

## Sports Talk With Governor Martin O'Malley

*PressBox Sits Down With Gov. Martin O'Malley For Exclusive Interview to talk about the state of sports in Maryland, the horse racing industry, slots legislation, a new arena in Baltimore -- and even the athletic prowess of a young Martin O'Malley.*



PressBox publisher Stan "The Fan" Charles talks with Governor Martin O'Malley. (Christopher March/PressBox)

EDITOR'S NOTE: This interview was conducted April 23, one week before Gov. Martin O'Malley announced an agreement between Pimlico Race Course owner MI Developments Inc., parent company of Magna Entertainment Corp., and the state to keep the Preakness in Maryland. Additionally, MI Developments announced May 7 it brought in Penn National Gaming as co-owners of the Maryland Jockey Club.

*Over the years, the horse racing industry has made the case that it is the second or third most important economic benefit to the state of Maryland. Do you still regard the horsing industry as vitally important to the state?*

Absolutely. In fact, one of the leading arguments when we finally broke through the partisan gridlock on the whole slots issue and its impact on racing and horses in Maryland was that the industry was critically important to our economy. It's a roughly \$1.5 billion industry that employs around 20,000 people. The jobs that are created from racing, and also the amount of land that is protected because of horse-related agriculture, is critically important.

Back when we were breaking through that gridlock on slots, those were the two arguments. Look, we must keep racing jobs in Maryland. We also have to keep open space in Maryland; horse-related agriculture actually takes up more open land than all of the land we've been able to preserve through that program, Open Space. So it's critically important for the environment. The third argument was, of course, keeping those revenues here rather than waving goodbye to them in Charles Town (Races & Slots).

*Do you believe the racing industry has been damaged by the long delay in getting to the slots legislation? Has it been irreparably harmed?*

I don't believe it's been irreparably harmed, but it has been harmed by the sort of partisan gridlock that made it impossible for us to even put forward a moderate slots proposal that would bolster racing. ... I think there were two things that have damaged racing and horse-related agriculture in Maryland. One of them was our inability to break through that partisan gridlock, but the other thing was what the industry wasn't doing for itself.

You've got to modernize. The whole world is changing. The way the next generation, my kids -- I have daughters, 18 and 19 -- their lifestyle is such that they're on the Internet, they expect things to be changing, they expect things to be fast, they expect things to be multimedia.

When I was a kid, my dad would always take us to Rosecroft (Raceway). That was his idea of a wholesome good time with the boys. Put them in the family wagon and go to Rosecroft. We'd sit up there, my brother Patrick would handicap, I'd handicap. We'd send my dad down for \$2 tickets, and that's how we spent the evening. It was great. And it still is, but in order for this industry to continue to have the fan base and a growing fan base, it's got to become much broader and has to appeal to the next generation.

*Pimlico opened in 1870; Laurel held its first races in 1917. Can a regeneration of racing be successful given the current facilities, or do we need a new facility in the state of Maryland?*

We need to invest in these facilities. Now, I know there's been some who believe we should put in a new track like the Circus Maximus right downtown in the entrance to Baltimore. And that has a lot of issues associated with it, including cost and condemnation and all of that. That's not an issue I've gotten to or one that I was pushing. My time in office was my chance to break through that partisan gridlock on slots and try to move this forward.

One of the things in the slots proposal was money for the improvement of the racetrack facilities. I've been to some great tracks in upstate New York and other places that are very, very attractive. And sure, you have to invest in them. In any business, if your business looks like you haven't put a dime into it in 40 years, if it looks like its taped together, held together with bubble gum, you're not going to attract a clientele that sees a future there.

*Do you think the racing industry in the state of Maryland has done enough, or have the major players just been waiting for the state to bail them out? Are there things you think they could be more creative in doing to attract fans?*

I think that there are things [owners] can be doing, and I do think these last 10, 15 years of racing in Maryland were years when the owners of the track, for whatever reasons, their own finances -- they're businesspeople as well -- or maybe they were waiting on the holy grail of slots before they did anything with their own money. So that had us in a real period of inaction for 15 years. Meanwhile, other states were investing in their tracks. Other states were moving forward. Other states were starting to pull our horse industry out of Maryland.

