

SPORTS

A dream that won't die

Fisher ignores failures, still seeks baseball team

By Kevin Lyons
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He's busy now. Busy exchanging ideas on a conference call to Chinese businessmen. ("Ni hao ma? Ni hao ma?" he greets them). Busy talking international trade law in one breath, Northern Virginia baseball in another. Busy being Bart Fisher — connoisseur of big ideas to some, hopeless dreamer to others.

"Hold on a second, please" says the 51-year-old, bespectacled, balding man with his sleeves rolled up past his elbows. The phone is chirping like crazy in his fifth floor office overlooking Connecticut and L streets. There's a big deal to be made.

You wait in the big puffy couch and look around. On one wall are his academic credentials. There's a Phi Beta Kappa from Washington University (St. Louis), a J.D. from Harvard, a Ph.D from Johns Hopkins. On the bookshelf above his desk, you notice several publications he's authored, including one Johns Hopkins

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Photo by Kevin T. Gilbert / The Washington Times

Bart Fisher, batting for area fans: "Where are we now? I'd say we're on third base."

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uses in its law program. Deep staff. Then you remember the comment one Fisher friend made: "You think nerd when you first see him. Then you realize he's calculating, smart, and very serious. A true genius."

Fisher's on hold now. Quickly you ask about the photographs of his 17-year old son, Ross; of his wife, Margaret; of Stan Musial and Jim Kaat. "Musial's my favorite," he says before the chirping phone distracts him again.

This is how Bart Fisher's day goes. One moment, the Great Falls, Va., lawyer is working a joint-venture opportunity in China, the next he's answering questions about how a skinny kid from St. Louis adjusted to the sudden death of his father and how the loss of his youngest son to aplastic anemia caused him to rethink his social priorities. He's talking about what's important to him. And what's not.

He's also answering questions about baseball — about how his group, Capital Baseball, Inc., can, this time, land a major league franchise after having been jilted more times in the past four years than he cares to count.

It has been a long time since two Washington Senators teams left here to become, respectively, the Minnesota Twins in 1961 and the Texas Rangers in 1972. Fisher believes this area deserves another chance. But convincing others hasn't been easy.

Baseball said no to Fisher and Capital Baseball leader Mark Tracz in 1990, instead putting John Akridge's RFK Stadium-pushing group on the expansion short list. The Houston Astros said no in 1991. The San Francisco Giants, before major league baseball intervened, opted for the newly built, domed stadium in St. Petersburg, Fla., in 1992. The fiscally strapped San Diego Padres emphatically turned down Fisher's \$150 million bid in 1993.

Just last month, however, the Padres were sold for \$80 million. That's a sure sign that baseball's antitrust exemption laws will make it hard for any team to relocate unless the impending players' strike produces some new guidelines.

"A strike could accelerate the process of several small-market franchises [seeking new cities]," Fisher said. "It's a major variable in terms of major league baseball's need for money."

Fisher's group is one of 23 across North America and two in the Washington area assembling investors ready to bankroll one of two expansion franchises that could be awarded within the next several years. The price is expected to be set at significantly more than the \$95 million charged when the Florida Marlins and Colorado Rockies joined the National League last year.

Sources said Fisher's group has "eight to 12 investors, some celebrities" in the area whose combined net worth is more than the anticipated expansion fee. A source also said J. Moron Davis, a New York investor, is behind the group, and he alone is worth "more than \$200 million."

With that, Fisher is set to turn in an application to major league baseball executives detailing his group's intentions by Thursday.

Not everybody agrees with Fisher's plan. That doesn't bother him.

"Bringing another team into this region wouldn't be a good idea," says Baltimore Orioles owner Peter Angelos. "The Orioles serve as a regional franchise. Maybe it would be better if they made a bid to put a team in southern Virginia."

Says Washington Senators fan club president Pat Malone: "Historically, I've always been against teams relocating because the people in the losing town feel like the devil. It's a carnival-like atmosphere when teams pack up and go

franchise shifts in all sports. That's the way things are."

And this from Fisher's older sister, Karen: "He doesn't know he's been turned down. 'No' is the beginning of the negotiation. You know he's been turned down. I know it. But it hasn't even entered his consciousness yet. To him, he's going to bring baseball to Washington. That's all. You might question it. He hasn't."

Fisher is 13 years old and working at his uncle's lumberyard. It pays well — \$40 a week. He's already the man of the house. Who can worry about child labor laws? There's a table that needs food on it, backs that need to be clothed, a home that must be heated when wintry Midwestern winds make their annual appearance.

He and his dad, Irvin, used to do all the things that fathers and sons do. They went to ballgame... together, played catch in the front yard until it was time for supper. One day, Irvin dropped dead from a heart attack after a game of touch football. It happened right in front of Bart. Just like that. He was 47. Left behind were his grieving son, a wife whose salary at a ladies clothing store would have to do, and a daughter who would leave college in Miami to look for fulltime writing work in New York.

