

Snyder needs to be shown wise hiring is not humbug

UNLIKE Ebenezer Scrooge. Daniel Snyder has rarely been miserly with his money. But the owner of Washington's NFL franchise shouldn't be surprised if, like Charles Dickens' protagonist, he is visited by holiday spirits during this critical off-season for his team.

Let's call them the Ghosts of Gridirons Past, Present and Future.

The Ghost of Gridirons Past would escort Snyder back to the happy days of his childhood and adolescence, when RFK Stadium's stands were filled and bouncing. George Allen led the Over the Hill Gang to the Super Bowl and a well-oiled machine won three Lombardi Trophies, thanks largely to a coach (Joe Gibbs) and general manager (Bobby

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Steve DeShazo



TUNE IN

**GIANTS (3-11)
at REDSKINS (3-11)**

FedEx Field,
Landover, Md.,
Sunday, 1 p.m.
(Fox. WGRQ-FM 95.9)

Beathard) who would be elected to the NFL Hall of Fame.

The scene presented by the Ghost of Gridirons Present would actually look like what Scrooge sees in the future: a half-empty stadium full of opposing team jerseys and an

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apathetic fan base tired of losing seasons and mismanagement.

That ghost need only escort Snyder to his suite for Sunday's home finale against the equally inept New York Giants. Given the proximity to the holiday and the wretchedness of both teams, it'll be a Christmas miracle if one-third of the seats at FedEx Field are filled—and because of the opponent's jerseys, it may be a mostly blue Christmas.

Which brings us to the Ghost of Gridirons Future, who takes Snyder to a post-apocalyptic world in which no qualified candidate wants to coach his team, no top-notch free agent will accept his money and no one will attend a game in his expensive new stadium that local governments refuse to subsidize.

After two decades of incompetence in a league designed to promote parity, it can't get much worse.

Can it?

With Snyder, there's never a rock bottom. But there is hope if he, like Scrooge, finally realizes the error of his ways. (Spoiler alert: Don't count on it.)

Insulated from criticism, Snyder may not fully grasp just how toxic a reputation he, Allen and his team have. If he listened to Todd McShay, he might get a hint.

"I would rather coach any team, I would rather coach 31 other teams than Washington right now," the ESPN analyst said on Dan Patrick's syndicated radio show last week.

"Right now, under the current construct, Washington can't succeed," McShay continued. "They need Daniel Snyder to take a step back, they need to hire a general manager that knows football and can evaluate players, and they need a coach who can take those players and develop them."

At the moment, Snyder has Bruce Allen (George's son), a sycophant who has mismanaged nearly everything but infamously insisted that "We're winning off the field." Snyder has had several quality coaches (Marty Schottenheimer, Gibbs 2.0 and Mike Shanahan) and an accomplished GM (Scot McCloughan)—but never both at the same time.

He has chased big, past-their-prime names while allowing promising young assistant coaches to leave and flourish elsewhere (Kyle Shanahan in San Francisco, Sean McVay in L.A. and Matt LaFleur in Green Bay).

He and Allen have wasted money on high-profile free agents without regard to how they'd fit. The latest is cornerback Josh Norman, who's now in a bizarre highly-paid purgatory in which he's on the active roster but sitting behind players who were

signed for the league minimum last week.

As with Scrooge, nothing will change until Snyder's heart does. The whole world is calling for him to fire Allen. That has yet to happen, although in a change, Snyder hasn't been seen with Allen on the sideline before games recently.

If the job were to come without strings, there are (believe it or not) some competent people who might be interested in being Washington's GM—like ESPN analyst Louis Riddick, a former scout for the team, or Kyle Smith, Washington's current director of college scouting.

Either might be able to hire a qualified coach who could exploit Washington's nucleus of young talent (Terry McLaurin, Dwayne Haskins, Ryan Anderson) and get more out of an underachieving defensive line. He could try to mend fences with disgruntled Pro Bowl tackle Trent Williams and convince impending free agent guard Brandon Scherff to stay.

That's a lot to ask, though. And none of it can happen until and unless Snyder finally realizes, like "Seinfeld"'s George Costanza, that every decision he makes is wrong. Maybe a few spiritual visitors can get through to him.