We can't go back. We have to go forward. We could spend a lot of time placing blame, who didn't do what and invest when, who wasn't willing to come to the center and allow slots to happen. We are where we are, and I can't change the past. All we can change together is the future.

Every single county in Maryland approved the slots referendum that was put forward. Unfortunately, by the time it went to bid it coincided with the collapse of credit markets, and that then coincided with Magna's bankruptcy problems. One of the people we thought would be a leading bidder for one of these licenses didn't even put up their good-faith money.

So here we are. We have five locations; two of them are going forward, the one in Cecil County with Penn National, the one on the Eastern Shore. Baltimore City has an attractive site, and they've cleared it. But that's one that's going to have to go back out for bid because that team couldn't get together their financing.

The site in Anne Arundel County ... the bidder there, the Quarters Company, which is very established and very talented, has a vision for the future, they proposed putting it at a mall, which took a lot of voters by surprise. So that triggers all the litigation that goes with that as well as a second local referendum on the land use issue of whether this facility, while allowed by state law, is appropriate there.

And the one out in Rocky Gap was always a tough putt -- relatively small location, state-owned hotel -- but we made some changes. We'll go back out and bid that. But the first slots location should be open by October, and hopefully the one on the Eastern Shore shortly thereafter. So we've just got to keep pushing. And I'm hopeful that as the economy is coming back we'll see a more robust round of bidding for the next ones.

*There are some people who would say one of the reasons why you haven't gotten more bids for slot licenses is because the state's take is too high. It doesn't jibe with other states. What do you say to that?*

The numbers say it is one of the more favorable deals any state has put forward in terms of the take that goes to the citizens of Maryland, which I think was also the reason why it was approved by voters in every single county. ...

Look, the fact of the matter is this issue of slots and racing in Maryland was used as a political football in a very mean-spirited, partisan way that instead of bringing people to the center for a reasonable compromise, pushed people away from one another. And it was hard, quite honestly, to cobble together the compromise necessary.

... I'm the governor. I'm not the entire general assembly. And in order to get this thing done, it took a lot of work and a lot of bringing people to the table and a lot of compromise. So the proposal we have is a proposal we're pushing. The good news is it did get done. We have a couple of facilities that will be opening this year.

I think the bigger factor rather than the state's take was the collapse of credit markets. I think people can make a go of this so we'll keep forging ahead.

***As a former mayor of Baltimore, you're well aware of the inadequacies of the city's arena. Is there something the state can do to help get a new facility for Baltimore?***

Well, the state would absolutely have to help. The city of Baltimore, the citizens of Baltimore, couldn't undertake a project like that on their own. We invested in Camden Yards as a people; we invested in Ravens Stadium, two of the finest stadiums in the nation. Just as we invested in the Convention Center because of its impact on the economy of the entire state and certainly on the metro economy of Baltimore, we should invest in a new civic center.

We haven't been able to do it in these four years, but there has been a planning process and some visioning going on for it. I believe that the best location for it -- and I believed this when I was mayor as well -- would be right where it is. I think it's a real spark to the west side as indeed the Verizon Center has been a spark to that portion of D.C.

These have been some of the toughest years economically for our country since the Great Depression, and to the extent that we have had capital investments that have mostly gone toward trying to catch up to the backlog of school constructions, school renovations, things on our community college campuses and the like. But there will come a time, and hopefully it's sooner rather than later, when we have a new arena in Baltimore. We desperately need one.

***No prior administration in Maryland has placed the emphasis on sports as an economic-development tool as much your administration. How did you decide how to make such a major push in this area?***

I guess it had to do with my experience as mayor of Baltimore. ... As mayor, we found ourselves always trying to put on the events that showed, 'Hey, our city has life. It has life at its center and people from all over the state and all over the metro region come into Baltimore for fun and good things.' And it really goes to the vibrancy of the city.

It goes to people's self-confidence that their city is still moving forward and is on the rise. And at the same time, we had a difficult time connecting with anyone at the state who saw the economic development value to it. ... We now have an emphasis at the Department of Economic Development on attracting big sporting events to major league events to a major league city. ... Terry Hasseltine (director, Maryland Office of Sports Marketing) is a great example of state government that is now smaller than it's been since 1973, but in many respects, a lot more effective than it's ever been. I'd rather have one Terry Hasseltine than 10 other people who just sit around and wait for somebody to call them. He's got the contacts; he's got the vision; and he does the hard work.

