balls, four bases; the unique physical and mental confrontation between pitcher and batter; the pristine beauty of the delicately manicured field, its green and sandy areas in bold contrast, upon which each player has staked out his exclusive territory; the graceful agility of a pitcher in motion, a batter unleashing his power, a diving shortstop, a fleet-footed outfielder; the seemingly endless, but nevertheless too soon concluded, 162-game season, necessary to separate the contenders from the pretenders; the mesmerizing statistical record -- of every pitch, every at-bat, every play, every game -- posted and archived for cowhide devotees to ponder and analyze.

The numbers are what lured me to baseball; it certainly wasn't athletic proficiency, since I lacked the strength, speed, and coordination to play it -- or any other sport -- at even a mediocre level. As a youngster, I could always withdraw from the playing field to the printed word -- I was a child let loose in a candy store after I learned to read, sampling one tasty treat after another -- a refuge that became more problematic when I was sent away to summer camp in the White Mountains of West Virginia at the tender age of eight. There I was thrust into a gaggle of budding baseball enthusiasts, who were not only reasonably adept at hitting, fielding, and throwing -- and these were Jewish kids to boot -- but also amazingly well-versed in all sorts of Major League trivia. When camp lights went out, they would chatter on incessantly about teams, players, and averages, conversation to which I had nothing to contribute.

Upon returning home, I resolved never again to find myself adrift in a sea of sports ignorance -- even if I couldn't play the game. I embarked on a voyage of self-education, investing as much time and energy in baseball lore and current events as I did in school work, and thus became a fan. I was first out the door every morning to retrieve the newspaper, not for the front page, but for the comics, the sports section, and the box scores. I became an avid collector and trader of baseball cards, revelling in the statistics of even obscure players. I learned how to keep score, diligently recording hits and putouts on composition paper as reported by Dizzy Dean and Pee Wee Reese on their Saturday Game of the Week. And I would listen to AM radio broadcasts while lying in bed in the dead of night, including the remarkable performance of Pittsburgh Pirate Harvey Haddix when, on May 29, 1959, he pitched twelve perfect innings

against the Milwaukee Braves, only to lose in the thirteenth.

Of course, every baseball fan -- especially a burgeoning one--needs a team to root for. Inaugerating a personal foible that persists to this day, I became hopelessly enamoured of two lovable losers: the Washington Senators in the American League, probably because their home was closest to my own (or maybe it was their early sixties eclectic flavor: who could ever forget Camilio Pascual and Pedro Ramos?) and the Pittsburgh Pirates in the National League -- in their case because my mother hailed from the Pittsburgh area and whose father, as she was fond of relating, was a diehard Pirate fan who himself had played semi-professional baseball. Sadly, this family athletic gene expired permanently with his death from a heart attack in 1955.

If you were attracted to underdogs, the Pirates were an insightful choice. From 1950 through 1959, they averaged 61 wins and 93 losses, finished last five times, and posted winning records only in 1958 and 1959. Their one star, slugger Ralph Kiner, the League leader in home runs from 1946 to 1952, was traded the next year to the the Chicago Cubs after a contract dispute with General Manager Branch Rickey, who told him the Pirates could finish in last place without him.

But before he himself was fired in 1955, Rickey had laid the foundation for a competitive team: moving the quick, nimble Bill Mazeroski from shortstop to second base, where he became, according to statistician guru Bill James, the position's premier defensive player; shipping diminutive reliever Elroy Face to Double A New Orleans in 1954 to learn to throw a forkball (today the split-finger fastball); drafting the gifted Puerto Rican outfielder, Roberto Clemente, from the Brooklyn Dodger's farm system; and signing Duke basketball All-American Dick Groat and the two pitchers who would become the backbone of the staff, Vernon Law and Bob Friend.

Although these capsule descriptions I have borrowed from William Nack's October 23, 2000, Sports Illustrated article, the names are as familiar to me today as my own children's, as well as others added by Rickey's successor, Joe Brown: the catching tandem of left-handed hitting Smokey Burgess and righty Hal Smith; the "fiery third baseman," Don Hoak; the aforementioned "wiry, chain-smoking Harvey Haddix, a crafty lefty nicknamed the Kitten because he had

studied at the paw of St. Louis Cardinal veteran Harry (the Cat) Breechen"; the "sweet-fielding, bespectacled" Bill Virdon, also a former Cardinal; the well-traveled minor leaguer Rocky Nelson, mistaken by one of Brown's colleagues for television wonderboy Ricky Nelson; and the "tobacco-chewing, beagle-faced" manager, Danny Murtaugh, himself a former Pirate second baseman.

