

How The Deal Went Down

On the morning of October 27, John Moag rushes from his Murray Hill home, locking the door behind him, then spinning and stepping briskly into a damp, foggy autumn morning. The sky is thick with low, threatening clouds.

Today, of all days, how could he let himself run late? He's got only half an hour to reach Baltimore-Washington International Airport for a top-secret meeting on the deal of his career—one that might help heal a whole city's wounds, that might bring millions in economic development to his hometown. *Might. If all goes well this morning.*

Reaching the forest-green Lexus in the driveway, Moag stops short, amazed to see that the car's interior has been transformed into a bon voyage party. He peers inside at the mounds of orange and brown balloons. Little chocolate footballs are sprinkled over the seats.

Peggy must have gotten up before dawn to pull this off. Drawings by 12-year-old Lauren and 10-year-old Alex are part of the surprise. One shows a plaintive Dad on his knees before an enormous football. A prayer bub-

For 11 long years, Baltimore got the cold shoulder from the National Football League. But when the Cleveland Browns called, suddenly Baltimore was the belle of the ball.

by Jim Duffy

with Geoff Brown in Baltimore and Shari Sweeney and Jay Miller in Cleveland

Illustrations by Peter McDonnell



Negotiating under cover of secrecy, Baltimore and the Browns resembled nothing so much as two jilted lovers, eyes meeting across the Appalachians.

ble over his head reads, "Please, give Baltimore the ball!"

His wife is one of the few people he has confided in about his negotiations with the Cleveland Browns. She's always reacted in low-key fashion—until now.

Moag twists a balloon between his fingers until it pops. He grabs another and pops it. Then another. Finally, Moag shoves the remaining balloons into the back seat and then slides hurriedly behind the wheel.

This is really cute and thoughtful and nice, he thinks, but I have got to get my ass to this airport.

THE BALTIMORE BROWNS? AS MOAG SPED toward BWI that morning, the concept was unthinkable to sports fans in Ohio and Maryland. Nine days later, when Governor Parris Glendening appeared at a downtown press conference waving a lease agreement that binds the NFL's Browns to playing in Baltimore for the next 30 years, they'd learn that the unthinkable had happened. "This is a great day for the state of Maryland," the governor exulted, promising economic gains and social benefits.

In Cleveland, it was another kind of day—one of travesty and, perhaps, betrayal. Instantly, the Browns faithful erupted, outraged at this blow to the civic ego. Even some guilt-ridden Baltimoreans joined in the chorus, remembering the emptiness they felt when the NFL Colts departed for Indianapolis in 1984.

In short order, the uproar went national. Hastily convened Congressional hearings gave politicians a chance to voice shock and dismay. A *Sports Illustrated* cover caricature showed Browns owner Art Modell punching a Cleveland fan depicted as, well, a dawg.

Only the parties who agreed to the deal seemed to think it made perfect sense.

By last summer—when negotiations between Baltimore and the Browns turned earnest—moving football franchises from city to city was business as usual in the NFL. The modern-day spate of moves dates to 1982, when owner Al Davis shifted his Oakland Raiders to Los Angeles. In an ensuing court fight, the NFL lost a \$50-million antitrust judgment.

Jittery, the league for the most part opted to ignore the issue. It didn't lift a finger when the Baltimore Colts (originally from Dallas) left for

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All reconstructed dialogue comes from at least one party to the conversation.

Indianapolis. Or when the St. Louis Cardinals (originally from Chicago) moved to Arizona. Or when the Los Angeles Rams (originally from Cleveland) moved to St. Louis. Or when irrepressible Raiders owner Davis moved his team from Los Angeles back to Oakland.

In post-Colts Baltimore, the populace lived in a state of foggy football nostalgia. The Colts Marching Band remained active. Radio airwaves still crackled with talk of Johnny Unitas and The Greatest Game Ever Played, the 1958 NFL championship.

Civic leaders toiled to win readmittance to the NFL, only to lose every round in the league's ruthless game of musical cities. Time and again, team owners would flirt with Baltimore, only to turn around and use the city's charms to extort better terms from other suitors.

In Cleveland, Browns owner Art Modell felt spurned as well. The baseball Indians and basketball Cavaliers were playing in sparkling new homes, and Cleveland's once-dingy downtown was glittering with new museums built in part with government funds. But Modell's team was still stuck in aging Cleveland Stadium, losing money every year. Eleven years had gone by since his first discussions with Ohio officials about a new or refurbished stadium.

Later, of course, the prospect of a Browns move from Cleveland would shock the sports world. And many would question whether either Modell or Baltimore had legitimate grievances. But back in August and September, negotiating under cover of secrecy, Baltimore and the Browns resembled nothing so much as two jilted lovers, eyes meeting across the Appalachians.

Smitten with suddenly rosy prospects for the future, they fell into each other's arms and quickly decided to elope. The new couple broke the news to their families when Glendening waved that lease agreement in the air.

In response, stunned Clevelanders and Baltimoreans asked the same question: "The Baltimore Browns? How long has *this* been going on?"

IN A LATE JANUARY 1995 TELEPHONE CALL, newly inaugurated Governor Glendening thanks Baltimore attorney Herbert J. Belgrad for his eight years of service to the campaign to bring NFL football back to Baltimore. "But I need my own person," the governor says. "The NFL needs to see a new face."

Belgrad, whose term as chairman of the Maryland Stadium Authority is expiring, has already reached the same conclusion. "As much fun as this job has been," he'd say later, "there comes a time when a person should step aside."

Glendening senses that the football campaign



is in trouble. For seven years, the MSA has extended a lucrative offer to the league and its owners: Come play in a new downtown Baltimore stadium financed by lottery revenues; we'll make your franchise one of football's most profitable, to the tune of nearly \$30 million a year. But so far, no takers.

The biggest blow came in 1993 when the NFL awarded expansion franchises to Charlotte and Jacksonville. Some involved in Maryland's bid reacted with outrage, hurling accusations at league executives.