Sweet dreams, Dan.

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Outdated University Hall made for wealth of memories

DIVE BARS and and hole-in-the-wall restaurants are often vastly superior to their big-chain alternatives, but their profit margins can be razor-thin.

So, too, are college basketball arenas. With one notable exception, bigger is considered better in the arms race that has taken over the federally investigated sport.

Duke could build and sell out a monstrosity twice the size of cozy Cameron Indoor Stadium, but the Blue Devils prefer their unique and raucous home court advantage. Almost everywhere else, though, cavernous coliseums with luxury suites have replaced intimate arenas.

It is thus at Virginia, where University Hall will be demolished on Saturday morning—13 years after the Cavaliers moved across the street into palatial John Paul Jones Arena.

You can argue that the reigning national champion Cavaliers might not have wooed Tony Bennett to move cross-continent—and wouldn't have cut down the nets in Minneapolis last month—without the lure of a state-of-the-art facility and the commitment it shows to winning. The new arena certainly helped Virginia's bottom line on and off the court.

Still, for those who spent any time inside

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University Hall, there's a bit of sadness at its demise. Maybe that's why many fans lined up this week to take home a free brick before Saturday's final TNT blast.

I arrived in Charlottesville in the late summer of 1981, when Ralph Sampson and the Cavaliers were ranked No. 1 in the nation. Then as now, tickets were hard to come by; students had to submit self-addressed stamped envelopes a week before each home game, hoping to be chosen in a lottery.

If you were lucky enough to get a seat, you sometimes got to witness royalty—before and after Sampson's four-year tenure. N.C. State's David Thompson visited once a year in the 1970s; Michael Jordan, James Worthy and Len Bias were annual guests in the '80s, Christian Laettner and Duke brought their road show to town in the '90s.

The Cavaliers often rose to the occasion. Richard Morgan's 39-point tour de force in a 1989 upset of North Carolina may be the top individual performance in the arena's history, along with Sampson's last-second jumper that beat Maryland in his home finale six years earlier.

My favorite memory came earlier in that 1982–83 season. The Cavaliers were in the midst of a 98–81 blowout of a very good Louisville team when Sampson led a fast break by throwing a behind-the-back bounce pass to Rick Carlisle. The current Dallas Mavericks coach threw down possibly the only dunk of his college career, leaving



ZACK WAJSGRAS / THE DAILY PROGRESS

Charlottesville residents take souvenir bricks made available at the University Hall demolition site.



A copy of a printed page shows Ralph Sampson playing at University Hall.

fans to wonder which was more impressive: the pass or the jam.

Moments like that inspired a din that often threatened to blow the roof off what former player and coach Jeff Jones referred to as the “pregnant clam.” That was a tribute to its signature scalloped roof on which someone painted “Ralph’s House” in 1979, when the Cavaliers helicoptered Sampson into town while recruiting him out of Harrisonburg High School.

It wasn’t all glamorous, by any means. Toward

the end of its four-decade tenure, University Hall leaked and occasionally stank, and like many facilities built in the 1960s, its walls were insulated by asbestos. Parking was always scarce, especially in the glory days when everyone wanted to be there.

Like most buildings, University Hall reached its expiration date. And upon taking over as athletic director in 2001, Craig Littlepage saw both the program and its home court in decay and began planning to build the sparkling John Paul Jones Arena across the street from University Hall. It cost \$131 million, but has paid for itself in revenue and exposure, thanks to Bennett’s arrival and the team’s recent dominance.

Still, even if you now drive a Bentley, you probably appreciate the Ford Pinto that once (usually) got you from Point A to Point B. Longtime Virginia fans are undoubtedly grateful for JPJ and their program’s lofty status, but most are also aware of its origins—and a little sad to see a piece of it end.

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Free agents will find riches, not resolve

BEFORE HIS champagne-soaked uniform dried Thursday morning, Anthony Rendon officially became a free agent. Stephen Strasburg now can opt out of his contract. That's the sobering news.