In searching my memory to reconstruct that 1960 line-up, only two names escaped me: outfielder Bob Skinner and utility infielder Gino Cimoli.

In 1958, Murtaugh's first year, the Pirates won 84 games and lost 70, finishing second to the Milwaukee Braves, if not a traditional rival, certainly one in my mind, since they were the favorite of my across-the-street neighbor, Randy E., who gloried in the exploits of that star-studded team's high-octane performers: Warren Spahn, Lew Burdette, Hank Aaron, Eddie Matthews, and Joe Adcock.

After reverting to form the next year and slipping to fourth place, in 1960 the Pirates shocked the baseball world, winning 12 of their first 15 games, ninety-five in all, and cruising to the National League pennant, seven games ahead of those despicable Braves. "Groat hit .325 to win the NL batting title. Law won 20 games, Friend 18, and Face saved 24. Mazeroski led major league second basemen in putouts, assists, double plays, and fielding average."

It's best for those who religiously follow the fortunes of perennial losers never to elevate their hopes too high and calmly to anticipate the worst, so as not to be crushingly disappointed when inevitable disaster strikes. Thus, in spite of their wire-to-wire run, could it have been anything but a total surprise when the Pirates clinched the pennant, their first in thirty-three years?

Their World Series opponent, however, was no surprise: the mighty New York Yankees. If the Braves had stars, the Yankees had Hall-of-Famers, up and down the line-up, and you didn't have to be a Yankee fan, even much of a baseball fan, to regurgitate those names: Yogi Berra, Bill Skowron, Bobby Richardson, Tony Kubek, Elston Howard, Roger Maris, Mickey Mantle, Whitey Ford, and the manager, Casey Stengel. The Yankees had claimed eight pennants and six World Series in the fifties. They finished the 1960 season by winning their last fifteen games and hitting 193 home runs, a new

American League record.

No one gave the Pirates much of a chance against that powerhouse, and after humiliating 16-3 and 10-0 defeats in Games Two and Three, such prognostications seemed well-founded -- except for the surprising outcome of Games One, Four, and Five, in which the overmatched upstarts triumphed by the slim margins of 6-4, 3-2, and 5-2, prompting manager Murtaugh to observe between expecorations: " The Series will be decided on games won, not on total runs scored."

If the Buccaneers' bumptiousness wasn't exhilarating enough, imagine my reaction when, sometime that week, sitting at the dinner table, my father, in the ceremonious and portentous manner he was prone to exhibit in such situations, announced that he had in hand two tickets to Games Six and Seven of the World Series. My eyes widened in disbelief; surely I must have assumed he was playing the kind of subtle practical joke he was fond of, like reading from the newspaper bogus stories featuring a friend or family member. But, no; it was all true. Apparently, some connection or friendship involving my mother's spate of relatives from the Pittsburgh area had delivered the goods, a magic carpet ride to Forbes Field, my second Major League destination, the first having been Yankee Stadium during a family sightseeing tour of New York a few years earlier.

Back then, baseball was still America's pastime, and the World Series was its preeminent sporting event. There were only three television networks; sports broadcasts were few and far between; the Super Bowl had yet to be invented; and the widespread popularity and continuous exposure of football and basketball were futuristic phenomena. The World Series was, refreshingly, a daytime event, and scores were snatched like lightning bugs from transistor radios smuggled into school bathrooms and hallways those autumn afternoons. Some teachers were accommodating or interested enough themselves to allow students to listen to the games in class -- but not my eighth-grade history teacher, Mr. Eddie H., who, in spite of a boundless adoration of the Yankees and a boisterous jealousy of my good fortune, was too strict a disciplinarian to interrupt his lesson plans.

To attend the World Series -- at the expense of missing a couple of days of school -- was quite a coup.

I suppose this adventure can also be depicted as a father and son bonding experience, one of the few we ever had -- that is, until we went into business together, after which we were permanently in bondage, so to speak. I do not mean to be derogatory; if there is blame to be cast, an equal amount must be borne by me.

