

# Memories of an old freshman

*Brian Keelan - October 2020*

In 1963 I was a freshman in residence at Christ The King College, a.k.a. “The King” – the catholic college for men at the University of Western Ontario. All the good little catholic boys who went to Western were supposed to go there so that we would not get too corrupted as we began to mingle with the heathens and infidels of the outside world and – in those days – I was a good little catholic boy.

My roommate was Mike Dwyer, fresh out of Michael Power Catholic High School For Boys in Toronto. It seemed to us that the Catholic Church was doing everything in its power to keep the catholic boys from associating with women... especially catholic women, since Brescia College – the catholic college for all the good little catholic girls – was on the other side of the campus. It was as far away from the catholic boys as they could get it. As Mike said, “Probably a Papal decree.” But Huron College – a protestant boy’s college – was right beside the catholic girl’s college... so good luck with that decree Your Holiness.

On day one, I was setting up and installing my \$29.95 General Electric AM/FM clock radio when the door of my room burst open and this red haired, freckle-faced guy burst into the room, flopped on my bed with his arm cast over his eyes as if he were a shy, embarrassed vestal virgin. He whimpered softly, “Take me. But please... be gentle.”

Laughing out loud, I said, “Who are you and what in hell are you doing on my bed?”

He opened his eyes, looked around and said, “Your bed! Wait a second. Who the hell are you?”

I said, “My name is Mr. This-is-my-room-and-that’s-my-bed-you’re-on!”

He stood up, looked around and said, “Oh... really. Well then... my name’s Blandford - Pat Blandford and I’m in the wrong room. Mine room’s next door. Anyway, why are you wearing that stupid-looking shirt? Wait. I know. You’re a clown, right?”

And that’s how I met “The Blands.” It was the beginning of a long, wonderful friendship. We had a lot of laughs together in first year as we tried to pass economics and philosophy and figure out why all the cool girls liked the second-year guys better than us ... except for the nursing students at St. Joe’s Hospital. We did well there.

Besides Blandford, I remember being asked by guys from Toronto if I’d ever been to a Detroit Tigers game. Since there was no baseball (yet) in Toronto, the nearest place they could see a major league baseball team was Cleveland – a three-hundred-mile drive. I told them all how cool it was to live in Sarnia because we had blue water to swim in and it was just under 60 miles to Detroit which they saw as NHL, NFL, NBA, Major League Baseball and NCAA (University of Michigan) paradise. Granted the Toronto guys had the Leafs who in those days were pretty good, but the price and limited availability of tickets made it easier (and much, much cheaper) for them to see an NHL game in Detroit; something I organized a few road trips for including one unforgettable ultimate “Legends” weekend in late September.

In those days – in one weekend – you could see the Tigers with Kaline, Cash and Denny McLain play the Yankees with Mickey Mantle, Roger Marris and Whitey Ford on Friday night. After the game we’d go to the Lindell AC to see who showed up: a lot of the Yankees were there that night. On Saturday afternoon we went to Ann Arbor to watch the Michigan Wolverines play Navy and then it was back to Detroit to watch an exhibition game: the Red Wings – with Howe, Lindsay, Ullman and Delvechio – played the Blackhawks with Hull, Mikita and Esposito. After the game it was back to the Lindell AC to see who showed up: several Blackhawks were there but sadly, Bobby Hull was not.

We finished the weekend with a Sunday afternoon NFL game: the Lions with Joe Schmidt, Roger Brown, Dick “Night Train” Lane and “the iron man” Alex Karras – who married a girl from Sarnia – played the Packers with Bart Starr, Paul Hornung, Ray Nitschke and my all-time favourite, “The veteran, Max McGee.” Then it was back to the Lindell AC to see who showed up: Paul Hornung and Alex Karras were there.

We were on the road home by 6 p.m. With tickets and everything, the weekend would cost less than \$100 – not counting what we spent at the Lindell AC. Five guys stayed in the Viking Motel on Grand River. Sure, it was my first and last 1-star motel, but it was only \$5 per night per guy and it was an easy stagger home from the Lindell and there was a White Castle on the way. All in all, the memories will last a lifetime... I sincerely hope.

One other thing I remember about that year was when my roommate Dwyer, Blandford and

I along with a couple of other guys actually went into the King Chapel together to pray for J.F.K. the day he was assassinated – F.Y.I: our prayers were either unanswered or the Big Guy just said, “No!”.

I left Western after first year and would not return for three more years, but Blandford was still there when I returned: working on his honours accounting degree along with Paul Beeston who lived in the D.U. frat house with me and my roommate – local legal legend Ray Whitnall.

