Life Goes On

By John Clayton

Now that Major League Baseball’s Spring Training has started, I can resume my favorite way of wasting time when I should be working: reading about baseball in general and the Washington Nationals in particular. This is the optimism season, when all will go right and the Nats will get into the playoffs—then who knows what can happen. When the season starts, I will be reminded once again that other teams also have some pretty good players, as well as their own young players who have progressed another year closer to their peak abilities, and that some of your players get hurt, or disappoint, etc. Today, however, the sun is shining, the woodpeckers are walking upside down on the tree trunks, and all is right with the world, or at least a small part of it.

Be that as it may, work beckons, and I have to justify all the time I’ve spent watching the Republican presidential debates. When you hear the word “debate,” what comes immediately to your mind? When I was ten years old, my immediate answer would have been “it’s what you use to catch de fish,” and that’s not a bad answer on a sunny day in late February, but, this year, it clearly signifies a testy parade of Republicans seeking their party’s nomination. A quick call to our research department (aka Google) suggests that they just had their twentieth debate. I admit to watching a significant number of them, but a good deal less than half. I have read about most if not all of them, and that should be enough. My actual watching has also been in the more recent debates with the field winnowed down, although I did catch some classic Perry and Cain moments early on, I’m proud to say. It was harder to watch when the stage was crowded with the likes of that Pawlenty fellow who bailed early, Michelle Bachman, and that guy who was Obama’s ambassador to China.

Now there are four. Admittedly, I am not particularly fond of any of these guys, but we can chalk that up to partisan sensibilities and move on. I have my reasons, believe me, but we’re not that kind of paper, and none of my reasons would be particularly compelling, to say nothing of original. The personal interplay among the candidates has become the most interesting thing about the debates, at least to me. Romney and Gingrich have been clobbered by each other and the others so many times that they seem pretty oblivious to it, taking their blows with sort of a weary good humor. Santorum, however, looked a little shaken by being the target of their firepower. He’s been pretty good at dishing it out, but seemed to be a little worried about taking it, as any normal person would be, as if a normal person would ever progress this far in this type of process. Ron Paul, and stop me if you’ve heard this one before, continues to be Ron Paul. His opponents now affect this amused, gotta-love-our-crazy-Uncle-Ron demeanor when he goes on about his views on the world. It’s all very collegial.

Newt Gingrich is easily the most fascinating person to watch, and I’m not even sure I would have bothered if he weren’t still in the race. Love him or hate him, he’s a sharp dude, and you can’t stump him. He may ultimately shoot himself in the foot, but he’s going to come back with something that shifts the topic back in his favor, or at least encourages us to see it in a slightly different way. Figuratively speaking, he’s very quick on his feet. He’s like someone you play golf with who always bombs a long shot off the tee. Sometimes it rockets 250 yards down the center of the fairway, and sometimes it’s a towering slice that flies off over the trees out of sight, but you’re going to say “Whoa!” every single time.

The last candidate in this debate, who is almost unrecognizable to me, is Barack Obama. Listening to these folks demonize his every move, it’s hard to believe he’s the same person we see on the news and on the web, let alone with Michelle and the girls. If this seems familiar, it’s because the Democrats gave George Bush the same treatment during the last few debate cycles. Different folks, same strokes. Speaking of the Democrats, it’s a shame they didn’t have debates this time. Maybe there would have been a couple of leftwing firebrands like Dennis Kucinich or Ralph Nader to needle him for being too soft, maybe a more intellectual left-winger like Howard Dean to really get under his skin. Maybe a Blue Dog conservative or two would have delivered some shots from the other side. It might have been fun, and maybe we would have learned something. It’s a strange year. The party roles are reversed, with the Democrats playing nice among themselves and the Republicans eating their own. It will be interesting to see where it ends up, but as long as the Nationals lock up Ryan Zimmerman in a long term contract, life will go on. After all, presidents come and go every four years, but when was the last time we had a Washington team on the upswing?