***What type of athlete was Martin O'Malley?***

A superb athlete. He could have been a contender. ...

I was a participant. I hit my peak in baseball around sixth or seventh grade. I pitched darn near a no-hitter once as a pitcher on the Midget B team for Our Lady of Lords in Bethesda, and then I started growing. My arms and legs felt like they were three miles long, so I went through kind of an awkward phase.

Finally I settled down when I was at Gonzaga in D.C., and I played on the football team. I should say I was on Gonzaga's football team. But when I played, I played cornerback. I was not first string, but if anybody got in trouble and was benched, that's when I had my moment to shine.

Actually my chief of staff, Michael Enright, who had been my chief of staff for 10 years in city hall and also in the governor's office, was the starting cornerback who played in front of me. One game, someone got in trouble at the monster back position and got benched so they moved Enright to the monster back, I moved up to cornerback. The first play of the game -- it was Bishop Ireton -- they came sweeping around my side, hit the guy at the line of scrimmage. No gain.

Next time, they came sweeping around again, but did a down-and-out pass, and I swatted the ball down.

Third down comes. They run the same play. Come at me, I pick it off for an interception. My friends all hitting me on the helmet, thank you very much. I come to the sideline and the coach says, 'O'Malley, sit down. Enright, you're going back to cornerback.' And that was my moment of glory. I said, 'Well, what else was I supposed to do?' I guess they thought their luck wasn't going to hold any longer.

***What kind of sports fan are you?***

I like football and follow that more intensely than I do anything else. The magic when the Ravens went to the Super Bowl, I was mayor for one year and at the end of that first year, it was punctuated by that incredible spirit. It was great ... and then to see everybody coming together in the city, hugging one another on War Memorial Plaza, was sensational.

If anyone is at all cynical about what a championship can do for the pride of a city, they should experience that just once, because it did great things for us. It's not dissimilar to the great runs the Orioles made in '96 and '97, when I was a member of

the City Council. To see Camden Yards rocking every night was just great for our city, and I can't wait until the O's can start making some noise again.

***How important is it for the leader of the state to have a strong personal relationship with the professional sports owners in the state?***

I think it's important to have a strong business relationship. And if there can be a personal relationship, that's good, too. These sports teams, and the facilities in which they play, are big, important assets to our economy, for jobs and for everything else that goes into making our state strong. So I've always had a good relationship with the Ravens owners, the Modells, class acts, and Mr. (Steve) Bisciotti, also a class act.

Mr. (Peter) Angelos I've known since day one as mayor; how can you not know Peter Angelos? He and I get along very well. And it's not to say we always agree on things, but at the end of the day, we're in a bit of a partnership, aren't we, the state and these professional teams? So it's important that the governor be responsive, that he work hard and that he make sure that these facilities are safeguarded.

***Part of Michelle Obama's initiative as First Lady is getting kids active. Can governors play a part in moving that agenda further for Mrs. Obama?***

I was there when she challenged all of the governors. I was at the national governor's meeting with the other 49 governors when she gave her remarks on child obesity. All of the states have a role to play, the counties have a role to play, and the people who have the most important role are moms and dads.

I count myself as one of those moms and dads that is constantly trying to get our kids away from the screen, away from the video games, away from the TV, and outside doing something -- whether it's sports, whether it's walking around in the woods, being out in nature. So there are a number of things that we are doing.

There are two big anxieties I think that are present right alongside the economic fears all of us have. One of them is concern about the future and the health of the environment, and the other related to that is the health of our kids. So childhood obesity is one way to attack understanding that anxiety about the health of our kids. Getting children out in nature, getting them involved in sports is another; eradicating childhood hunger is another. So all of these things work together.

Why do we want to tolerate a situation where our children are going to be the first generation of Americans with a lower life expectancy than we do? And so much of it comes to the nutrition, the health of our kids. And you see efforts happening in various school districts, including the city of Baltimore, where some school districts are starting to raise their own vegetables and giving kids healthier diets. I think it's critically important that the First Lady give us that charge.

It's important that every governor, county executive, and mom and dad help give our kids a healthier shot at life.

*Issue 149: May 2010*