

# BASEBALL DIGEST

## ★★ THANKSGIVING EDITION ★★

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*By Abe J. Schear*  
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Like a fine wine, the legacy and importance of Mayor Sam Massell evolves from year to year. Following a Mayoral term sandwiched between Mayors Allen and Jackson, Mayor Massell has simply been Atlanta's biggest cheerleader.

Lost in his undeniably southern demeanor is his important footprint on this city. He was the President of the Board of Aldermen when Atlanta built the original stadium. He magically arranged for the Omni to be built, resurrecting a then downtrodden portion of town which now houses the Georgia Dome, CNN and anchors the Olympic Park. As an ACOG member, he was a critical volunteer in the building of the new stadium. And he was ever so instrumental in the formation of MARTA.

Few have ever been more positive about Atlanta. Fewer, if any, have been able to weather (i.e. ignored) the negative political winds and emerge so gracefully. He is now the "Mayor" of Buckhead, however, and even more importantly, it is his elegance, his passion, his love for this city which we find so endearing. As I sat and listened to his stories, I realized that Sam Massell is that special uncle that we all love to listen to for hours.

I'm sure that you too will enjoy his tales. From my perspective, our discussion ended far too quickly.

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## Sam Massell: "Atlanta's Greatest Fan"

**Abe: I am here with Mayor Sam Massell and it's a pleasure and privilege to be here. Where did you grow up in Atlanta?**

Mayor Massell: In Druid Hills. It was on Oakdale Road. The last block, interesting block, incidentally. Herman Talmadge lived there on that block. Bert Parks of Miss America fame lived there. The President of the Chamber of Commerce and other prominent people lived on the street. I went to Druid Hills Elementary and Druid Hills High School.

**Did you play baseball as a youngster?**

I tried, but I don't know if it was my eyes or my thinking process, but the ball came faster than I swung.

**(Laughter) Did you play organized baseball as a youngster?**

No, because I never made the team.

**Did the rest of your family watch baseball, enjoy watching baseball?**

Well, my son does to this day. He has season tickets for the Braves and he has served as batboy for the Braves.

**And did you teach him to play?**

No, but, you know, I got him involved like he has with his children. He's got two boys that have been in Little League.

**And I'm guessing he played little league in Buckhead?**

The one in Chastain Park.

NYO.

Yes

**Well, I love NYO. I was on the Board of NYO forever. They asked me to be on the Board, I think, because they thought I'd give money. NYO does have perhaps the most beautiful youth baseball field I've ever seen.**

We publish here at the Buckhead Coalition the Buckhead Guidebook and

this year we included information about NYO and Buckhead Baseball at Frankie Allen Park so now you know who to contact if you want to play.

**Did your family have an interest in baseball – your mom or your dad?**

No, I had an uncle who did, and he used to take me to the Crackers games when I was a youngster. At that time, we lived on St. Charles Place.

**You could walk to the Crackers games?**

Yes.

**Did you go to the games often? Did you wander around and sit around on the train over the top of the field?**

No, we didn't do that, but we sat in the bleachers mostly.

**I know that when everybody watched the ballgames there, they always gambled around the Ponce de Leon ballpark. What do you remember of the ballpark?**

I do remember seeing people gamble, yes indeed. I remember something that had an impression on me regarding a friend of mine who is to this day a sports fan and a former sports writer for The Atlanta Constitution. His family had gotten on hard times financially during a period there and he was working the ballpark and, though he was one of my peers or whatever you call it, to see him out there selling Cokes and programs or whatever, made me think well of him because he showed he wasn't embarrassed about getting out and making a living even as a young boy.

**Now, did you get autographs from the players?**

Not then, but I subsequently have, you know, collected a number of balls and helped my son get a number of them.

**When you were growing up, did you listen to the games on the radio or read about them in the paper?**

Some on the radio, but when I was growing up I didn't read the newspaper.

**I hear everybody talk about the beautiful magnolia tree that was out at the Ponce de Leon ballpark and I also hear them talk all about the billboards that were over the ballpark. Were there restaurants near the ballpark then?**

I don't remember any restaurants near the ballpark. Of course, in the park they sold hot dogs and other fast food-type

run again for Mayor, I ran for that seat and then spent four years there as Mayor.