Ever since, the two parties have regarded each other with mutual mistrust. One thing Glendening wants to do now is rebuild bridges with the league. Antagonism, he concludes, "doesn't get you a team."

Leadership is another pressing issue. After the failed expansion drive, then-Governor William Donald Schaefer asked Orioles owner Peter Angelos to step in and find Baltimore a team. So far, though, that has succeeded only in sowing confusion: NFL owners aren't even sure anymore whom they should call to deal with Baltimore—Belgrad? Angelos? Schaefer?

Glendening wants one person in charge. But who should it be? "I want someone who's aggressive, tenacious and can deliver," he tells confidants. "I also want someone who doesn't

need the limelight."

John Moag, a partner with the powerhouse Washington law firm of Patton Boggs, has his eye on the post—a fact he's made known to mutual friends of his and the governor's. Former Governor Harry Hughes and U.S. Representative Steny Hoyer sing Moag's praises to Glendening.

Politically, Moag's a perfect fit: Baltimore will be relieved if the post goes to a city native, and Maryland's Washington suburbs will be reassured if it goes to someone with D.C. connections. In an early February phone call, Glendening formally offers Moag the position. "I hear from all kinds of people that you're interested in this job," he says, "but I haven't heard it from you."

"Well, Governor," Moag responds, "I thought it would be a little presumptuous of me to put you on the spot like that."

On February 9, the day Glendening announces Moag's appointment, the clock is already ticking down on Baltimore's NFL hopes. State legislators are threatening to revoke financing set aside for a football stadium.

In a strategy born of necessity, Glendening asks lawmakers to give him until the end of the year.

7:30 a.m., October 27: Minutes before the biggest Browns meeting of all, John Moag finds a bon voyage surprise in his car.

Arriving at Glendening's office, Moag's optimism shows when he bursts in wearing a broad smile. "Governor," he announces, "I think we've got a team."

EVER SINCE THE TEAM'S FOUNDING IN 1946, THE Browns have ranked high among Cleveland's civic treasures. The franchise was among the first in pro sports to sign an African-American player: Marion Motley joined the Browns in their debut season, a year before Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color barrier. Playing first in the All-America Football Conference

ers. It was a style that matched the Brooklyn native's background: After his father's death, the then-14-year-old Modell had gone to work at Bethlehem Steel, earning 57 cents an hour as an electrician's helper.

Within a few years of joining the league, Modell became a force among NFL owners. In 1970, he paved the way for a merger between the American and National football leagues by agreeing to shift the Browns into what would become the American Conference. And, serving on the league's broadcast committee, the onetime television entrepreneur helped develop *Monday Night Football*, the television hit that would help vault pro football to new heights of popularity.

ON MARCH 29, MOAG OPENS negotiations with the Cincinnati Bengals, flying into that city to visit with Mike Brown in his office. "Look," the Bengals owner explains, "I very badly want to stay in my town. But I don't think it's going to work out here, so I need to be prepared."

Moag listens intently, gauging the sincerity of Baltimore's most amorous NFL suitor of the moment. His reply is simple: "We can do business." But from the start Moag senses Brown's reluctance to leave Ohio.

Detailed lease negotiations with the Bengals begin, but Moag is already looking

ahead. He chooses to run his own version of football's option play.

Meeting with Frank Bramble, chairman of First National Bank of Maryland, Moag delivers an update on the Bengals scenario. "Things are fairly serious," he says, "but I'm still very pessimistic." Knowing Bramble is in frequent contact with Cleveland bank investor Al Lerner, Moag is confident his words soon will find their way back to Lerner, a minority owner of the Cleveland Browns.

A lease document with the Bengals is 85 percent done when word of a planned June 14 visit to Baltimore by Mike Brown is leaked to the Cincinnati media. The resulting uproar on the banks of the Ohio River is predictable—and effective. On June 29, the Cincinnati City Council

gives preliminary approval to a bond issue to finance a new stadium.

Moag is disappointed, but not surprised.

Brown was gonna take almost anything to stay there, he thinks.

Maryland's new strategy—high secrecy, firm deadline—has failed on its first flight.

THE ECONOMICS OF PROFESSIONAL sports underwent dramatic transformations in the 1980s that hurt old-school owners like Art Modell who rely on football for their livelihoods. They suddenly found themselves struggling to keep pace with brash and independently wealthy competitors who ignored the bottom line and spent lavishly on player contracts and team facilities.