Blandford and Beeston were finishing their accounting degrees under the tutelage of Clarkson Gordon – the big London accounting firm – and they were posted out to Labatt’s. When they graduated to become full-fledged accountants, Beeston stayed at Labatt’s and in 1976 became the comptroller of their new business venture; a baseball team called the Toronto Blue Jays. In 1989, he was appointed president of the Blue Jays and guided them to two World Series. Of all the guys I ever met who made the perfect career choice on graduation day, it had to be Paul Beeston

Blands however decided that accounting was not for him and dropped out to become a radio ‘talk jock’ which was the perfect gig for him. His first job was here in Sarnia at CKJD as their ‘midnight to dawn guy.’ I was working for IBM in Kitchener at the time, but I used to come home on the weekends for the sailboat racing since the sailboat racing opportunities in Kitchener were quite limited, and as far as I know, still are to this day.

One July Friday night – on the eve of the Mackinac sailboat race – I was over in Port Huron with some of my crewmates and when we came back to Sarnia, we heard Blands on the radio telling us that while the last commercial was on, the entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir had dropped by to say hello but unfortunately they were in a hurry and unable to stick around for an interview. That’s when I got the bright idea to go into the station and visit him. We pulled in to the “White Elephant’ building on Christina St. where CKJD was headquartered and went up to the top floor where Blands was doing his show. When he saw us, he smiled and came out of the studio and said, “Okay Keelan, you’re coming in here to do your John Wayne impersonation for me.”

I allowed as to how I would be delighted to do so and into the studio I went. A few minutes later, we were live on the air and Blands joyfully took the mic and informed the listening audience, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am truly honoured tonight. My old friend, John Wayne – the Duke himself – is just passing through Sarnia on his way out west and he dropped into the studio to visit his old pal, The Blands. I have managed to get him in here for an interview so with no further ado allow me to present my guest of honour, John Wayne.”

Turning to me, Blands said, “Welcome to Sarnia Duke.”

I replied in my best John Wayne voice ever, “Whaaalll... it’s a pleasure to be here pilgrim.”

Blands smiled - this was working. He continued, “Duke, have you got any words of wisdom you’d care to share with all your fans here in Sarnia?”

I leaned over to the microphone and in my absolute best John Wayne voice ever, I replied, “Nope.”

Then – with a huge “I gotcha” smile – I leaned back in my chair. Blandford put his hand over top of the microphone and said, “You son-of-a-bitch! I will get you for this!”

Then he took his hand off the mic and smiled as he said, “Thanks for sharing that with us Duke.... moving right along now,” and away he went to spin his magical web.

Over the years, he became a great customer of mine: he loved good audio gear, all kinds of good music and good books. One year – for my birthday – he sent me a book by Elmore Leonard with a note that said, “You gave me the first book I ever read for fun back in our first year at the King. It was a James Bond novel and it turned me on to reading. Thanks a lot for that. Now you owe me a cool, thoughtful present. Good luck with that! P.S. no shirts please.”

Blandford’s dad – ‘Murph’ – was a sports reporter for the old Toronto Telegram. He was a hard-drinking, cigar-smoking, old school type of reporter who died of a heart attack at age 53. In Bland’s own words, his dad, “earned” his heart attack. In an effort to avoid such a fate, Blands took better care of himself and at age 53 he was running marathons and living a very healthy life in Toronto with his wife and two kids. But one morning in June 1996 – just after Blands turned 56 – I got a call from his secretary telling me that Blands had passed away in his sleep from a massive heart attack.

I could not believe it: to have known him for so long and then to lose him like that after he had tried so hard to live. It just wasn’t fair. I told my John Wayne story at his funeral and got a huge laugh. They all remembered and cherished the laughter that went with knowing a guy like that. I still think about it almost twenty-five years later although I do admit there are tears in my eyes as I imagined him at the Pearly Gates giving St. Peter the old what for: “What am I

doing here? I never smoked, I only drank beer, I never ate rib-eye steaks or fettucine Alfredo. I ran marathons and all it gets me is three years more than my old man but Keelan smokes for 40 years and never once gets off his fat ass to even run around the block and you take me and leave him. Thanks man!”

Over the years Blands and I used to have a lot of those, “What’s it all about?” talks. We used to laugh about the fact that that good health was important but so was good weather. He’d tell me, “It would suck to be really healthy if it rained every day.”

I think we should all try to do as much personal laughing and spread as much of it around as we can, because it’s good to be remembered in a good way. And maybe, how we’ll be remembered is all we’re really going to get out of all this.

Now that’s just my opinion... I could be wrong... but I’m pretty sure “The Blands” would agree with me.