

After Camden Yards assault, Orioles fans speak out

Incident reflects similar problems at other stadiums

By [Yvonne Wenger](#), The Baltimore Sun

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In the aftermath of a [Camden Yards](#) fight that left a Maryland man with severe head injuries, [Orioles](#) fans have turned to radio talk shows, Twitter, Facebook and office watercoolers to express their outrage.

The alleged assault of lifelong [Yankees](#) fan Matt Fortese, 25, of [Hagerstown](#) was a rare occurrence at the stadium, according to police records and regular attendees. But with Fortese in critical condition, the incident has disturbed many fans — and attracted national attention.

"I have heard some heckling; I have heard some arguments, but never a physical assault," said Joe Speca, a 24-year-old Orioles fan from [Fells Point](#). "I want the victim's family to know that the fans of Baltimore care about this kind of thing. It's the kind of thing that shouldn't be tolerated."

The incident is the latest example of aggressive fan behavior in stadiums nationwide, and experts say public awareness has increased with the advent of cellphone cameras, YouTube and a 24-hour news cycle.

"This is not a blood-sport war," said Susan Krauss Whitbourne, a [psychology](#) professor at the University of Massachusetts and a Psychology Today contributor. "We need to keep reminding people about watching their own behavior. Friends don't let friends go crazy at a ballgame."

To combat violence at stadiums, sports franchises have developed text-alert capabilities to summon security and limited the availability of alcohol. At Camden Yards, for example, fans are encouraged to use a "discreet texting service" to report any incidents, said Greg Bader, team vice president of communications and marketing; the [Ravens](#) have a similar system..

One group, inspired to address aggression after the severe beating of a [San Francisco Giants](#) fan at [Dodger Stadium](#) in 2011, is encouraging teams to do more. California-based Fans Against Violence, or FAV, wants teams to adopt a new "FanShake," in the style of a "kiss cam," where fans of the home team shake hands with a rival team's supporters.

"The fans need to take responsibility," said Kathy Samoun, founder of FAV. "The teams have a responsibility to the fans, but they can't put security at every intersection. You've got to treat it like your living room."

Fortese, whose condition has worsened in recent days, remains in critical condition at Maryland Shock Trauma Center. Two men, Michael Bell, 21, of [Annapolis](#), and Gregory Fleischman, 22, of Jarrettsville, were charged in connection with the May 29 incident. They were each released on \$50,000 bail last week.

Police say that during a game between the Orioles and [Washington Nationals](#), Bell threw a beer that hit Fortese, who was wearing a Yankees cap. Fortese then climbed a 5-foot wall and began arguing with the suspects. Fleischman punched Fortese, who fell backward and hit the concrete below, according to police.

Fleischman was charged with first- and second-degree assault and disorderly conduct. Bell faces second-degree assault and disorderly conduct charges.

A police report did not say whether alcohol was a factor.

An attorney for Fleischman, Kurt Nachtman, declined to comment, other than to say that Fleischman is eager to have his day in court to "prove his innocence." He did say, though, that Fleischman, like Fortese, is a Yankees fan.

Attempts to reach Bell have been unsuccessful, and no attorney is listed for him in court documents.

A preliminary hearing for the men is scheduled for June 26.

Some Orioles fans have been critical of Fortese and his decision to confront Bell and Fleischman rather than seek out security. The police report says Bell was throwing beer on people sitting near him throughout the game and that a number of the fans were arguing with him about his behavior.

Bader would not answer specific questions about the incident, including whether an usher or officer was stationed near the section where Fortese was injured.

But he said the Orioles provide "a number of highly visible and behind-the-scenes security procedures." Providing details about security would be counterproductive, he added.

The security force at a given game is determined by factors such as crowd size, the opponent and whether a special event is scheduled, Bader said. The Orioles' security procedures are reviewed by [Major League Baseball](#) and comply with league requirements, he said.

The stadium also has a Code of Conduct that calls for "courteous behavior" from "all fans." Bad behavior that infringes on another's enjoyment of the game, such as using foul language or displaying signs of intoxication, could be cause for ejection.

Similar security measures are in place at M&T Bank Stadium. Ravens senior vice president for public and community relations Kevin Byrne said season-ticket holders are sent a "fan creed"

that stresses good behavior. The creed is read at the start of each home game, and fans have created a tradition of yelling one of the lines: "Don't be a jerk."

"Our goal is to create a safe and energetic atmosphere at our home games, where fans of all ages can enjoy the event and help us have the best home-field advantage in the [NFL](#)," Byrne said in a statement. He declined to provide information on the number of security personnel present at the games.

Statistics provided by the city-run OpenBaltimore website show that since 2008, 67 assaults were reported at or near Camden Yards and 57 were reported at or near M&T Bank Stadium.

Bader said in a statement that the Orioles are "saddened" by the incident that left Fortese injured. "Our thoughts remain with Matt and his family."

Meanwhile, longtime family friend Jeff Minnichbach has created a website, mattfortese.com, to help raise money for Fortese's medical expenses. He hopes to raise \$10,000, but Fortese's bills are expected to far exceed that.

People across the country have responded, Minnichbach said, and donations have been received from as far away as Alaska.

"Matt's just a happy-go-lucky guy," Minnichbach said. "He is always laughing about anything and everything."

The reason for fan aggression is multifaceted, said Paula Parker, an associate professor at [East Stroudsburg University](#), and Rick Grieve, a Western Kentucky University professor. Both are consultants for the Association for Applied Sport Psychology.

Fans most likely to cause problems are those who tie their identity to the team. Such fans can see their team's supporters and a rival's as "us and them."

Put those personalities in a stadium full of people, where they might feel they have the cover to act poorly, and trouble can emerge, according to Parker and Grieve.

"When you're a fan in a crowd, there is a depersonalization, you become part of the crowd, your moral compass isn't centered on you, but on the group," Grieve said.

Alcohol is often a factor as well, Parker and Grieve said.

Stadiums began taking precautions years ago to limit alcohol consumption at sporting events, said David Jernigan, director of the Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth and an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Baseball stadiums across the country stop selling beer after the seventh inning. Many limit alcohol purchases to two per person per transaction, and most don't allow fans to bring alcohol into the ballpark, he said. [Memorial Stadium](#) first banned fans from bringing beer in 1985.

"In a highly charged emotional setting, adding alcohol is like throwing gas on a lit fire," Jernigan said. If the Orioles wanted to take further precautions, management could raise the price of alcohol or stop vendors from selling in the stands, he said.

Eric Strawderman, an Orioles season-ticket holder the past three years, said there's nothing wrong with razzing a rival team's fan, so long as it's done in good spirits.

Strawderman, 26, added, "No one should go to a ballgame and leave in an ambulance."

Baltimore Sun reporters [Jessica Anderson](#) and *Andrea K. Siegel* contributed to this article.

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