

## PLAYING FAVORITES

Remember the bestselling book by Robert Fulghum, “All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten”? Well, the other day I found myself pondering something in a related sphere – namely, do the mental habits we developed during our formative pre-teen years still knock around in our brains 70-plus years later?

While rummaging around in my long-term memory for an example to test this question on, the answer came to mind from a book I was reading about major league baseball during the draft-depleted World War II era – years when I was between seven and eleven.

What I remembered with stark clarity was my sense back then that I absolutely needed to decide who was my favorite ballplayer on every team and, league-wise, at each position. I recall spending lots of time making my choices, which could be very difficult – for instance, was my favorite third baseman Sid Gordon of the New York Giants or Stan Hack of the Chicago Cubs?

The underlying premise of the exercise was my certainty that at some point in the next few days I would be asked to name my favorite National League third baseman, and when that happened, I wanted to be prepared in advance with a definitive answer – not just something made up on the spot. The pesky fact that no one ever asked me that question didn’t deter me from having a ready response when the situation would inevitably arise. And so, painful as it was for me as a Giants’ fan, I had to admit (for some reason I can’t fathom today) that Hack caught my special fancy. But no one else ever knew this, since I didn’t go around blurting out the news, nor did I pose the question to others (which might have provoked a reciprocal query).

My mania in this regard wasn’t limited to ballplayers, nor did it dissipate when the war ended. For instance, as time passed and my passion for jazz took root, I spent a lot of time deciding such issues as whether Paul Desmond or Lester Young was my favorite sax soloist. Again, I can’t recall ever needing to reveal my choice to anyone, but that didn’t matter – *I* had to know.

Okay, that type of quandary was back then – how about now as an octogenarian? Well, although it may not be as pronounced and frantic, I'm still doing the same thing today. Ask me who my favorite author of comic fiction is – forget that no one ever has – and without blinking an eye I'll reply, Bruce Jay Friedman (of "Stern" and "A Mother's Kisses" fame). Favorite ballad from non-hit Broadway show? Charlie Strouse's *Once Upon a Time* from "All American." San Francisco edges out Washington and New Orleans as the American city I most enjoy visiting. And in my book, no running back has ever come close to Jimmy Brown. Anything else? – go ahead, ask me.

In some ways, though, I have smartened up a bit. When forcing myself to choose between Paul Desmond and Lester Young for favorite sax soloist became just too hard to handle, I managed a tour-de-force to duck the issue – dividing the category into two instruments, alto sax and tenor sax, and gracefully awarding Paul the former and Lester the latter.

Incidentally, for those of you who still own a dictionary, be aware that in addition to the meaning of "favorite" I'm talking about – "preferred over all others" – the word can also have the sense of "a contestant regarded as most likely to win." As I'm writing this piece, the U.S. Open has just concluded with virtually every one's favorite (preferred) tennis ace, Roger Federer, being defeated by the tournament favorite (most likely to win), Novak Djokovic. Don't worry, Roger – you're still my favorite, in the only meaning of the word I care about.

Here's a little aside on the general subject. At times when I'm playing the piano, someone will come over to sing along. I used to ask them, "What's your favorite song?" – hoping I could oblige by playing it. But phrased that way, my query often seemed to nonpluss people (who apparently weren't disciples of my advance selection process); I got the feeling that there were just too many musical contestants vying for the honor for them to anoint a single one on the spot. I soon smartened up, though, by asking them to name "*one* of your favorite songs." I'm delighted to report that this has proved much less traumatic and usually evokes a positive response within 20 seconds.

Anyway, I have two questions for you to ponder here. First, have you ever succumbed to this “favorite” malady of mine – and if so, did it date back to those pre-teen years? Second, are there other mental habits you still engage in that are carryovers from earlier days?