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### Flacco brothers have a dream

#### While Joe stars for Ravens, Mike hopes to work up to Orioles

By Kevin Cowherd

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The Flacco brothers like to dream.

Here's what they envision: A few years from now, Joe Flacco is the Ravens' veteran quarterback and younger brother Mike has moved up through baseball's minor leagues and is an Orioles infielder. The two live together in bachelor-pad heaven: a place with flat-screen TVs, leather recliners and a sparkling kitchen they rarely visit except to raid the fridge or find plates for their carry-out orders.

The Flaccos previewed this dream last year, living for a time in a two-bedroom apartment in Pikesville as Joe Cool enjoyed a solid rookie season with the Ravens and Mike was a student and slugging third baseman for CCBC-Catonsville.

But since Mike was drafted by the Orioles in the 31st round and plays for their Rookie-level affiliate in Bluefield, W.Va., the two envision living together again as the rarest of pairings: brothers who play for two pro teams in the same town.

In some ways, it would bring their relationship full circle and cement the bond that dates to childhood rivalries on the dusty playing fields of South Jersey.

"Whatever I was doing after school and hanging out with my friends," Joe said, "Mike was always with me."

"We were like best friends, I guess," Mike said on the phone from Bluefield.

Yes, a 22-year-old drafted out of a community college in the East is generally considered a long shot to reach the major leagues.

But no one who knows him well is betting against Mike's playing at Camden Yards some day.

"I definitely feel I can get there," he said. "If I didn't ... I wouldn't be wasting my time here."

Their father, Steve Flacco, agrees.



"Oh, I absolutely think he can make it," Steve said. "Nobody's aspiring to be a minor league player."

Through Saturday, Mike is batting .262 with three home runs in 52 games for Bluefield. Mike leads the team with 12 doubles and 28 RBIs, and he is tied for the team lead with three triples.

Growing up in a sports-crazy family in Audubon, N.J., Joe and Mike were the oldest of Steve and Karen Flacco's six kids.

"We're all close with each other, as close as you can be," Joe, 24, said of his four brothers and sister.

But Joe and Mike were the closest.

Steve, 48, played football and baseball at the University of Pennsylvania and instilled a love of sports in all his kids.

From their earliest days, the two oldest boys played two-hand-touch football, basketball and baseball together, even playing on the same Little League team.

They shared a bedroom in the family's two-story frame house that was awash in sports posters: Muhammad Ali glaring over a fallen opponent, Deion Sanders straight-arming a would-be tackler, Michael Jordan sky-walking to the rim and about to dunk over some poor fool.

Their demeanor was the same, too. In old family photos, the two often wear the same look: intense, serious, even wary.

In one snapshot taken during a vacation at the Jersey shore, six family members are smiling.

Two are not. You can guess the two.

At the age of 6 or 7, Joe was so obsessed with basketball that he announced to his dad he wanted to be black and bald like Michael Jordan.

"The black part, I can tell you, it ain't going to happen," Steve told his oldest. "You can probably get a good tan, seeing as how you're Italian. And the bald part - if it happens, you're probably not going to like it."

Mike, on the other hand, wasn't content merely to be the next Jordan growing up.

"I thought I was going to be like Bo Jackson," he said. "I was going to be everything: a basketball player, football player, baseball player. Then I was going to go into NASCAR, hockey, you name it."

A rivalry naturally developed between the two hyper-competitive brothers. Who could beat who, who was the best athlete in the neighborhood, who had bragging rights at dinner that night.

"Oh, it was definitely a rivalry," Mike said, "probably more on my part than Joe's. Every once in a while I'd get on his nerves, think I could beat him at something, and he'd have to put me back in my place."

At Audubon High School, Joe played football, basketball and baseball - he even led the Green Wave to the state baseball title.

But it was clear to everyone that football was his ticket to the big-time. He went off to play briefly for the University of Pittsburgh, then on to a stellar career at the University of Delaware and a selection as the Ravens' No. 1 choice in the 2008 NFL draft.

But this is what happens when you grow up playing sports year-round and trash-talking with your brother about who's the best athlete in the family: You get this restless feeling when you're not playing and trash-talking.

This feeling led Joe to seek out his football coach at Delaware, K.C. Keeler, in the winter after his junior year.

"He pops in the office, sits down, shuts the door, which was unusual for him," Keeler recalled. "You could see something was on his mind."

There was: Joe, who had just thrown for 2,783 yards and 18 touchdowns for the Blue Hens, asked Keeler whether he could play baseball, too.

Keeler was incredulous.

"My response was: 'Baseball?! OK, where? You mean here at Delaware? You realize you're going to be a [NFL] draft choice?' "

"Oh, really?" Joe said, as if the thought had never occurred to him.

And that was the end of that discussion, with Keeler quickly declaring that both Joe and the school had too much invested in his football career for any baseball nonsense.

Football is where Joe decided to make his mark - and he's getting plenty of family support. Last year, the entire Flacco family - including Mike - traveled to Baltimore to see Joe's first home game as a Raven - the second preseason game against the Minnesota Vikings. "We were just anxious to see him do well," Steve said. "We expected him to go out there and let everyone know he could be the starter someday."

Mike took a more circuitous route to a pro career. He played football, basketball and baseball at four different high schools, then starred in baseball as a fifth-year graduate at Peddie School, a prestigious boarding school in Hightstown, N.J.

He also shot up from a skinny 5 feet 7, 135 pounds as a sophomore to 6-2, 200 pounds as a senior, a frame more like his older brother's.

"The overview with Mike always was that he'd be a baseball player," Steve said. "Growing up, he was always the best player on his team."

At Peddie, Mike made an immediate impression on coach Erik Treese.

"We went to Florida for spring training and he was just ripping line drives in the [batting] cage one day," Treese recalled. "I just turned to my assistant coach and said, 'Wow.'"

"[Mike] looked effortless in a lot of the things he did. That's what all the kids talked about: how smooth he was."

But a mysterious back ailment, never fully diagnosed, sidelined Mike for the next two years.

Steve enlisted the help of Tim Bishop, former strength and conditioning coach for the Orioles, to see whether something could be done to ease the pain and stiffness in Mike's back.

Ultimately, the only thing that really helped was rest. But the connection with Bishop led to Mike's decision to attend CCBC-Catonsville in 2008 and play baseball; he led the team with a .399 batting average, 14 home runs and 51 RBIs while attracting the attention of pro scouts.

"He had one of the best offensive seasons I've seen in all the years I've coached," said Dan Blue, the baseball coach, who has been at the school 12 years. "He hit some of the longest home runs ever hit in our park, too."

This summer, with Mike just beginning the long journey that could one day take him from the sleepy minor league outpost of Bluefield to the big leagues in Baltimore, the brothers allow themselves to dream a bit.

They close their eyes and see Joe throwing touchdown passes in front of a roaring crowd at M&T Bank Stadium. They see Mike hitting tape-measure shots next door at Camden Yards. They see both coming home at night to a nice condominium with maid service - an essential part of the dream - where they can start their Odd Couple act all over again.

"We'd definitely need a cleaning lady coming by," Mike said. "My side of the house would be disgusting."

"He's, uh, a little messy," Joe said. "Not that I'm a neat freak. But he takes being messy to a whole other level."

This dream could become reality, both brothers insist. The rest of the Flacco family is pulling hard for Mike to make it, too.

"If he's somehow able to claw his way up to that team in Baltimore, oh, how crazy would that be?" Steve said with delight.

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