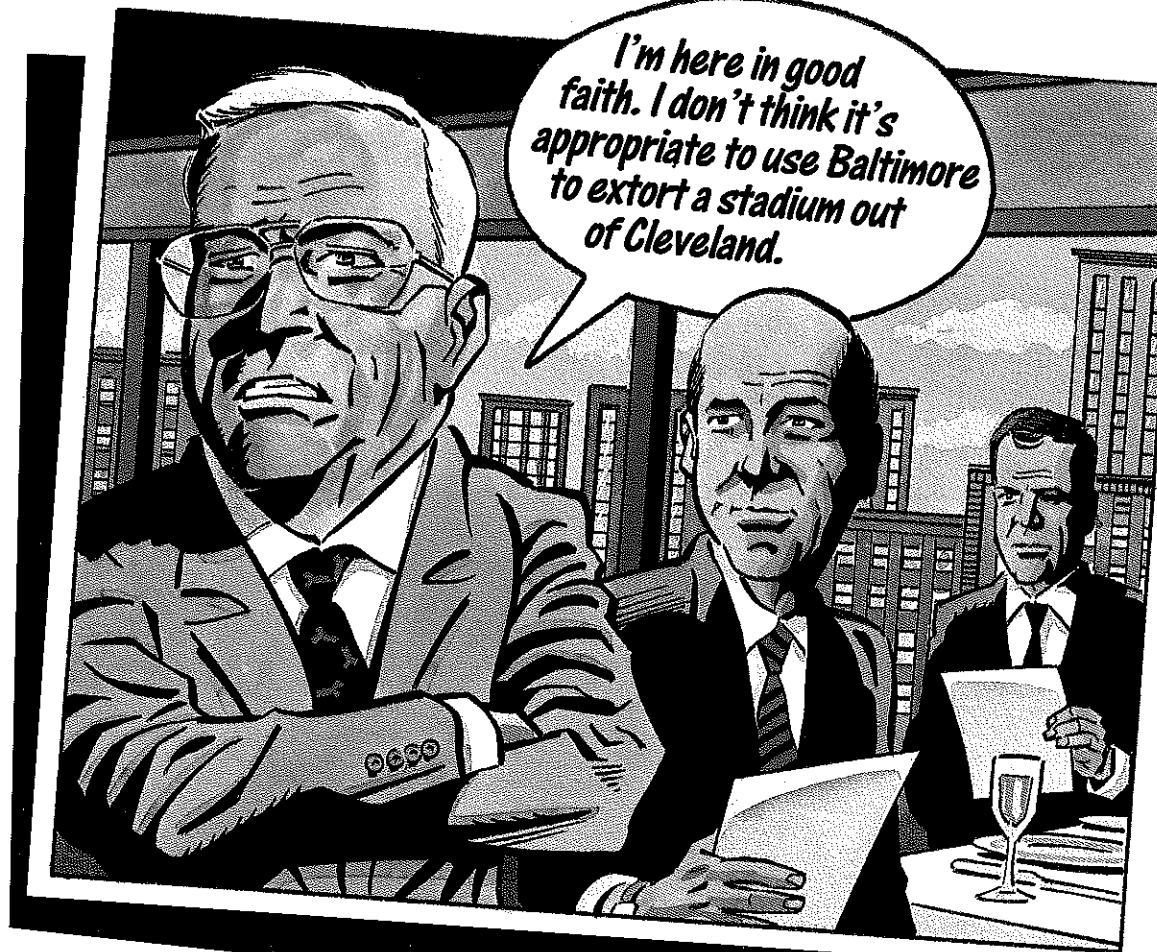
Modell faced another economic handicap as well. In 1974, he had taken over operations of Cleveland Stadium in a 25-year lease deal between the city and Modell's newly formed Stadium Corporation. Over the last 22 years, Modell says, he has spent nearly \$50 million operating and maintaining "that old barn."

Built in 1931, Cleveland Stadium once made up for its numerous shortcomings with sheer size. Even in losing seasons, the Browns regularly drew 70,000 fans.

But in the new sports economy, big attendance numbers don't translate into profitability. Instead, the financial health of teams increasingly depends on amenities found only in new stadiums—skyboxes for corporate clients and plush club-level seating for well-heeled fans. "You cannot make it in sports today," Modell insists, "without what [Orioles owner Peter] Angelos has in Camden Yards." The condition of stadiums has played a major part in every franchise move of the modern era.

In 1992, documents filed by the league in a court case over a labor dispute provided the first public indications of the Browns' bleak financial condition. The team lost \$9.1 million between 1986 and 1989, according to the documents, which also identified Modell as one of the league's lowest-paid owners, earning \$195,000 a year (which does not include earnings from the Cleveland Stadium Corporation).

I'm here in good faith. I don't think it's appropriate to use Baltimore to extort a stadium out of Cleveland.



Noon, September 18: Browns owner Art Modell arrives at Lerner's New York office for his first meeting with Moag.

"I'm a little embarrassed by this whole thing. . . . I guess this shows the carpetbagger from New York City is not milking the franchise, huh?" Modell said at the time.

Any community sympathy for Modell's financial plight was soon overwhelmed by controversial personnel moves—especially the Modell-approved release from the team of popular quarterback Bernie Kosar, an Ohio native, in 1993. The Browns have never qualified for the Super Bowl, despite several narrow misses in the '80s. The team's last championship came against the Colts in that game 31 years ago.

WAS JOHN MOAG JR. DESTINED TO BECOME THE dealmaker who would bring pro football back to Baltimore? When his family moved to Baltimore from Chicago in 1965, they took up residence within walking distance of Memorial Stadium, home of the Colts. On game days, young Moag guided cars loaded with fans into parking spaces in his parents' backyard. As an upperclassman at Loyola High School, he donned the mascot costume of the Loyola Don, leading sideline cheers for the football team.

In the fall of 1972, as a freshman at Washington College in southern Maryland, Moag headed Kent County's organization for presidential candidate George McGovern. As a senior, he was president of the school's student body.

I want to know where you guys are coming from.



2 p.m., July 28: Browns minority owner Al Lerner gets the lowdown on Baltimore's deal from John Moag.

and then in the NFL, the team won seven championships in its first 10 years.

In 1961, New York businessman Art Modell bought a majority interest in the team. The price tag on the Browns was a then-record \$3.925 million, including \$500,000 in cash which the 35-year-old Modell scrambled to raise by hitting up banks and friends and selling some New York business interests. In Modell's third season as owner, the Browns thumped the Baltimore Colts in the 1964 NFL championship game, winning by a score of 27-0.

In those early years, Modell established himself as a blue-collar owner, traveling by bus with the team and staying at the same hotels as play-



8 a.m., October 27: On a plane at BWI, John Moag and Governor Parris Glendening finally sign a lease deal with Art Modell and Al Lerner.

Diploma in hand in 1977, Moag went to work for Congressman Steny Hoyer, earning \$25 a day as a driver. "We got lost a lot," laughs Hoyer. "I gave him a lecture: 'I want you to get me from point A to point B in the quickest possible way.'" That was a lesson the young Moag would take to heart.

After graduating in 1981 from the University of Baltimore School of Law, Moag returned to Hoyer's office, this time as the congressman's chief legislative aide. "He was extraordinary," says Hoyer. "He's very smart, and a very quick study. He could write a 20-page speech in 10 minutes."

Later, Moag moved on to Patton Boggs. At age 33, he became the youngest partner in the history of the firm, and presumably the only partner who'd seen two dozen concerts by the Grateful Dead.

