

A fan's perseverance helped put Mike Bass in Washington's Ring of Fame



By [Scott Allen](#)

September 13, 2022 at 2:17 p.m. EDT



Barry Kemelhor with former Washington cornerback Mike Bass on Sunday at FedEx Field. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

From 1980 through 2016, childhood friends Barry Kemelhor and Matthew Maury attended almost every home game for Washington's NFL team together. More often than not on those Sunday afternoons, one of them would catch sight of the names of franchise greats on the placards circling RFK Stadium and later FedEx Field and comment on cornerback Mike Bass's absence.

From 1980 through 2016, childhood friends Barry Kemelhor and Matthew Maury attended almost every home game for Washington's NFL team together. More often than not on those Sunday afternoons, one of them would catch sight of the names of franchise greats on the placards circling RFK Stadium and later FedEx Field and comment on cornerback Mike Bass's absence.

"We would see Brig Owens, Pat Fischer and Ken Houston up there, and we'd think, 'Mike needs to be part of this,' " Maury said recently, referencing the other members of the greatest secondary in franchise history. "Almost every game, we'd make an aside that Mike should be up there, too."

At halftime of the Sept. 11 season opener in Landover, Bass became the latest inductee in Washington's Ring of Fame, his name and No. 41 unveiled on the 400-level facade to the right of the space recognizing his former coach, George Allen. During a pregame ceremony on the main concourse, Bass delivered a speech in which he thanked Kemelhor for his efforts in making the honor possible.

"We would see Brig Owens, Pat Fischer and Ken Houston up there, and we'd think, 'Mike needs to be part of this,' " Maury said recently, referencing the other members of the greatest secondary in franchise history. "Almost every game, we'd make an aside that Mike should be up there, too."

At halftime of the Sept. 11 season opener in Landover, Bass became the latest inductee in Washington's Ring of Fame, his name and No. 41 unveiled on the 400-level facade to the right of the space recognizing his former coach, George Allen. During a pregame ceremony on the main concourse, Bass delivered a speech in which he thanked Kemelhor for his efforts in making the honor possible.

Kemelhor and Bass had reunited for the first time in 51 years only moments earlier. They weren't longtime friends or even acquaintances, just two people brought together by a handwritten note from an uninhibited young fan and a surprising dinner invitation from a football pro, bound by a memory — however faded through the years — of a lifetime.



Fans cheer as a banner reveals former Washington cornerback Mike Bass's name in the Ring of Fame on Sunday. (John McDonnell/The Washington Post)

Kemelhor and Bass had reunited for the first time in 51 years only moments earlier. They weren't longtime friends or even acquaintances, just two people brought together by a handwritten note from an uninhibited young fan and a surprising dinner invitation from a football pro, bound by a memory — however faded through the years — of a lifetime.

‘You had to pinch yourself’

On Dec. 13, 1971, Kemelhor and Maury, who graduated from Walt Whitman High in 1970, gathered with a few other former classmates at Maury's house in Bethesda to watch Washington play on “Monday Night Football.” With a win against the Rams at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, Allen's “Over the Hill Gang” could clinch Washington's first playoff berth in 26 years.

At some point that evening, Kemelhor and Maury learned that Bass's wife, Rosita, was watching the game at a house nearby. This was a thrilling and unexpected piece of information for the two college sophomores because Bass, who signed with Washington in 1969 and was in the midst of a career year, was their favorite player.

“When we became great Redskins fans in the '60s, it was all about offense, but we couldn't stop anybody,” Maury said. “[Vince] Lombardi comes, our defense gets better, and we notice there's this guy playing cornerback that we'd never heard of. We fell in love with Mike because he was this unassuming guy that no one was paying attention to.”

With Washington leading the Rams 24-10 at halftime, Kemelhor scribbled a note to Bass on a piece of paper. He told Bass that he was his favorite player and may have included one of the defensive statistics he dutifully tracked that season about how few touchdowns the former Michigan standout had allowed. Kemelhor signed the note with his address and phone number, ran it up the street to deliver it to Rosita and returned to watch the second half.

Bass's third-quarter interception of Rams quarterback Roman Gabriel — his seventh in Washington's past 10 games — set up a Roy Jefferson touchdown reception that extended the visitors' lead to 31-10. Washington held on to win, [38-24](#).

Kemelhor and Maury drove to Dulles Airport in the predawn hours of Tuesday morning, hoping to catch a glimpse of their playoff-bound heroes upon their return from the West Coast. The excitement of that night was surpassed a few days later, when the phone at Kemelhor's parents' house rang. The voice on the other end belonged to Bass.

“He said: ‘I loved your note. I really appreciated it,’ ” Kemelhor, 70, recalled. “Then he said that he’d like for me and my friends to come over to his house for dinner because he’d like to meet us and thank us in person.”

Kemelhor called Maury with the unbelievable news.

Shortly after Washington was eliminated from the postseason with a [divisional-round loss](#) to the 49ers in San Francisco, Maury and Kemelhor found themselves accompanying Bass on a trip to Waxie Maxie's record store so he could do some belated Christmas shopping before dinner. When they returned to Bass's house in Silver Spring, they played touch football in the front yard and shared a spaghetti dinner prepared by Rosita.

"The star cornerback was covering *me*," Kemelhor, who had a poster of Bass in his dorm room at Johns Hopkins, said. "You had to pinch yourself."

"The whole thing was surreal," Maury said.

