Squeeze Play

How Congress got baseball to cough up two more teams

by Matthew Cooper

Playing Hardball: The High-Stakes Battle for Baseball's New Franchises
David Whitford, *Doubleday, $22.50*

Even more than most genres, sports books tend to be pretty predictable fare. There are hagiographic accounts of teams which are written for the benefit of hometown fans and which usually contain a phrase like "The incredible story of. . ." in the subtitle. There are "as told to" biographies that are as fun as they are self-serving. A recent and welcome type of sports book works the crossroads of sport and commerce, or, more properly, sport *as* commerce. The goal of these books is not only to explain the culture of the clubhouse but also of the front office, to give color and shape to the guys in suits as well as the guys in uniform. *Barbarians at the Gate* meets *Ball Four.*

David Whitford's fun read falls into this last category. It's the account of the machinations that led to the creation of the Florida Marlins and the Colorado Rockies—both of which are now embarked on their first season. A Boston-based writer, Whitford parachuted into both Denver and Miami and kept a keen eye trained on the jockeying that marked both cities' efforts to acquire a franchise. What he's come up with is not only a solid sports book, but one with a public policy dimension that's worth wider consideration: the things cities do to revitalize themselves.

The Rockies and the Marlins are the first expansion teams in baseball since 1977, and, as fans know, that slow pace of expansion is no accident. (There were no new teams between 1902 and 1952.) The reluctance stems mainly from the wariness of owners to divvy up more of the pie, but also comes from a quite legitimate concern about the dilution of talent on the field. What got them to change in 1990, when they voted to allow two new teams into the National League, were two factors. First, their profits seemed safe. Baseball attendance had been soaring; television rights were up; the asking price for a new franchise had reached such a high level—almost $100 million to be shared among the incumbent owners—that the threat of a dip in profits seemed minimal compared to a few years earlier.

The second and more important spur to expansion was Congress' threat to lift baseball's exemption from antitrust laws—a status no other sport enjoys. The exemption dates to 1922 when Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes ruled that baseball was a game rather than a business and

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outside the purview of the Sherman Antitrust Act. Harry Blackmun, despite his reputation as a judicial activist, declined to overturn Holmes' opinion when he ruled on an important baseball case in 1972. In a majority opinion, he declared the exemption "illogical," but, citing precedent, he upheld it. In the manner of a Reagan-style constructionist, he ruled that the antitrust exemption is a matter "that is to be remedied by Congress and not this Court."

At times, Congress has toyed with the notion of removing baseball's antitrust safeguard. But for the most part, owners correctly dismissed the threat as halfhearted. Whitford tells the story of how that changed in the mid-eighties when a host of senators, eager to get a baseball team in their home states, threatened to lift baseball's exemption unless expansion was forthcoming. Al Gore (looking for a team for Nashville), Dan Quayle (Indianapolis), and especially Tim Wirth (Denver) joined the effort.

Denver went full bore—even having the city's church bells ring "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" when major league officials came through town for their on-site inspection. Local politicians persuaded voters to support a cushy stadium deal, 70 percent of which would be financed by taxpayers. After the referendum passed, a memorandum was attached to the deal, and, incredibly, taxpayers wound up paying for everything.

Wirth emerges in Whitford's account as a wily tactician, quick to understand the role Congress could play in making pro ball cough up more teams. He made it a point to attend the baseball owners' meeting just days after his election in 1986 to pitch Denver as a possible expansion city. He detailed a staffer to find out what Congress could do to put pressure on the big leagues; and it was Wirth who organized Gore, Quayle, and other expansion-hungry senators to come together for a press conference in early 1987 to threaten an end to the antitrust exemption.

If Wirth comes across as a savvy politician, then-baseball commissioner and oft-mentioned candidate-for-everything Peter Ueberroth emerges as anything but the suave wheeler-dealer you would expect. When Wirth's baseball task force held its first meeting, Ueberroth declined to meet with half a dozen U.S. senators. Instead, he sent his deputy commissioner who, in one of many very funny scenes in the book, Wirth derisively refers to as Ueberroth's "A.A.," Capitol Hill jargon for administrative assistant. When Ueberroth finally consented to meet with the senators, he was contemptuous, saying to them, according to a participant: "Do you want me to give you a line of crap? Or do you want the truth?" When Wirth dropped Ueberroth a note after the meeting, it took the baseball commissioner three weeks to respond.

Ueberroth thought that playing the role of tough guy would get Congress to back down. But it was his successor, Bart Giamatti, who charmed the senators. He argued that the removal of the antitrust clause would lead to havoc. (With owners free to move anywhere, he claimed, they would.) Eventually, in the wake of Giamatti's untimely death in the fall of 1989, baseball agreed to a limited expansion of two teams rather than the six the senators had tried to extract.

Whitford does a terrific job of explaining the hustling that the competing cities did to lure the big leagues to their home towns. Miami linked up with neighboring cities to sell itself as South Florida, gateway to Latin America's crazed baseball fans. Denver went full bore—even having the city's church bells ring "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" when major league officials came through town for their on-site inspection. In Denver, local politicians persuaded voters to support a cushy stadium deal, 70 percent of which would be financed by taxpayers. After the referendum passed, a memorandum was attached to the stadium deal, and, incredibly, taxpayers wound up paying for everything.

That does not augur well for Federico Pena, now Transportation Secretary and then Denver's mayor. Pena, eager to bring baseball to his city, emerges in Whitford's account as a can-do mayor who understands that baseball and other high-profile projects, like expanding the city's airport, could help the Mile High City rebound from the oil price collapse of the eighties. But Pena also emerges as too eager to please, a weak negotiator who gave Denver's baseball owners too much, including a two-year rent-free deal in which the city agreed to give the team 92 percent of its revenue from concessions. Is this the man who will reform government construction practices?