Now 41, Moag lives in Baltimore County with his wife, Peggy, and their two daughters. He heads the Baltimore office of Patton Boggs and supervises operations at five other branches around the country. His Maryland client list has included the likes of the Greater Baltimore Committee and the Kennedy Krieger Institute.

In his biggest success at Patton Boggs, Moag shepherded through Congress a proposal to erect a federally funded marine research center in downtown Baltimore. By 1994, when the

\$160 million Columbus Center rose up in the midst of the Inner Harbor, it was clear that Moag had learned how to play to win.

ON THE MUGGY, MID-summer morning of July 18, Parris Glendening stands at the window of a meeting room in a suburban Virginia hotel, looking across the Potomac River into Washington, D.C., home of the NFL Redskins. This scenery prompts the governor's strategy, as he decides to use this bit of geography to endear himself to his hosts, NFL commissioner Paul Tagliabue and New York Giants co-owner Robert Tisch.

Over an early breakfast, Glendening tells the two men how his 15-

year-old son, Raymond, a fanatic Giants fan, has forged a friendship with a Prince George's County police officer who once played for the Giants. "For almost 10 years in a row," Glendening adds, "Ray and I would catch the Redskins-Giants game at RFK [Stadium in Washington] and then drive up" to New Jersey to see the two teams play again at the Meadowlands.

Smiles and nods from Tagliabue and Tisch tell Glendening that he has a foot in the door. And, in a way, that's all the governor had been looking for when he asked Mercantile Bankshares Corp. chairman H. Furlong Baldwin, a Baltimorean with NFL connections, to set up a meeting designed to smooth ill will between Maryland and the NFL.

"There is a new administration and attitude," Glendening tells his hosts. "I want you to see me as a different governor."

Glendening moves to the next topic on his agenda. Baltimore is the only city in the country with public funding in place for a new stadium, he reminds them, and he wants to make *absolutely* certain that the league understands that the city no longer intends to play the football fool. He recites Maryland's ultimatum: "We want a team, or the money goes away." Ideally, the governor adds, it would be an expansion team in Baltimore.

Expansion, Tagliabue tells him, is out of the question until the next century.

Modell's voice starts to shake with emotion. "I've waited long enough," he says. "It's clear to us that nothing is going to happen" in Cleveland.

Glendening knows what this means. The city will have to play its siren song, luring a team to Baltimore just as the Colts were lured away by Indianapolis. Glendening is confident that Tisch and Tagliabue realize what's bound to happen.

After the meeting, the governor hopes that he's managed to reopen lines of communication with the league establishment. A couple of days later, Mercantile's Baldwin calls Glendening with the lowdown on how the NFL bigwigs reacted to his pitch. "Mission accomplished," Baldwin reports.

TALKS BETWEEN ART MODELL AND OHIO'S elected officials about the Browns stadium situation date back to 1984, when Cuyahoga County proposed building a \$150 million domed stadium. Modell endorsed the plan, which died when voters rejected a property-tax increase to pay for it.

Two years later, the first proposals for what would become downtown Cleveland's Gateway sports complex included a stadium to be shared by the Browns and the Indians. At the time, Modell was quoted in the media as saying the site was too small. (In 1995, he would insist, vehemently, that the Browns were never formally asked to be part of Gateway.)

When Jacobs Field opened at Gateway in 1994, the Indians were among baseball's best teams—as well as the toast of their hometown. One close friend of Modell's says the Browns owner grew jealous of the Indians' success. "His ego was nicked," says this friend. "The last two years, all you heard about around town was the Indians. Suddenly, Modell wasn't top cat anymore."

Downtown Cleveland, meanwhile, continued on its crash course toward an improved image. Work was underway at Gateway on a new arena for the Cavaliers. The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum was rising on the edge of Lake Erie, as was the Great Lakes Science Center. The Flats, once a grimy industrial area, was reborn as a sparkling conglomeration of nightclubs and neon.

Cleveland Stadium just kept getting older. Negotiations between Modell and Ohio politicians over stadium renovations date to 1987. At first, Modell had asked for a lease extension through 2008, vowing to pump \$10 million into improvements. But the plan—which included a heavy penalty should the Browns move—never won City Council approval.

In January 1995, a task force appointed by Mayor Michael White recommended renovating Cleveland Stadium. In May, White endorsed the recommendation of a second task force that the project be financed in part with a 10 percent

parking tax. But four days later, Modell announced that his negotiations with the city were over until after the 1995 football season, a moratorium that has since become infamous in Cleveland.

White pressed ahead. The City Council eventually approved a revised tax plan. A proposal to complete the financing package by extending a county-wide "sin" tax went before county commissioners, who decided to put the issue before voters in November.

In the aftermath of Modell's decision to move his team to Baltimore, the two sides presented wildly divergent accounts of why the negotiations failed.

Modell claimed that the city and county missed numerous deadlines and couldn't finance the plans they eventually submitted. "For six years, I have been waiting for something to happen," he complained. "I'm out of options." At a time when public investments were showered on the Indians, the Cavaliers and the two lakefront museums, he fumed, "I'm trying to get my laboratories to work."

Elected officials, though, felt that the only option the city and county failed to offer Modell was the choice between grass and artificial turf. They contended that Modell never issued deadlines in the first place. In 1995, they said, he failed to warn them that time was running out. "This has all been a put-up and a charade," Mayor White charged, "designed to ensure his deceptive negotiations" with Maryland would go forward.

(In November, after the deal was announced, Cleveland pressed its case in the Ohio courts, winning an injunction blocking—for the moment—the Browns move to Baltimore. As this issue went to press, the case remained unresolved—as did questions about whether Modell eventually would agree to let Cleveland keep the name "Browns" in the event the city wins another NFL franchise.)

IN EARLY JULY, AFTER FIVE MONTHS ON THE JOB, John Moag is back at square one. Negotiations with the Bengals are dead. Which NFL prospect would Maryland flirt with next?