Bass helped Washington to its first Super Bowl appearance the following season and earned second-team all-pro honors in 1974. A neck injury prompted him to retire at 31 during training camp in 1976.



Barry Kemelhor had a poster of Mike Bass in his dorm room at Johns Hopkins. (Courtesy of Barry Kemelhor)

Kemelhor and Maury would occasionally reminisce about their visit with Bass, but they would have no further contact with him until 2020. Housebound at the outset of the coronavirus pandemic, Kemelhor started reaching out to former classmates and colleagues with whom he had lost touch. On a whim, he also decided to look up Bass, found [his website](#) and sent him an email.

“I’m certain you won’t remember this,” Kemelhor began, “but it was one of the most memorable days of our young lives.”

He went on to describe the “Monday Night Football” game, his note and how surprised he was when Bass called to invite him and Maury to dinner. As was the case in 1971, Kemelhor didn’t expect a response. Twenty minutes later, the phone rang. It was Bass.

“I’m not sure if he was just being polite, but he said, ‘Oh, yes, I remember you coming over,’ ” Kemelhor said. “I don’t know how he would, but that’s how we reconnected after 49 years. It was like history repeating itself.”

Making the case

Bass, 77, said he sometimes has trouble remembering where he parked his car on a trip to the grocery store, but he feels fortunate to have most of his faculties and that his early retirement may have been a blessing in disguise. He doesn’t remember any details of his dinner with Kemelhor, and he wasn’t in the habit of inviting strangers to his home, but confirmed that Rosita has always made a killer spaghetti.

With Bass's blessing, Kemelhor made it his personal mission to get Bass's name in Washington's Ring of Fame. Bass had been named to Washington's ["70 Greatest" team](#) in 2002, but the Ring of Fame was [a more exclusive club](#). Bass told Kemelhor the honor would be the "crowning glory" of his NFL career.

"My mom taught me that self-praise is no recommendation," Bass said. "I firmly believe that, and I probably never would have approached the team about considering me. It was just not my way of doing things, but Barry, he took the lead and was persistent."

In between planning his Whitman graduating class's 50th reunion during the pandemic, Kemelhor made the case for Bass. He compiled a list of Bass's career accomplishments: The cornerback never missed a game over his seven seasons in D.C. and had 30 interceptions, three returns for touchdowns and Washington's first score in a Super Bowl. He provided guidance on the creation of an hour-long, highlight-laden DVD celebrating Bass's career and mailed a copy to Commanders senior vice president of media Julie Donaldson in February 2021.

Kemelhor wrote emails to Washington's front office, including Donaldson, director of alumni relations Tim Hightower, senior adviser Doug Williams and team president Jason Wright, and spoke to both Hightower and Williams on the phone. He kept Bass apprised of his progress, slow as it was with the team in the midst of its rebrand.



Mike Bass returns a blocked field goal for a touchdown in Super Bowl VII on Jan. 14, 1973. (AP)

‘It came as a major surprise’

Maury wasn’t surprised by his friend’s perseverance because he had seen it before, such as when they helped get former Whitman basketball star Gary Browne [inducted into the school’s athletic Hall of Fame](#) in 2010.

“This is Barry,” Maury said. “He thinks, ‘Well, maybe I can find Mike, and maybe if he’s receptive we can get him into the Ring of Fame.’ It’s just an example of how one person can make a difference.”

Ahead of Bass’s birthday in March, Kemelhor emailed Williams again to ask whether the team had given any further consideration to honoring him. Hightower replied two days later to say the team was “finalizing a few plans on this end for the upcoming season with Mike in mind.”



By coincidence, Mike Bass wore the same number at Michigan that fan Barry Kemelhor wore in Pee Wee football. Both photos were taken in 1964. (Courtesy of Barry Kemelhor)

After Bass's good friend and former teammate [Brig Owens died at 79 in June](#), Kemelhor wrote to the Commanders once more and gently noted that Bass wasn't getting any younger.

In July, Bass received a call from Wright, Hightower and Williams, who were not made available for this story, informing him that he would be inducted into the Ring of Fame at the team's home opener.

“It came as a major surprise,” said Bass, who called Kemelhor with the news.

On Sunday, Kemelhor and his wife, Karen, drove with Maury to FedEx Field, their first game together since they gave up their season tickets. They met Bass on the main concourse, and after Kemelhor introduced himself, 51 years since their only other meeting, Bass embraced him.

“I owe a lot to Barry,” said Bass, who had more than two dozen friends and family in attendance. “So much of this was started by him. He’d been a fan of mine for over 40 years, and he really believed in me. He was the one that made the team stand up and take notice.”

“Seeing his happiness and his family’s happiness was very rewarding,” said Kemelhor, who, along with Maury, had 35 commemorative T-shirts made for the occasion and watched the game from the suite the team arranged for Bass. Fittingly, [an interception by an unheralded defensive back](#) helped seal Washington’s win.

In a testament to his character, Bass used part of his speech during the pregame ceremony to make the case for two of his former teammates, Larry Brown and the late [Jerry Smith](#), to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

“I never was the type of player who looked for recognition, but sometimes you are rewarded for not being renowned,” Bass said. “You’re rewarded for consistency and doing your job. If you’re going to have success, let someone else talk about you.”



Mike Bass waves to the crowd as he is inducted into the Ring of Fame at halftime of Sunday's game.
(Jonathan Newton/The Washington Post)