

Contents

Preface to the New Edition <i>by Neil deMause</i>	xi
Introduction <i>The View from the Cheap Seats</i>	xiii
1. A Tale of Two Inner Cities	I
2. Stealing Home	27
3. Ball Barons	42
4. The Art of the Steal	62
5. Deus Ex Pizza	83
6. Home Field Advantage	103
7. Local Heroes	119
8. Bad Neighbors	136
9. Repeat Offenders	160
10. The Bucks Stop Here	182
11. Winning Isn't Everything	194
12. One Year	198
13. The Art of the Steal Revisited	225
14. Youppi! Come Home	247
15. The Perfect Storm	272
16. Saving Fenway	318
Acknowledgments	341
Notes	347
Index	389

Preface to the New Edition

Neil deMause

When we sat down to begin reporting the articles that ultimately became the first edition of this book, we were only dimly aware that we were witnessing the beginnings of an epochal shift in the sports landscape. In more and more cities, owners of sports teams were demanding new publicly financed stadiums at hundreds of millions of dollars a pop, even as local governments pleaded poverty when it came time to allocate funds for such trivialities as schools or libraries. It seemed a curious moment in the worlds of both sports and urban politics, and we set out to document it before it disappeared.

That moment was now almost twelve years ago, and the little trend that we noticed then has become a massive industry. No one keeps reliable figures on how much taxpayer money goes to building new homes for sports teams—though this book details some of the best guesses—but it’s certainly now in the neighborhood of \$2 billion a year. The reasons given are largely the same: Sports subsidies are good for economic development, the old place is obsolete, you’ll lose your team if you don’t build one. And, as we explain here, they’re still almost entirely bogus—as when, for example, Florida Marlins team president David Samson declared a series of “firm” deadlines for state legislators to approve a stadium deal, and then, when no cash was forthcoming, simply waited a year and tried again.

This newly expanded edition of *Field of Schemes* picks up where the previous one left off, with four new chapters that investigate some of the most notable stadium and arena controversies of the new millennium. Chapter 13, “The Art of the Steal Revisited,” covers the tricks of the trade of stadium seekers, and how they’ve changed (and more often, haven’t) over the years. Chapter 14, “Youppi! Come Home,” details what baseball business writer Doug Pappas dubbed the Stadium Extortion

across North America Tour that Major League Baseball conducted as it sought to wring maximum profits from the orchestrated demise of the Montreal Expos. Chapter 15, “The Perfect Storm,” recounts the blizzard of new-stadium deals that hit New York City in the new millennium, with a public price tag of more than \$2 billion. And chapter 16, “Saving Fenway,” is the story of that rare group of citizen activists who took on the combined power of the sports industry and the local political establishment, and won.

In addition, annotations have been added to the original chapters of this book, bringing their stories into the present day—so if you’re wondering how Cleveland’s new stadiums look as an economic-development project more than a decade down the road, you’ll find out here. (Hint: not good.)

The little story that we stumbled across more than a decade ago turns out to be one of the defining themes of our political culture: How one big-money industry has manipulated democratic institutions to boost its own profits. The stories in this book are not just about sports, or even tax money, but ultimately about something more fundamental: Who does our government serve, and why?

Introduction

The View from the Cheap Seats

Back in the dim, distant past, when the Earth was new and the Carolina Hurricanes were still the Hartford Whalers, we knew little about the world of sports-franchise roulette. We probably were about as informed as any regular newspaper reader or ESPN junkie—namely, we knew that sports teams seemed to be moving to new cities, or at least threatening to do so, at an alarming pace. Those that stayed put were more often than not rewarded with new sports palaces with odd corporate names like the TWA Dome and the Pepsi Center. We might have wondered, too, whether these new sports facilities were really worth the hundreds of millions of public dollars being spent on them. And we might have questioned, in idle conversation, the wisdom of spending such exorbitant amounts of money on behalf of private interests while so much of what we knew and loved about U.S. cities was falling apart.

Mostly, all we knew back then, in the fall of 1995, was that the Cleveland Browns were no more.

Each of us had a long history as a sports fan. Joanna grew up in Cleveland, singing the Browns Christmas song in sixth-grade choir and generally confident in the notion that football and Sunday afternoons would forever go together. The announcement in November 1995 that longtime owner Art Modell was yanking the team away to Baltimore stunned locals. If this could happen to one of the most devoted fan bases in the country, it could happen anywhere.

