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Clubbo, Fats, Shorty, Bum, Icky & Head

There was a time, a generation ago, before we were all quite so corrected, that few of us could escape a nickname. Sometimes they were innocuous, other times borderline cruel – especially in sports.

I played high school football with a boy nicknamed Porky and another called Fats. Peanut Roy started in the backfield and Tweety Turcotte in the line. I played pick-up basketball in Maine with a guy nicknamed Bum, short for Rubberbum.

Head played on the Middlebury basketball team from '63-65. He was called Head because his head was too big for his body. His friends all still call him Head. He refers to himself as Head!

The Fox played guard on that team, with Johnny Low-Card in the frontcourt. Our center was Charlie Ladd, or Chas-Chas, the Great Tall Ladd, as he was known to all.

The captain of the ski team at that time, and president of his frat, was Icky. That's a nasty nickname, but he liked it (maybe because his real first name was Norton).

I later had a basketball teammate called Clubbo, which was reduced from Clubfoot, a nickname he got for having such big feet, which smacked on the court when he ran.

40 years later, he is still called Clubbo (his real name is Rick, how prosaic), and he too refers to himself that way. His e-mail is clubbo@whatever.com or some such. He's the husband and father of lovely women and they call him Clubbo. He calls his daughter who goes to Middlebury, Shorty.

My hero growing up in Lewiston was three-sport high school star, Pep Gagne. That wasn't so bad. Every time I made a hoop in my driveway, I'd think, "just like Pep."

At the Caddy Camp I attended in the summers on the golf course at the Poland Spring (Maine) resort, nearly everyone got a nickname. John Morang almost immediately became Pie (so he was “Morang, Pie” on camp rosters). Eugene Mazel was overweight, so he was called Baby Huey, or Huey, after the cartoon character of the time.

Thomas May was Daisy; Richard Bedford was Bedbug. The Wall twins, Richard and Robert, couldn't say their r's, so of course we called them Wichid and Wobbit. If you didn't like your nickname, tough. Objecting was fruitless.

In the big-time, in the old days, nicknames were often the creations of publicists or sportswriters: Joltin' Joe, the Yankee Clipper; Teddy Ballgame, the Splendid Splinter; the Bambino; Stan the Man; Muggsy McGraw; Shoeless Joe; Al “the Earl of Snohomish” Simmons; Pepper Martin, the Wild Horse of the Osage; Willie “Say Hey” Mays; the Duke of Flatbush, Scooter, Whitey, and Yogi. Charlie Hustle. Every player of any celebrity got a moniker, a sobriquet.

And baseball's Negro leaguers, my goodness, they all had stage names: Satchel, Cool Papa, Smokey Joe, Boojum, Buck, Bullet Joe, Biz, Turkey, Mule, Hooks, Devil, Rube, Pop, Lefty, Big Bertha, the Cuban Strongboy, and the Hoosier Comet . . . and these are just the men in the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown.

Today, nicknames are less common, for good or ill. The Red Sox have Big Papi, and that's a good one, and Coco Crisp is classic. Red Sox manager Terry Francona, himself known by his father's nickname, Tito, has the impulse if not the imagination. He constantly refers to his players familiarly, as Youk, Tek, Schill, Wake, Pap, and Mikey.

Baseball Hall of Famer Ernie Lombardi wasn't too happy with his nickname – he had big nose so he was Schnozz. Likewise, Dummy Hoy, the deaf-mute and the Native-American pitcher, Chief Bender. Wilt-the-Stilt Chamberlain hated his nickname. Bill Lee, the Spaceman, tolerates his.

Rarely these days do we find nicknames with negative connotations. A delightful exception is Celtics rookie, Glen “Big Baby” Davis, who at 6'9”, and nearly 300 pounds, is the second coming of Charles Barkley, a.k.a. the Round Mound of Rebound.

My son Peter is playing seventh grade basketball. He is a large boy and is just beginning to get interested in hoops. I'm encouraging him to sign his school papers, “Peter ‘the Beast’ Lindholm.” That's better, I figure, than Bruiser, Moose, Boog, or Tubby.

My daughter Jane's nickname was Zim, after Red Sox manager Don Zimmer to whom she bore a strong resemblance as a baby. (Now that's unkind.)

When I was playing senior baseball here in Vermont, I told my teammates my fantasy nickname was Big Train, after Walter Johnson. They called me Slow Train instead, said it was closer to the truth.

Sometimes I think we go too far to protect our kids from natural developmental tests and tensions. Enduring an unflattering nickname can produce thick skin - and banter, joshing, ribbing, teasing, kidding can be fun, even inclusive. But I don't know. For the most part, for the sake of my kids, I'm glad we live in a more sensitive age.

So I guess I won't be trotting out my nicknames for my colleagues here at the Independent: Angelo "Big Dog" Lynn; John "Do-Write" McCright; Andy "Scoop" Kirkaldy; Megan "Brains" James; John "Flower-Power" Flowers; Greg "the Oracle" Denis; Matt "Royal Humpty" Dickerson; and Jessie "Erma Bombeck's Love-Child" Raymond.

Just don't call me Big Fella.