

GOT TO GET YOU INTO MY LIFE »

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IT'S BEEN 50 YEARS SINCE THE BEATLES LANDED IN THE USA

+ MAKING COLLEGE POSSIBLE IN EL DORADO, ARK. / USING FOOD TO REVITALIZE DETROIT / THE TALENTED SHEILA JOHNSON



FEBRUARY 01, 2014

AMERICAN WAY

AMERICAN AIRLINES + AMERICAN EAGLE

Point Man

CHRIS PAUL can score, pass and defend, but what he does best is lead



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MONTH



Fresh Fish

PERHAPS THE ONLY TYPE of tale more enticing than a good fish story is a good fish-out-of-water story. You know the kind: when someone is taken out of his or her comfort zone and hilarity ensues. More enticing still is the fact that fish-out-of-water stories are, for the most part, true, whereas the fish that got away is usually of biblically ginormous — and fictitious — proportions.

My dearly departed grandfather, Harold Kagan, had a great fish-out-of-water story. Born in the Catskill Mountains, Grandpa Harold was the son of the town butcher in Woodridge, N.Y. He was like all the other town kids in this sleepy, working-class burg, which meant he was a die-hard New York Yankees fan and a heckuva stickball player in his own right — when he wasn't working in the butcher shop for his old man. When Grandpa Harold was old enough to see over the steering wheel, his father put him to work driving meat deliveries all over Sullivan County. By the time Grandpa Harold was 13, he knew all of three things: butchering, driving and Yankees baseball, pretty much in that order. Indeed, he was like all the other town kids: He had a puritanical work ethic and a love of the national pastime, but he was completely clueless in the ways of the world.

One day, while Grandpa Harold was manning the butcher shop, a pregnant woman walked in to buy some cutlets. As she was speaking to my 13-year-old grandfather-to-be, she doubled over and said she felt the baby getting ready to make his or her way into the world. The butcher's son

wasn't exactly an obstetrician, so he did what any good 13-year-old would do in 1937: He offered to drive her to the nearest hospital, Hamilton Avenue Hospital in neighboring Monticello, N.Y.

The lady got in the back seat, and Grandpa Harold got behind the wheel. The woman was breathing heavily, which made Grandpa Harold very nervous. Would she hold out for the 13-mile drive along craggy county roads?

When they were halfway there, the lady let out a scream. "What is it?" Grandpa Harold asked in a panicky voice. "My water broke!" the lady shrieked. Grandpa Harold pulled the car over, took a deep breath, gritted his teeth as he exhaled, and applied the parking brake. Then he leaned over, rolled up his pant legs, and steeled himself for the rest of the drive, expecting to have several inches of water filling the car momentarily.

I had a fish-out-of-water moment when I was 16. It was an honest misunderstanding in the midst of a tragic event. One of my best coaches in virtually every sport I played all throughout youth, Nathan Roth, passed away at the age of 45. More personal still, though, was that Coach Roth was the father of one of my best friends, Phil. The Roth family — all of whom I just adored — was sitting shivah at Phil's grandmother's house in Beachwood, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland about five miles from our houses in Moreland Hills. I picked up my friend, Annie Chen, and we drove to Beachwood to pay our respects to the Roth family. Phil's grandmother lived on the same street as my grandmother, so I parked at Grandma Sally's house and we walked eight doors down to a similar-looking house.

Jewish tradition holds that when paying respects to a family sitting shivah, you are supposed to just walk in. No ringing bells or knocking on doors, as it's essentially an open house. So Annie and I just walked in.

There was a couple sitting in the kitchen whom I didn't recognize, but they were my parents' age, so I assumed they were friends with Coach Roth. "Hi," the lady said. "Hi," Annie and I said in unison. "Can we help you?" the man queried. I looked at Annie, and then I looked around the house. I heard some movement upstairs and figured the Roth family was receiving visitors there. "Where is everybody?" I asked as I made my way toward the staircase. The couple looked at each

other. "Well, Richie just got home from soccer practice," the lady said. "He'll be out of the shower in a minute." "Oh, good," I replied, backing away from the stairs. Annie looked at me for guidance, since it was me who had walked us into this mess. "We'll just be outside, waiting in the car. Tell him to come on out and see us when he's done."

Once we got outside, we didn't wait for Richie.

I had fish-out-of-water stories on the brain when I met Tim Johnson in Alberta, Canada. Tim is an accomplished Canadian journalist. I asked myself: How does an American editor get a Canadian writer out of his comfort zone while still serving the airline's passengers? And then it hit me: Send him to the Brazilian rain forest, of course (page 46).

Along the same lines, Muhammad Ali was certainly a big fish, yet he was decidedly out of water during the run-up to his iconic fight with Sonny Liston 50 years ago (page 52). And a simple DNA test will most likely take you out of your comfort zone when you see who your ancestors were (page 38).

It's been almost 15 years since I've spoken with Phil or Annie — one of those unfortunate results of time marching on. Last I heard, Phil was living in Miami and Annie in Portland, Ore. Perhaps I'll give them each a fish-out-of-water moment and call them up out of the blue.


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