**Were they hotly contested races in the 60's?**

Yes.

**You were a very young man when you first ran for city-wide office.**

Yes. I remember I had about five opponents and I ran against the incumbent and incidentally it sounds like a sports cliché because his main platform, if you call it that, opposing me was that "shame on me that I wanted to be captain of the team and I never played". I wanted to be

opposed to it and he talked to me about it several times, but I thought, you know, we did so much in brick and mortar, buildings and roadways and other improvements to the city, utilities, infrastructure in general, that having something that was pure pleasure was worthwhile. Now, interestingly enough, when I became Mayor and there was a call for building an arena, I said I was for the stadium, but, you know, I'd give my wife one fur coat, but not two, and unless I can find a way to build a coliseum with no additional taxes on the taxpayer, I'm not going to do it. I did work out a method, the first one in the country, where it was like a real estate deal where Tom Cousins had to guarantee the amount of rent that would cover the bond indebtedness and the interest.

**And that was for the Omni. When Mayor Allen wanted the stadium, was it his idea or was it the Chamber's idea or was it the Chamber's and Coca Cola's idea?**

In fact, Mills Lane gets the credit for coming up with the money to kick it off and guarantee it, but I can't answer where the idea emanated from. Ivan was the one that was pushing me as President of the Board of Alderman to get the Board to pass it, which we did unanimously. I think it was unanimous, but anyway it was something that I thought was good for the city and, you know, one of the by-products of that stadium, which I guess is common in the country, but this effort was a tremendous benefit in race relations, in my opinion, because we had blacks and whites sitting together who had never done so before and enjoying something and the focus was purely on the quality of life and it was very worthwhile in that regard and, of course, having black players also gave pride to the black community.

**Representative John Lewis said very much the same thing, that it was, at the time, having whites and blacks together to root for blacks and whites could not have been more important to Atlanta in the mid-60's. Was Ivan Allen a big baseball fan or was he just a really big fan of Atlanta? Or was he both?**

He was both. He was a big baseball fan, I guess, but, you know, a sad thing, and incidentally Carl Sanders was Governor at the time and we had to also have the state's support for the stadium and to show you a lesson for politicians, you don't mix politics and sports. On opening night, the two of them were in a convertible riding around the track, around the field, and

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*"I'd give my wife a fur coat, but not two."*

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items. You mentioned magnolia tree. Incidentally, there's a group here called the Native Atlantan's Club, of which I'm a member, and I chipped in some monies actually from the Buckhead Coalition because they put a plaque there where the magnolia tree is, which still stands back there, the tree and the plaque.

**I guess growing up in the 50's or even earlier, it would be hard to imagine that Atlanta could have grown from where you were on St. Charles to where we are today?**

I wish my father were here to see it. He wouldn't believe it, for sure, and there's more to come and Buckhead's a big, booming part of it.

**Now, how did you get involved, when did you get involved at City Hall?**

Well, I was in various elected offices for 22 years and the first one was on the City Council of Mountain Park, Georgia, which is up around the side of Roswell, a little incorporated city which was the only city in the country where you could vote and hold office and not have your legal residence there, just be a property owner, and I owned a cabin up there and got active and got around. In fact, Sidney Marcus, helped me campaign. Sidney was my roommate at college, but then I went from there to the Atlanta City Executive Council, which was the organization that ran the elections for the city, set the qualifying fees and certified the candidates and so forth. At that time I saw a need, I thought, an opportunity to run for President of the Board of Alderman which I did, and then when Ivan didn't

captain and I never played on the team; starting as the President of the Board instead of a member of the Board, but I won.