My father and I had little in common. He was a gregarious, garrulous, extroverted, magnetic individual who never met a stranger; I was cerebral, reserved, introverted, and, in spite of my academic prowess, rife with insecurities. He was also intensely preoccupied with his growing business and with various community organizations, working six, sometimes seven, days a week and traveling frequently -- a pattern I was fated to replicate years later. Looking back, I'm not sure if he really held any enthusiasm for baseball or the Pittsburgh Pirates, or if he could name any of the players; I have to believe this trip was a genuine, heartfelt attempt to reach out to me, a shared activity he knew I would enjoy.

This is not to say he didn't take advantage of an opportunity to indulge himself along the way. I don't recall any details: what car we took (it wasn't his infamous Ford Galaxie convertible, a 1962 model) - - most likely my mother's Country Squire wood-paneled station wagon -- or where we stayed -- probably we economized and lodged with one of my mother's relatives -- but undoubtedly we detoured to Harrisonburg, Luray, and Winchester to pay business calls on Schewel managers Wilburn, Moore, and Lucas.

The question arises: What did we talk about, joined at the hip, just the two of us, for at least sixteen hours, eight on the drive up, eight on the drive home? Who remembers conversations half a century old? I can with confidence attest to the subjects we avoided: hunting and fishing, about which we were, and forever would be, blithely ignorant, and sex, about which he only spoke to me once, advising me to consult him if I ever found myself in a troublesome situation, in itself a depressingly unlikely prospect. I suspect that mostly he talked, I listened, and we stopped a few times to eat and for him to make telephone calls.

Not having attended a college or professional football game in many years, I can only make an educated guess as to what draws zealots to brave the elements week after week: a slavish devotion to their team;

the communal energy flowing through the stadium like an electric charge; the violence seen and heard from a ringside seat; a submersion of one's identity in the synergetic clamor of the crowd; or maybe it's just the tailgating. I experience a similar thrill at a Major League baseball game, but would propose a slightly nuanced and largely ignored distinction.

I believe one reason baseball has suffered as a spectator sport over the last twenty years is that it does not translate to the television screen as facilely as football and basketball. To appreciate the subtleties and intricacies of a baseball game, one must be able to survey the whole field, all its components -- pitcher, batter, fielders -- and observe their reactions to the pitch and the ball in play. You can't see that on television, even in replays, whereas football (and basketball) broadcasts show almost all players in movement when action commences, afterwards isolating coverage in the critical areas. The camera actually diminishes the game of baseball, while enhancing our viewing of those other sports.

I couldn't articulate that thought in 1960, but, perhaps, subconsciously, I felt it after passing through the concrete portico into the open stadium, for surely I paused, smiled, looked around in awe and excitement, and absorbed the breathtaking expanse of diamond and outfield, which would be frozen in time while the game ran its course.

Like a rocketing home-run ball disappearing over the fence, Forbes Field and that first game have faded into oblivion. Was there a fearsome conflict roiling in my brain, between the loyal fan's prayer for victory and the anxious twelve-year old's yearning for another contest? If so, it was quickly resolved by another Bronx blowout, 12-0, in which lightweight Bobby Richardson continued his uncharacteristic power surge, hitting two triples and driving in three runs, including a record-setting twelfth.

The next day, Thursday, October 13, would be the last of the season, no matter the outcome. My father and I had hardly settled in our seats -- somewhere on the first base side -- when the fireworks started. I remember three moments; for the rest, I refer again to William Nack's Sports Illustrated article, published on the fortieth anniversary of what he called "the Wackiest World Series of Them All."

The Pirates raced to a 4-0 lead on the strength of a first-inning two-run home run by Rocky Nelson and a second-inning two-run single by Bill Virdon. Casey Stengel replaced starter Bob Turley with 5'6" lefty-sinkerballer, Bobby Shantz, who silenced the Pirate bats for the next five innings, allowing only a single by Smokey Burgess. In a move with significant implications, Burgess was lifted for a pinch runner, and his catching position was filled by Hal Smith.