But there was still life to live. And Fisher made sure he would live his.

Says high school classmate Lawrence Kaplan: "Physically, Bart resembles his father. His dad's death scared the heck out of him. Bart has assumed, on some level, that he, just like his father, would go at any moment. Some heart problems are hereditary. So he has tried to jam as much as he can into the rest of his life, and he's been very driven as a result of that."

Fisher was shy as a teen-ager. Kaplan remembers that he had busted out his front teeth and hardly said much. He wasn't very athletic, but he was a decent tennis player. No one ever picked him first for the neighborhood sandlot teams. He usually wasn't the last one selected either.

Not much was expected from him educationally. The Fishers were a working-class family who lived in a working-class neighborhood that was crazy about its baseball. That's how it was for everyone in St. Louis in the '50s. Bart loved to go the ballpark and watch Musial hit for the Cardinals. When he couldn't get there, he'd listen to the Cards and the Browns — often simultaneously on radios in the kitchen and living room.

Little Bart had a particular interest in the Browns. Elliot Stein, who co-owned the team with legendary promoter Bill Veeck before the franchise was sold and moved to Baltimore in 1954, married one of the Fisher cousins. Bart took an instant liking to Stein, who showed him around the park occasionally. Bart also, in time, sports editor of the Clayton High School newspaper.

He and Kaplan also ran an underground publication in which they frequently criticized the school administration for its "shortcomings in educating us." They printed copies on the school's old mimeograph machine. After four issues, school officials made them cease operations.

As a teen, Fisher affected people in different ways.

"No one knew what his potential was," Kaplan said. "I'm not quite sure he knew what his potential was. I used to ask him why he had average grades in high school. He didn't flower until he left high school. And then he just took off."

Karen: "From the time he began growing up, he always wanted a family. All the other boys were playing around, but he couldn't wait to get married. That's what's driving him to get a team in D.C. He wants to create a family atmosphere so that fathers can go to the park and show their sons what the game is all about."

Kaplan again: "I don't know

what you're talking about anyway because he was a good speaker. For the high school graduation, we wrote a speech together in which we took the school to task for doing a poor job educationally. The speech was reviewed by the speech teacher, and she edited out all the negative stuff. But when Bart gave the speech after we'd received our diploma, he gave it exactly as we had written it."

John Duvall, Washington University classmate: "I met him in a poly-sci class. He was the kind of guy who loved to get into a good, lively discussion. It was nothing for us to stay up all night. We'd debate about anything. You know that was during the '60s, so we talked about a lot of stuff — the Peace Corps, Bay of Pigs, who won the debates? We were both [tale tellers] of equal ability."

Karen: "You're talking about a guy who was always, quietly, the center of the group. Quietly. We didn't come from that kind of educated family. But he's been doing things in a major way since Day 1."

It's 1983 and Bart Fisher is grieving again. The doctors say they can't do anything for his son, Ivan, who lived eight years before his body stopped producing blood cells. He could have been saved, but there was no one in the family from whom he could receive a bone marrow transplant. Even more damning, there was no national transplant registry for qualified bone marrow donors in 1983.

And so Fisher was off on perhaps the most important mission of his lifetime, to work with then-Rep. Al Gore on a bill under the National Organ Transplant Act that would create a national registry of people willing to donate marrow for unrelated patients. The effort took more than three years. Through that, he co-founded the Aplastic Anemia Foundation in 1983 and the National Marrow Donor program in 1984.

"It made me stop and focus on which direction I had been going," Fisher says. "I knew how to lobby and get things done, but it forced me to focus on social needs."

But it is the quest for getting the Washington area a major league baseball team that has given Fisher the most notoriety.

Will baseball come to Northern Virginia? The odds seem to be stacked against it. Major league sources say St. Petersburg and Phoenix are the favorites to land the next expansion franchises. Fisher also made a bid for the Oakland Athletics, who are up for sale. But the local ownership wants to keep the team in the Bay Area. Other small-market teams such as Pittsburgh and Montreal also are on the market, but those clubs probably will stay put.

Another problem: Where would Fisher's team play? His group is still negotiating with Fairfax and Loudoun county governments about where a stadium would be built and how it would be funded.

But at least Fairfax County board chairman Tom Davis and Gov. George Allen support the attempt to bring baseball to Northern Virginia. Fisher said former Gov. L. Douglas Wilder labeled his previous attempts to land baseball as "a gimmick." And Audrey Moore, former Fairfax County board chairwoman, supported Akridge's failed attempt to bring baseball to the District.

"We're light years ahead in terms of the governmental support we have now compared to that of 1990," Fisher says.

Now Fisher has to convince Major League Baseball that the game is right for the national capital area. The local citizenry has seen how baseball has viewed previous attempts to land a team here and has grown skeptical.

"This community doesn't believe in itself," said Fisher, who owns a small percentage of the Class A Prince William Cannons. "But this is a doable deal. It's just like the game of baseball. You have to hit a lot of singles. Where are we now? I'd say we're on third base."