The answer comes in a phone call to Moag's office from First National Bank of Maryland's Frank Bramble. "John," Bramble says, "Al Lerner would like to meet with you."

It looks like Moag's option play is working. A few months back, he had ordered background reports on key executives and owners at NFL franchises in financial trouble. He'd been particularly impressed with Lerner's bio. *This isn't a guy who places casual calls, Moag thinks. This isn't a guy who wastes time playing games.*



7 p.m., November 1 or 2: While Moag listens at home, a talk-radio caller gives WBAL listeners the inside scoop on the top-secret Browns move.

THE SON OF UKRAINIAN IMMIGRANTS, ALFRED Lerner grew up in New York City, living in apartments attached to a succession of candy stores his father owned. He graduated from Columbia University, then signed on with the Marines. After his discharge, he moved briefly to Baltimore, earning \$75 a week selling furniture for Ethan Allen.

Lerner then moved to Cleveland and turned his attention to real estate, earning his first fortune during the '60s and '70s by buying, selling and syndicating apartments and shopping centers.

In the '80s, Lerner moved on to banking. He invested in Equitable Bancorp of Baltimore and eventually became director of Baltimore's largest bank. He and a partner also made a run at Cleveland's leading bank, AmeriTrust Corp. Though the duo never succeeded in gaining control, they did manage to turn an estimated \$30 million profit before walking away.

In 1989, Lerner sold Bancorp of Baltimore to MNC Financial, Inc. He later became chairman of MNC and is widely credited with rescuing the company from deep trouble.

With a fortune estimated at more than \$850 million, Lerner is a fixture on *Forbes* magazine's annual list of the 400 richest people in America. He and his wife, Norma, live in the exclusive Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights.

Lerner's involvement with the Cleveland Browns dates to 1988, when he bought a 5 per-

cent share in the team. At about this time, Modell's health faltered and he was no longer able to travel in the players' plane and stay in the same hotels. Lerner and Modell began flying together in Lerner's plane to Browns road games.

Lerner's interest in owning an NFL expansion team in Baltimore dates at least to the early '90s. (By some accounts, his overtures date back to 1985.) But no firm proposal developed until the waning weeks of the 1993 expansion campaign, after the NFL awarded a team to Charlotte. Baltimore, desperate for someone with NFL connections, turned to Lerner. But the strategy flopped when Jacksonville got the second team.

"Lerner became our last hope," recalls Herb Belgrad. "And I guess there was some degree of disappointment because we anticipated he would make an all-out effort to lobby the owners in advance, and that Art Modell would be by his side. . . . A lot of the preliminary effort that we had anticipated never took place."

In the end, not even Modell voted for Baltimore. (Today, Modell says owners were reluctant to choose between the two recently spurned cities of St. Louis and Baltimore, so they opted instead for Jacksonville.) Despite mixed feelings about Lerner's performance, the leaders of Baltimore's expansion campaign never blamed Lerner or Modell for the defeat. Other villains—most notably, NFL Commissioner Tagliabue and Washington Redskins owner Jack Kent Cooke—earned Baltimore's ire by opposing the city's bid more directly.

AT 2 P.M. ON THE AFTERNOON OF JULY 28, JOHN Moag walks through Baltimore-Washington International Airport, bound for a runway rendezvous with Al Lerner. Moag expects to meet a very substantial and very straightforward man. Once aboard the plane, he's not disappointed. Lerner offers Moag a bottle of water, as the two sit and exchange introductions.

"I want to know where you guys are coming from," Lerner says simply.

The two discuss Maryland's deal in broad outlines. Already, Lerner knows most of the details from his participation in the Baltimore

"You're going to have to leave town by Monday," Modell tells his wife of 26 years. "You can't be living here when I make this announcement."

expansion effort. Moag tells Lerner of the year's-end deadline, and he stresses the importance of secrecy.

The meeting is short, simple and serious. Lerner asks only a few questions. "I have been through many years with this man, trying to make things work in Cleveland," he says of Art Modell. "I believe Art has come to the conclusion that it is simply not going to work out."

As the meeting ends, Lerner promises to call soon.

After leaving the plane, Moag drives to Annapolis to meet with the governor. As a dealmaker, Moag has learned to check his emotions—*Don't get too pumped up, don't get too discouraged*, he often reminds himself—but now he briefly loses that equilibrium. "The fact that Al Lerner flew in here to talk to me, to find out what our situation was, indicated to me that Art Modell was fed up in Cleveland," Moag would say later.

Arriving at Glendening's office, Moag's optimism shows when he bursts in wearing a broad smile. "Governor," he announces, "I think we've got a team."

"John, are you certain?"

"Yes."

"You know we've heard this before. Are you really certain?"

"Yes."

Moag is anxious for the meeting to wind down so that he can get to Bethany Beach and join his family on vacation. Glendening offers Moag a piece of parting advice: "Now John, look, I don't want you to be worrying about this on your vacation. After all, it's only your career."

"Thanks a lot, Governor."

Moag's enthusiasm proves infectious. A few nights later, over dinner at a restaurant, Glendening confides the news to a friend: "I think we have a better than 50-50 chance of getting the Browns."

His friend is confused: "The Browns what?"

"The Cleveland Browns."

"Yeah, sure. Have another beer."

ON THE EVENING OF SEPTEMBER 6, IN THE warehouse adjacent to Oriole Park at Camden

Yards, the private Camden Club is jammed with sports celebrities, visiting dignitaries and business elites. In a few hours, Cal Ripken is expected to play in his 2,131st consecutive game for the Orioles, topping Lou Gehrig's legendary record.

Al Lerner and John Moag are among the celebrants. Though the rest of the negotiations between the Browns and Baltimore would be



Noon, November 6: Governor Parris Glendening breaks the news, with John Moag and Art Modell at his side.

veiled in secrecy, on Ripken's triumphant night Lerner and Moag meet in this thoroughly public forum. The two drift off to a corner for 15 minutes of low-key talk, mostly about Maryland's chances to swing a deal for a team by dealing directly with the NFL offices. Both men think such a strategy is a longshot at best.