**Now, had you known Mayor Allen well before you ran?**

Pretty well, because of his involvement in the Chamber of Commerce. It was interesting when I was on the City Executive Committee, as I mentioned, I was Secretary of that and I was swearing in the candidates and Ivan was being opposed by Muggsy Smith who had been a good member of the legislature as well as Lester Maddox who was running and others, but I hated to see Muggsy get defeated or Ivan, they were two great people, and I was trying to get everybody to convince Muggsy to run for President of the City Council, Board of Alderman, and get him to do that and I mentioned it to Everett Milican who was running for another office and he said, "Yeah, somebody needs to beat the incumbent." My motivation was to try to save Muggsy so he could run for Mayor later. I went home that night and asked my wife if I could run and I called A.T. Walden, a prominent black attorney, head of the Atlanta Negro Voter's League, and Helen Bullard, who was the political guru of the time, and all of them said, "Go for it", so I did and the next day I qualified myself.

**Now, when you were President of the Board of Alderman, how did the issue of the Braves first come up?**

Well, it was Ivan who was promoting the idea of Atlanta having professional sports. Bill Hartfield was vehemently

they were booed almost unanimously and it wasn't because people didn't appreciate what they had done or were opposing them politically, it was just that, "Hey, don't get in my way. I'm drinking beer and I want to see a baseball game."

**It was a defining moment in Atlanta. You had to have major league teams to be a major league city.**

And the exposure, the branding. You know, when you have a National League team of any type, you're in the newspaper in every major city in the country every day because of the games and the stats.

**Did you go to the first opening day for the Braves?**

Yes, I was at the opening game.

**What was that like to go to the first game at the ballpark?**

It was taxing. They went 13 innings.

**(Laughter)**

I was then President on the Board of Alderman, which is now the City Council President. I was at the game with the mayor of the city we were playing and he sat with us. My wife and I took him to our home afterwards, which was very late, after midnight, when the game finally ended and we went home, and she made breakfast for us.

**Was it difficult after that to get the Falcons to come to Atlanta?**

No, it became much easier, you know, with the Hawks and the Falcons, the Flames. We even had the Chiefs. We had a professional soccer team.

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*"I thought we had a damn good city back then before professional sports."*

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**Do you remember the visits of Charlie Finley and the rest of the folks to Atlanta to scout out a stadium?**

No, I wasn't involved in that. I know, incidentally, there were, you know, efforts to develop other stadiums.

**Now, do you remember how it was that they chose the location of the stadium?**

It may have been because I was born there at the old Piedmont Hospital.

**(Laughter)**

It was an area that needed the care and attention of redevelopment because it was pretty run down, an urban renewal

project primarily.

I'm more familiar with the location of the Omni which I developed with John Portman who I had the greatest respect for, for what he did for downtown Atlanta. He saved downtown during that era with his development of Peachtree Center, but he called me into his office and told me that the Omni was going to be near the Civic Center and he told me rather than asked me where it was going to be and I said, "Well, I'm sorry, I haven't decided where's it going to be" and the reason I selected the site where we built it was because we could get Cousins to pledge income already from the parking decks and we had an old incinerator we were closing so we had land and it was just a much better deal, but if John hadn't been so domineering and demanding, I might have given more consideration to his site.

**Was the city really excited that baseball had come to Atlanta?**

Oh yes, tremendous excitement in all quarters. It was just something entirely new, you know. You can't compare the Crackers or that stadium and the Braves and this stadium.

**Any stories from your travel agency days?**

Yes, actually. Back when there was a strike, we took a bus to Savannah for a minor league game. It was full and the event was covered by the Atlanta Journal Constitution. We actually made a buck off of baseball!

**I guess of all the mayors Atlanta has ever had, I suppose everybody would agree that nobody is a bigger cheerleader for the city than you. Could you have ever foreseen that, not only from where you grew up, but from when baseball first came to Atlanta, that in the last 40 years Atlanta could have come as far as it has?**

No, I would not have. I think small because, you know, I thought we had a damn good city back then before professional sports. My father and my uncles were real estate developers. I've been all over the city, seen different parts of it evolve and

I thought Atlanta was going in the right direction and it was always progressive and positive and there was always some growth, but I would not have predicted the boom that has developed.

**What kind of memorabilia from baseball have you collected?**

Well, a number of balls. I didn't ever catch any, but I'm trying to remember. Now, my son Steve has the chairs from the old stadium. One of my daughters, Melanie, the entertainer, the one who sings, has a band, she's a fan and has a couple of chairs.