Ironically, as Whitford notes, baseball cared as much about the groups of millionaire owners bidding on a team as it did about their city. Thus, when the ownership group in St. Petersburg looked financially shaky, the city's dreams of a team were held hostage and finally died. (This episode offers one more reason why the *Monthly*'s longstanding suggestion that fans own their teams makes so much sense.) The local St. Petersburg government was largely powerless to do anything to avert the disaster. This was a particularly rough blow since the Gulf Coast city had banked heavily on baseball, building a $234 million domed stadium—on spec—in the hope of luring a team and shedding its image as "heaven's waitingroom," a town teeming with octogenarians and hemorraging business to nearby Tampa. The city's Suncoast Dome now hosts rock concerts and flea markets.

Obviously, when it comes to hustling business for a city, baseball is about as good an industry as a mayor can hope to get. As my *Washington Monthly* and *U.S. News* colleague Paul Glastris has noted, the only thing that's a more democratic experience than going to a ball game is standing in line at the department of motor vehicles. Beyond the fuzzy virtues of good feeling that's garnered from having a professional sports team, there is always the cash benefit, albeit a modest one. Yankee Stadium, for example, never "revitalized" the South Bronx as local politicians had promised when they sold taxpayers on a major government refurbishing to keep the Bombers in the Bronx in the seventies. But it's also clear that even the possible loss of the Yankees would have been bad for New York, not only mentally, but to a modest degree economically. The money was worth it.

The problem for urban taxpayers is that the bidding wars that go on for sports teams (or, similarly, for corporate headquarters or any number of other big-ticket projects) can lead to diminishing returns for everyone—especially when cities with declining tax bases wind up picking up the tab without the help of adjoining, wealthier suburbs. Cities wind up giving up too much in search of the magic bullet that's supposed to save their decrepit downtowns. For a while, the hot thing in urban development circles was convention centers. They had proven an enormous boon to cities like Atlanta and Las Vegas. But such depressed outposts as Gary, Indiana, lost millions in taxpayers' dollars trying to ride the wave. Aquariums are now all the rage. Chattanooga, Tennessee, recently helped private investors build a downtown aquarium to draw tourists. The facility is high-tech and terrific and may prove a lasting success. But a host of competing cities, including New Orleans and Baltimore, offer similar fare.

So called festival malls have been another sought-after panacea. In the wake of Boston's successful Faneuil Hall, other cities have tried to restore downtown historic sites by turning them into high-end specialty retail outlets. Some have fared well, but for every winner like Pike Place in Seattle there's a Water Street Pavillion in Flint, Michigan, that goes belly-up. But these are the risks of trying to help a city grow. In the end mayors wisely recognize what a lot of community activists don't: The public usually likes these big showy projects and won't forego them in order to sink more money into, say, wasteful school systems. And who can blame them? The Colorado Rockies are shattering attendance records. In just 17 games this year the team has drawn over a million fans—more than the expansion New York Mets did in their entire 1962 debut season. Mayors will—and should—keep searching for those dramatic purchases that enhance prestige and lift spirits. But is it too much to ask that they avoid the Pena Pitfall and cut the best deal possible? □

Cokelore

A brief history of America's all-time greatest export

by John Shelton Reed

For God, Country, and Coca Cola
Mark Pendergrast, *Scribner's Sons, $25*

"Southerners need carbonation," according to a character in one of Nancy Lemann's novels. Certainly the South's hot climate, its religious strictures on alcohol, and perhaps a regional tendency to hypochondria combined in the late nineteenth century to make it the principal font of the modern soft drink, and for whatever reason, Southerners still lead the nation in soda pop consumption. In one recent year, North Carolina's per capita consumption was 55.4 gallons—enough, I'm told, to leach the calcium from many Tar Heel bones and make stress fractures a minor public health problem.

Like Carolina's Pepsi and Texas' Dr Pepper, Georgia's Coca-Cola began as a patent medicine. John Pemberton, a Confederate veteran who had moved to Atlanta to seek his fortune, was one of many Southern pharmacists who saw the commercial opportunities offered by the newly popular soda fountain in a region characterized by widespread "neurasthenia" among Southern ladies (who were supposed to be high-strung) and depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction among Confederate veterans (Pemberton himself was a morphine addict). When Atlanta went dry in 1886, Pemberton was ready with a "temperance drink" he called Coca-Cola, after the coca leaf and the kola nut used in its production. Yes, despite what the guides at Coke's new Atlanta museum have been told to say and the company president's insistence in a 1959 statement that Coca-Cola was a "meaningless but fanciful and alliterative name," the real Classic Coke did contain cocaine.

By 1902, however, the dope had been removed because of pressure from clergy and public opinion alarmed by the spectre of Negro coke fiends. By then the marketing genius of Frank Robinson, a native of Maine and a Union army veteran, had transformed the product from a nostrum to a soft drink, and this Southern gift to civilization soon escaped its native habitat. Fifty years after its invention, Coca-Cola had become as much of a symbol of America as the Statue of Liberty, "a sublimated essence of all that America stands for," in the words of journalist William Allen White. By its centenary, Coke had transcended mere nationality, and its advertising was teaching the world to sing in over 135 countries and over 60 languages. Today, three-quarters of the company's profits come from overseas sales, and Iceland (of all places) leads the world in per capita consumption. In its first 50 years, the company sold nearly a billion gallons of syrup; in the next decade, the company sold a billion more. A $200 share of 1892 stock, with dividends reinvested, would be worth $500 million today.

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