It's Moag who presses the conversation forward. "I don't see any reason why we shouldn't get to work on this deal," he tells Lerner. "Then we can put it in a safe-deposit box and keep it quiet until you're ready to run with it."

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"Fair enough," Lerner responds. "I'll call you Thursday. It may be time for you to meet Art Modell."

ART MODELL WAS BORN ON JUNE 23, 1925. After his stint at Bethlehem Steel, he served in the Army Air Corps during World War II. Upon returning to New York he sold ABC on a plan to familiarize the public with the new technology of television by installing custom-made TV sets in 200 New York City supermarkets. Later, Modell owned a television production company and became a partner in an advertising firm.

After buying the Browns and moving to Cleveland, Modell had an immediate impact on the city. In the early '60s, he was a fixture on the downtown nightlife circuit, gathering regularly around Table 14 at the Pewter Mug restaurant with the likes of George Steinbrenner—the shipping magnate who would later buy the New York Yankees—and Michael D. Roberts, who would become editor of *Cleveland Magazine*.

"He liked people and had a sense of generosity, not only with money but with his feelings," Roberts once recalled. "There was a sensitivity about him, countered by a sometimes curt manner. Sometimes he was ruled more by emotion than by logic."

Modell lived at Winton Place, a lake-front high rise 10 minutes west of downtown. He was well-liked, known for kindness and generosity. When Browns star Ernie Davis died of leukemia in May 1963, Modell chartered an airplane to fly the Browns contingent to the funeral in Elmira, New York.

In 1969, the 44-year-old Modell married Patricia Breslin, an actress who sacrificed her career in Hollywood to join Modell in Cleveland. Modell immediately adopted his new wife's two sons, David and John.

In the '70s, Modell's business ventures grew broader in scope. His Cleveland Stadium Corporation purchased an amusement park in Tennessee, property in Cleveland's suburbs and a hotel in downtown Cleveland. But by the early 1980s, his real estate dealings were deeply in debt. He tried to sell the business to the Browns, but was blocked in court by Browns minority owner Robert D. Gries.

Some observers suspect that Modell's biggest financial mistake was his reported failure as a younger man to buy life insurance designed to help his heirs pay off estate taxes. Around the

National Football League, says financial planner Robert K. O'Dell, Modell's current situation is known as the "Robbie Dilemma," after the late Miami Dolphins owner Joe Robbie, whose family was forced to sell the team in 1994 to pay estate taxes.

But for Modell, who had heart bypass surgery in 1990 and a hip replacement in 1993, such an insurance policy had become prohibitively expensive by the time he saw what happened to the Robbie family.

ON SEPTEMBER 17, MOAG STROLLS INTO a tobacconist's shop in Georgetown. "I'll have two boxes of Davidoff Double Rs," he informs the clerk.

This is not one of Moag's usual errands. He's not much of a cigar smoker, but lately he's been asking friends what brands are top of the line. Moag signs a credit card slip to pay the tab. It isn't until he and the cigars are back in his car that he checks the receipt. Two boxes of Davidoff Double Rs cost \$890.

AT NOON ON SEPTEMBER 18, MOAG strolls purposefully into Al Lerner's New York City office, cigar boxes tucked under his arm. Maryland Stadium Authority general counsel Alison Asti and MSA executive director Bruce Hoffman also have made the trip.

The first thing the Marylanders notice is the breathtaking view, floor-to-ceiling windows offering a panorama of Central Park. The trio walks past a dining table, set with china and silver for eight, on their way to meet the Browns contingent gathered in the chairs and sofas arrayed near Lerner's mahogany desk. Awaiting their arrival are Lerner; Modell; Modell's son, David, vice-president of the Browns; Jim Bailey, executive vice president of the Browns; and attorney James Berick.

Moag hands one box of cigars to Lerner, an aficionado whose devotion is such that he maintains a humidor in his office. Lerner demurs, suggesting that perhaps Moag should offer them to David Modell.

"No, no," Moag protests, extending the second box in David's direction. "I've got one for you too."

Finally, Moag, now empty-handed, turns to the elder Modell. "And Art," he announces, "I've brought you a \$200 million stadium."

After a round of introductions, it's the stout, snowy-peaked Modell who breaks the ice, in a voice that betrays his Brooklyn origins. "I know you've been burned time and again," the Browns owner says, "but I'm here in

good faith. I'm not going to use you. I don't think it's appropriate to use Baltimore to extort a stadium out of Cleveland."

Modell's voice starts to shake with emotion as he talks of leaving his home of 35 years. Referring to the stadium situation in Cleveland, Modell says, "I've waited long enough. It's clear to us that nothing is going to happen."

Asti is impressed. In nine years representing the Stadium Authority, she's negotiated near deals with many of Baltimore's NFL suitors—Buccaneers, Rams, Raiders and Bengals. Now, hearing the strain in Modell's voice, a glimmer of hope punctures the cloak of her cynicism. *Maybe he is coming to Baltimore.*

Moag speaks first for the Maryland contingent.

"I want you to know," he assures Modell, "that if you're interested in doing business with us, I will be very straightforward. I will not bulls-t you."

When a waiter arrives, carrying a tray filled with salmon, chicken breast and London broil, it's time to break for lunch. Guests serve themselves from the tray, then take seats at the dining table. Moag and Lerner dominate a spirited political discussion about the coming presidential election campaign. Members of the Cleveland contingent express hope that then-undecided Colin Powell would opt to enter the race.

After lunch, Moag sums up the state of negotiations by saying, "You know what this deal is, Mr. Modell. I don't have to sit here and rehash it."

As the meeting continues, it becomes clear that only three major issues remain unresolved. First, the Browns want to cover moving expenses by selling personal seat licenses. (Increasingly common, PSLs force fans to pay a one-time fee for the right to buy season tickets.) Second, Modell and Lerner want to form a new firm, the Maryland Stadium Corporation, to manage the new stadium. And finally, the Browns want the right to select a concessionaire.