They're certainly free to sign elsewhere. But if they do, they'll have an awfully hard time convincing anyone that they're not doing so for completely financial reasons. That's because their current employer, the Washington Nationals, has a couple of things money can't buy: a World Series trophy and

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chemistry.

To be clear, you have to pay to win. And the Lerner family has, in the past decade, stroked massive checks to sign free agents and retain their own stars: \$210 million to Max Scherzer, \$175 million to Strasburg, \$140 million to Patrick Corbin, \$126 million each to Ryan Zimmerman and Jayson Werth. (Some of that

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money was deferred, but that's a topic for another day.)

Still, there are plenty of teams with massive payrolls, losing records and poor clubhouse morale.

Spend eight months working, traveling, competing and essentially living with a few dozen people, and petty conflicts are sure to arise—especially when you're 19–31. But if these world champion Nationals held any grudges against each other, they did a remarkable job of hiding them.

The euphoric celebration on the Minute Maid Park field after the final out of Wednesday night's series-clinching 6–2 Game 7 win over the Houston Astros marked the culmination of a remarkable season in which the Nationals won less often than in some years past, but definitely enjoyed themselves (and each other) more.

Yes, stellar pitching by Strasburg, Scherzer, Corbin and Anibal Sánchez had a lot to do with it. So did the metronomic consistency of Rendon, the emerging brilliance of Juan Soto and Victor Robles and the unexpected contributions from veterans like Howie Kendrick and Adam Eaton, among others.

In a sport that's getting younger and relies more heavily than ever on analytics, the veteran Nationals' unexpected October surge may make other teams rethink their strategies.

But these Nationals also ended years of postseason frustration largely because they enjoyed the journey.

General manager

Mike Rizzo made several in-season moves that bolstered a talented but underachieving roster. He upgraded a horrendous bullpen at the trade deadline and re-signed infielder Asdrubal Cabrera, who started Games 6 and 7 of the World Series, after he was cast off by the Texas Rangers.

But who could have guessed that arguably their most important pickup would be a veteran backup outfielder who would earn only 188 regular-season at-bats and get one postseason hit?

Gerardo Parra's real contribution came in the clubhouse, where he mentored Soto and Robles. And his infectious "Baby Shark" walkup music became a phenomenon that energized both his team and a fan base that had dwindled from recent years.

"I told him, 'I don't care if you're 2 for 100. I need you to bring energy every day,' " manager Dave Martinez said of Parra during the playoffs.

That enthusiasm spread to home run dugout dances, uncomfortably long hugs and an odd ritual in which Kendrick and Eaton would sit beside each other on the bench and pantomime shifting a car's gears after a big hit. All of that loosened up usually stoic home-grown veterans like Strasburg and Zimmerman, who enjoyed the most productive postseasons of their careers (and smiled a lot more).

Which brings us to the elephant that's no longer in the room: Bryce Harper.

Harper is unquestionably a superior talent, but there's little doubt he sucked most of the air out of the Nationals' clubhouse—especially in

2018, as his free agency approached.

Harper said all the right things about wanting to stay, but it was clear that he wanted a record contract—and the rival Philadelphia Phillies gave him \$330 million. (Even that mark didn't last long, though; the Angels committed \$426 million to Mike Trout a few months later. And Harper had a Freudian slip at his introductory press conference, speaking of "bringing a title back to D.C.")

They did it, and it can now be said: the Nationals are officially better without Harper. They are looser and more versatile. On opening day, without mentioning Harper by name, his former teammates talked about how "everyone is equal" in the clubhouse.

Now comes the hard part for Rizzo. The Nationals could defend their title with a virtually intact roster next year, but the team must decide on appropriate roles and salaries for veterans like Zimmerman and Kendrick. Zimmerman could choose this as a fitting time to retire, although he has said he plans to keep playing.

And it's Rendon's and Strasburg's turns to test the market. Like Harper, both are represented by Scott Boras, who likes to squeeze every penny for his clients.

Rendon's contract will top \$200 million. Strasburg's will be shorter, but also expensive. Coming off their best seasons, they've earned the right to cash in. But it's hard to image them getting more bang (or satisfaction) for their megabucks anywhere else.