**Bet she has sung the Star Spangled Banner down there.**

Yes, she has. I've got a great deal of memorabilia that has accumulated since the Buckhead Coalition which you are looking at here. You ought to see what's at home! Over the years, of course, of public life, there's a lot of stuff.

I got the first basketball that they threw when they opened the Omni, so that was my involvement, but the sad part was they had me throw up the jump ball. Can you imagine me? I couldn't even get the ball up that high for them to tip it!

**Do you still go down to the ballpark from time to time?**

Oh yes. I was involved with the development of the new stadium before and after the 1996 Olympics. It was a thrill to be there. It's still a very enjoyable evening. I've taken visitors there and guests and clients, so to speak.

**You just tell them that's South Buckhead.**

Well, I try not to spend any money there. You know, you get somebody else that owes me.

**I don't think that's true. In all the years you've been the face of the Buckhead Coalition, which I know you love, I think it would be fair to say you probably love the city every bit as much as you love Buckhead.**

You have 24 businesses in the business section of the phone book that have the name "Buckhead" in their business that are not even in the City of Atlanta - in Alpharetta and Snellville and further points north. I do go out of Buckhead, be it downtown to a speaking engagement or an event or whatever. In fact, I did yesterday for lunch because Melanie, my daughter, was performing at Woodruff Park downtown. They have a Wednesday event and I wear a tie that says "Atlanta" because I do show that I'm a fan of the city. I may have "Buckhead" on my ring here or on my coat lapel, but when I

go out of Buckhead, I want everybody to know for sure that I support the entire city. That's very important. In fact, last night I spoke to a Catalyst Magazine group and it was on branding and I was responding to a request or inquiry I get from time to time, "Why doesn't Buckhead create it's own city, like Sandy Springs has?" and I explained that the brand "Atlanta" is so important and we would bankrupt Atlanta because we pay 45% of the taxes and we have to stay part of Atlanta and keep it whole and strong.

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*"The brand "Atlanta" is so important."*

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People love the whole city, but they do love to come visit this part of the city at least every bit as much as they do any other part. I say that having lived in this part of the city for 26 years, but it is true. Buckhead is a remarkably elegant and pleasant place to both work and live.

And it's not by accident.

(Laughter) That's because it has great leadership.

A lot of people are working at it. For people in Little Rock, Arkansas or Jacksonville, Florida or name any city if you say you're from Atlanta, they say, "Tell me about Buckhead".

**Had we not had a stadium, it's pretty conceivable that we would not have all these tall buildings outside your window.**

You're right. It played a key role in that. You mentioned the World Series. I took my father-in-law, who was from a small Georgia town, and he was the

biggest baseball fan perhaps in the whole world, you know. He lived and breathed every single game. He knew all the stats and every player's name and history, but I took him to a World Series, the game in Baltimore, and he had never been in an airplane even and it was a wonderful opportunity I had.

**Do you have grandchildren that have played baseball?**

Yes.

**In Buckhead?**

Yes.

**What league do they play?**

They also play at NYO.

**And you go over there and watch them play?**

Yes, absolutely.

**Well, the park's gotten nicer.**

Yes, yeah.

**It's a beautiful park.**

It is indeed and the Buckhead Coalition has helped do it, monetarily with some of the development and improvements, including the PATH around the park.

**The whole Cox organization was involved in that, Jim Kennedy on the PATH and Jay Smith, of course, led the fundraising for the fields.**

We were one of the first to give money to the PATH Foundation, around \$5,000.00 when they first started.

**And that was huge 'cause at the time they were only trying to raise about \$25,000.**

That is right.

**And the PATH, if anything, has been too successful. There is a great number of people on the sidewalks. It's really pleasant.**

Wonderful asset.

**Wonderful asset to Buckhead and to the rest of the community and it's improved every aspect of that park; safety, elegance and participation.**

**And, with that, I'm out of questions. I really appreciate your willingness to bring to life so many of these important stories.**

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\*\*\* 34th EDITION \*\*\*  
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