In the minds of Moag, Asti and Hoffman, none of these issues is insurmountable.

HOW IS IT THAT BALTIMORE, A CITY without an NFL team since 1984, could bring a \$200 million football-only stadium and lay it on the table before Art Modell? Oddly enough, the answer starts with the often-vilified Colts owner Robert Irsay.

When Irsay moved the team to Indianapolis, he sparked a panic among Baltimore's civic leaders. Was Baltimore about to lose its major

league standing? Fears deepened that Orioles owner Edward Bennett Williams might move his baseball team to his hometown of Washington, D.C.

In 1986, then-Governor Hughes asked Herb Belgrad to look into strategies for dealing with the crisis. Three short months later, Belgrad gave new governor William Donald Schaefer a remarkably prescient set of recommendations.

First, Belgrad concluded that renovating Memorial Stadium wasn't a viable solution in the new sports economy of the '80s. Only a new stadium would suffice. Second, he said, rather than a multi-purpose stadium, Baltimore would need a baseball-only stadium for the Orioles first—and then, perhaps, a football-only facility if the NFL ever returned.

Schaefer, who was mayor when Baltimore lost the Colts, took Belgrad's report to a skeptical General Assembly. An arduous uphill lobbying campaign eventually convinced legislators that the state should invest heavily in professional sports as an economic development tool.

"Now that everybody loves Camden Yards, people forget just how controversial it was," recalls attorney Alan M. Rifkin, who was then legislative counsel for Schaefer. Rifkin predicts a similar phenomenon over football will unfold in the coming years.

When John Moag considers the upheaval over franchise moves in professional football, he sees a simple, hard truth about the new sports economy. Cities that choose to make professional sports teams an economic priority—by spending big money on state-of-the-art facilities—will get and keep teams; cities that don't will lose them.

ON OCTOBER 6, LESS THAN THREE weeks after the New York meeting, the deal is in the hands of the lawyers. At the Washington law offices of Jones, Day, Reavis & Pogue, Alison Asti meets with Modell's lawyers for a day-long, line-by-line review of a proposed stadium lease. But the deal hasn't cleared every hurdle yet. The days ahead bring some tense moments. When the two sides reach an impasse at one point, Moag calls a halt to the talks.

Lerner and Moag smooth things in a subsequent phone call, during which Lerner explains one of his golden rules of deal-making by relaying an anecdote about his father: The elder Lerner was once on the verge of buying a liquor store, but the deal turned sour when he and the seller argued over who would

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take possession of some toilet paper stored in the building. Lerner concludes his tale with a moral: "Never let a deal fall apart because of the toilet paper."

By mid-October, negotiations are back on track. The two sides agree on an \$80 million cap on PSL revenue. Stadium management issues are resolved.

ON THE WEEKEND OF OCTOBER 14, Alison Asti flies to Milwaukee for a sports-facilities conference attended by team owners, municipal officials and members of the media. She overhears talk about the state of Baltimore's negotiations with the Buccaneers. Someone stands up in a meeting at one

Pen in hand, Modell doesn't hesitate. He already has steeled himself to the task at hand.

point and discusses the critical nature of the upcoming referendum vote in Cleveland. *Isn't it interesting*, Asti thinks, *that no one has a clue?*

Back in her hotel room, Asti opens a package that's been overnighted from Cleveland. It contains a nearly final version of a lease agreement between Baltimore and the Browns.

ON THE MORNING OF OCTOBER 27, John Moag arrives on time for his 8 a.m. meeting after all. In fact, he's the first one at BWI, pulling up in his balloon-bedecked Lexus. Governor Glendening's car arrives just as Al Lerner's plane taxis toward the airport's private Signature terminal.

Glendening emerges and surveys the scene. "That's a nice plane," the governor marvels.

Once aboard, Glendening takes a seat across from Art Modell, while Moag sits down next to the Browns owner.

"I bet you didn't think this was ever gonna happen," Modell says, slapping Moag's knee.

"There were days when I wondered," Moag responds.

Modell then turns to Glendening, whom he is meeting for the first time. "This is one of the most difficult things I've ever done," he says in a somber tone. The two chat amiably for more than half an hour, touching on health care issues and pausing on the coincidence that both their wives are active in the hospice movement.

Eventually, the moment of truth arrives. Pen in hand, Modell doesn't

hesitate. He already has steeled himself to the task at hand. *I know this is the right thing.*

He and Moag each sign two copies of the lease. One copy will head back to Cleveland. The other will end up in a locked drawer in Moag's desk. Both sides agree that the deal won't be announced until the end of December.

The Cleveland contingent, which includes Lerner and David Modell, passes out victory cigars. Glendening, an avid anti-smoker, declines to partake and soon grows uncomfortable in the haze. Modell notices the governor's discomfort and extinguishes his cigar.

But the atmosphere remains exceeding-

ly thick. Excusing himself, Glendening is the first to leave the plane. The others stay aboard for another 45 minutes, celebrating and ironing out details.

ON OCTOBER 31, THE VEIL OF SECRECY surrounding the deal is falling away. Media in both cities are already chasing rumors of an imminent Browns move to Baltimore.

Modell is certain the leak originated in Maryland; Moag suspects it started in Cleveland. In either case, Modell's now in a bind. If he confirms a move, he risks ruining his team's season. If he denies a move, he'll have to admit his deception in the months to come. And then there are the voters to consider: The referendum on Cleveland Stadium renovations is just eight days away.

I've got to level with the public, Modell concludes. He calls John Moag and tells him it's time to schedule a press conference.

Later, in the Modells' Waite Hill home, Art informs his wife of 26 years about the change in plans. "You're going to have to leave town by Monday," he says.

"Why?" Patricia asks.

"You can't be living here when I make this announcement."

Patricia is crestfallen at the thought of never again seeing her house, of leaving Cleveland. She realizes that she has just a few days to pack. Slowly, she faces up to the task before her.

I'd go with Art to the North Pole if he wanted me to, she tells herself.