Meanwhile, the Yankees clawed back. Vern Law, unable to push off from the rubber due to an injured foot, was throwing his arm out and courageously lasted until the sixth inning, giving up one run. But when Murtaugh turned to the dependable, indefatigable Roy Face, 68 appearances and 114 innings (this was a time when star relievers pitched one, two, or three innings, whatever was necessary) finally took its toll. Face gave up a run-scoring single to Mickey Mantle, a towering three-run homer to Yogi Berra that just avoided the right foul pole, and two more runs in the eighth. The Forbes Field faithful were restless and distraught; with only six outs left, the Yankees led 7-4 and looked like sure winners.

To quote Nack: "Then came the most bizarre half-inning of this bizarre series." With Gino Cimoli on first after a dink single to right, Bill Virdon hit a hard grounder to shortstop Tony Kubek, a sure double play. The ball hit a rock in the infield, bounced up sharply, and struck Kubek in the throat. I can see him now, lying on the ground, writhing in pain, clutching his throat -- the game turning, the crowd sensing something mystical in the air. Was this truly a team of destiny?

Dick Groat singled, scoring Cimoli, the Pirates' fifth run. Then, Stengel inexplicably pulled Shantz -- "the greatest fielding pitcher in the history of baseball," according to Joe Brown -- for Jim Coates. Bob Skinner sacrificed Virdon to third and Groat to second. Rocky Nelson flied out. Roberto Clemente came to the plate with two outs, and hit a bouncer to first baseman Bill Skowron, who fielded it cleanly and looked to throw to the pitcher Coates covering first, a routine play. But Coates -- no Bobby Shantz -- wasn't there; his mental lapse cost the Yankees the third out. Virdon scored, Groat moved to second, and Clemente was safe. The score was now 7-6, and back-up catcher Hal Smith stepped into the batter's box.

I will never forget Smith's home run, because, like every other frenzied fanatic in the grandstand, I was sure he had won the game and the Series for the Pirates. The prosaic name Hal Smith should have been etched in baseball marble forever; he had put his team ahead 9-7 with three outs to go.

But Bob Friend, a starter who had also pitched too many innings, couldn't hold the lead. The Yankees scored two runs in the top of the ninth, thanks to a miraculous play by Mickey Mantle. Leading off first, he dove back to the base when the batter was forced out on a hard grounder, allowing the tying run to score from third.

Bill Mazeroski was first up for the Pirates in the bottom of the ninth.

He was an unlikely hero, the slick-fielding second baseman, hardly a power hitter, the son of an Ohio coal miner, who grew up in a little wooden house with no electricity or running water, "listening to his battery-operated radio tell stories of his beloved Cleveland Indians," Maz, as he was known. But after the second pitch -- "a high hummer delivered by Ralph Terry at 3:36 PM just where he wanted it" -- he would be legendary.

Nack writes: "He swung and struck the ball flush, sending it in a rising white arc to left centerfield. He was racing towards first base when he saw what everyone else saw, what Virdon and Skinner and Skowron and Richardson saw, what thousands saw from the stands, what millions who were watching on TV saw" -- and what I saw from my seat behind first base, and will never forget seeing -- "Yogi Berra crabbing back to the warning track, turning to face the wall, looking up, and watching the ball sail over his head and clear the wall."

Final score: 10-9.

In 1993, Joe Carter hit a game-ending home run to win the World Series for the Toronto Blue Jays in Game Six. But Bill Mazeroski's walk-off home run remains the only one ever hit to win a seventh game.

The improbable champs had been outscored 55-27 and outhit 91-60; but, in the end, they prevailed.

A few years ago I attended a fund-raiser honoring Lynchburg icon

and former Mayor Jimmie Bryan, at which various items of sports memorabilia were being auctioned off. I was casually examining the merchandise when I abruptly stopped, stared in astonishment, and delicately lifted from the table a most valuable object -- an autographed plastic-encased photograph of Bill Mazeroski crossing home plate after hitting his historic home run. In a foolish gesture of braggadocio, I pointed out to a friend that I had been there and seen it all, which only encouraged him to enter the auction -- and bid up the price. Nevertheless, I bought it, took it home, and propped it up on my dresser, where it sits today, a simple but magnificent reminder of the day forty-seven years ago when my father took me to the greatest baseball game ever played.



POSTED BY MARC SCHEWEL AT 4:23 PM 

2 COMMENTS:

scheweldog said...

sounds like an unforgettable experience...and yet now you call the playoffs and world series "irrelevant appendages." even if your teams don't make it, the world series has an allure that regular season games don't.