That evening, in Baltimore County,

Peggy Moag returns home from Halloween trick-or-treating with Lauren and Alexandra to find her husband pacing the house like a caged lion. Peggy and the girls give him space.

At 8:30 p.m., three hours ahead of schedule, John walks past his wife on his way to the stairs. "I'm going to bed," he says, distantly.

"Okay," Peggy replies, not wanting to ask.

Forty-five minutes later, John reappears downstairs.

"I'm going for a run," he announces. "Okay," Peggy says.

But he never leaves the house. Instead, he heads for the screened-in back porch, where he lights a cigarette.

One evening later that week, Moag hears a caller to a sports-talk show on WBAL radio announce in breathless fashion that the Browns are moving to Baltimore and that he heard the news from one of the governor's bodyguards. The show's hosts, skeptical of such a longshot possibility, simply move on to the next caller. *Whoa*, Moag thinks, *if the state police are talking, we've got a serious problem on our hands.*

ON THE NIGHT OF NOVEMBER 3, Baltimore's WBAL-TV breaks the story.

The next morning, as the news spreads through Cleveland, a gentle snow is falling—eerily reminiscent of the weather that 1984 morning in Baltimore when the city learned of the Colts' departure.

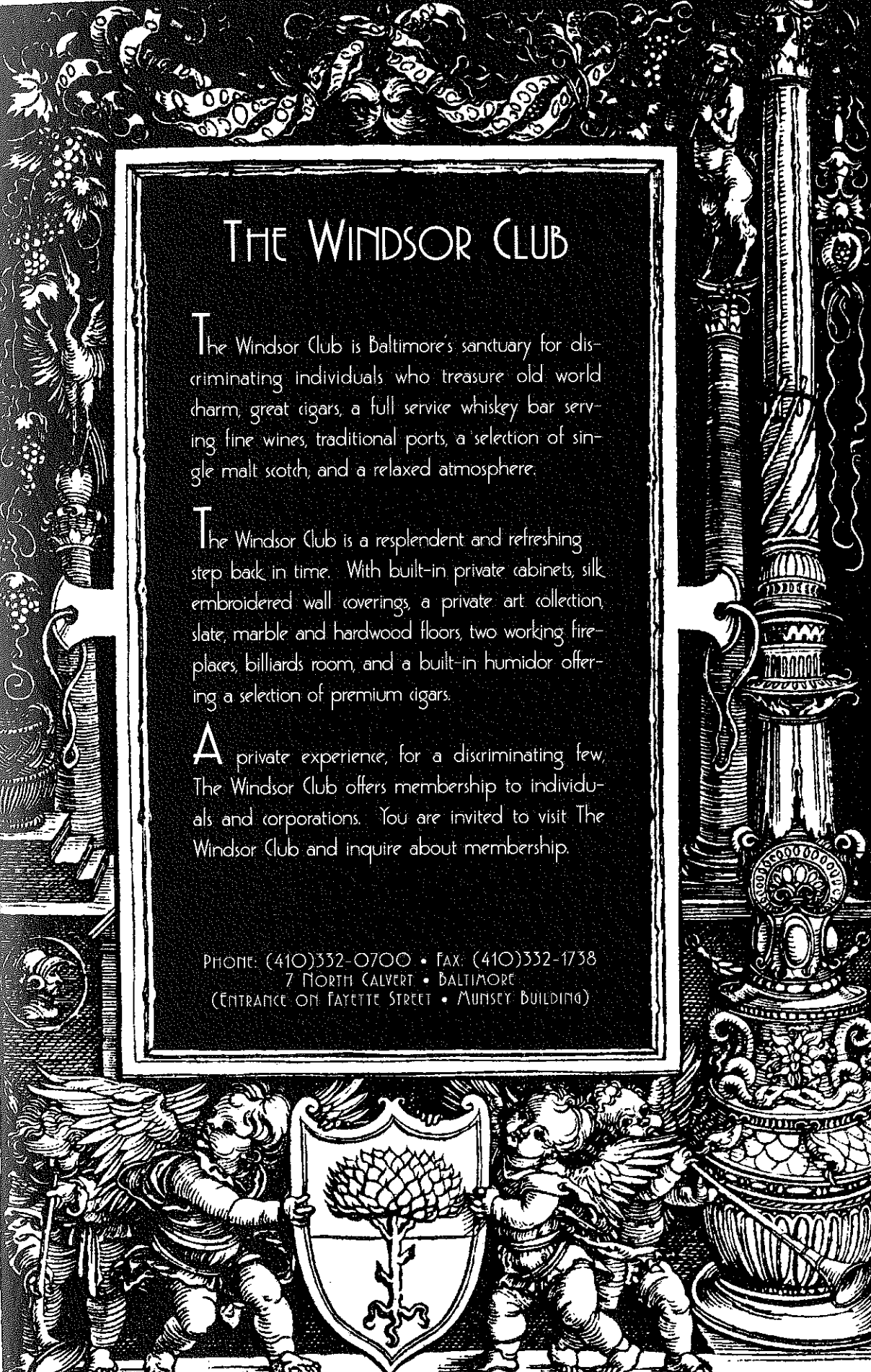
AT 11:45 A.M. ON MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6, Patricia Modell finishes packing in her suburban Cleveland home. All weekend, she'd been too busy organizing to really focus on events. Now, the situation finally hits home. A couple of Modell family employees notice the shell-shocked expression on her face and ask if she's alright.

Patricia reassures them. She's determined not to cry.

Fifteen minutes later, while Patricia is in a car headed for the airport to catch a plane bound for Florida, her husband is 358 miles away in downtown Baltimore.

Despite the fact that temperatures have dipped under 50 degrees, Art Modell is not wearing an overcoat as he climbs a makeshift dais in a downtown parking lot, the planned site of the city's new football stadium.

Joining him on the platform are Glendening, Moag and Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke. Minutes later, the governor delivers the news that will shock Cleveland and surprise Baltimore: The Browns and Baltimore have eloped. ■



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