Suddenly, the topic of team relocation and stadium construction seemed to deserve greater scrutiny. Local taxpayers had handed over hundreds of millions of dollars for a new baseball stadium for the Indians—should they have done the same for the Browns? And at what point was it fair for a beleaguered populace, facing a neglected

educational infrastructure and a continued urban exodus, to say “enough is enough; we deserve to have sports teams *and* a successful school system”?

For Neil, meanwhile, growing up a Yankees fan meant riding the subway to the newly renovated ballyard in the Bronx thirty times a year, to sit in \$1.50 bleacher seats with a crowd more diverse than you’d find most anywhere in a rapidly polarizing city: Latino families from the surrounding neighborhoods, members of the rap group Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, a Japanese newspaper reporter who happily gave up her press-box seat to sit with the real fans, and an elderly cowbell-wielding man named Ali, who commuted from his native Puerto Rico every baseball season to watch his team in action.

But being a Yankees fan also meant weathering New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner’s recurrent threats to move the team to the swamplands of neighboring New Jersey. Yankees games became poignant, with the fear that ours could be the last generation to share in this sudden camaraderie. Meanwhile the city, pleading poverty, doubled the subway fare, while Steinbrenner, pleading poverty, redoubled his threats while quadrupling bleacher ticket prices. But it wasn’t until a new mayor slashed social services to the bone while endorsing Steinbrenner’s demand for a new midtown sports palace that the full extent of the story became clear: What was it about sports teams that allowed them to find public money where the public couldn’t?

Like other sports fans of long standing, we had worried over the yearly ritual of watching our teams declare their intentions to move to another city unless bribed with a new stadium or a new lease. As journalists concerned with urban issues, we wondered about the wisdom of city governments spending millions of dollars on these stadiums at a time when public housing, libraries, and schools were being dismantled at an unprecedented pace. Perhaps, we thought, there was a story in that.

What we found was more than a mere story. For one thing, the

scale of the public subsidy was not millions of dollars, as we had thought, but *billions*—an expected \$11 billion over the course of the 1990s, with no signs of slowing down.

We also discovered that the popular notion of the villains and the heroes in the battle over sports-franchise blackmail was upside-down. Although newspapers had portrayed the public as unthinking fans who demanded their elected officials keep teams in town at any cost, we instead found hundreds of citizen activists who had been fighting city by city for years to stop public money from going to private profit. Corporate welfare, they called it, and understandably so. Meanwhile, the local politicians who had pleaded that they had no choice but to give in to sports owners' demands turned out to be eagerly lining up to build sparkling new luxury boxes—where they then happily attended games as the owners' special guests. As one fed-up city resident told us, "They're not public servants. They're corporate servants."

This book began because we were frustrated with free-agent franchises demanding money as the price of their loyalty. But this is far more than a sports story: It's also a story of deceptive politicians, taxpayer swindles, media slants, the power of big money, and most of all, a political system that serves the rich and powerful at the expense of the average fan, the average taxpayer, the average citizen.

The more we learned in researching this book, the more apparent it became that the most important partner in the new stadium tango has been left out for far too long. Average citizens are the ones paying for the cost of new sports facilities—in public subsidies, in tax revenue lost, in public spaces taken over for private gain, in disillusionment with the democratic process, and in the loss of sheer enjoyment at being a spectator at a pro sporting event. We spoke with heartbroken sports fans who couldn't imagine life without their team, and neighborhood activists just struggling to make ends meet. One outraged citizen, questioning the whole concept of public money going to sports facilities, wondered aloud if his love of bowling meant he should get state money to build new bowling lanes.

Another vowed never to patronize the monolithic stadium his once-beloved home team was set to build. All were willing to open their memories, their homes, and their lives to our inquiries and curiosity.

We remain overwhelmed and moved by the stories these people had to share. Yes, this is the tale of the Art Modells and George Steinbrenners of the world, but more than anything it is the average citizen's story: the story of people across the country saying "enough is enough" with corporate welfare in all its many forms.

We ultimately tracked the roots of the sports-stadium swindle back in time to the construction of the railroads in nineteenth-century America, and into the corridors of local power politics in a hundred towns across the United States and Canada. But the story of the swindle really begins on the night it first broke through to public consciousness: a cold spring night in a Maryland suburb, when a fleet of moving vans crept away in the dead of night—stealing a city's football team away, and forever changing the way we think about sports, urban politics, and the future of the American city.

1 A Tale of Two Inner Cities

It is simply unconscionable that cities are forced to succumb to blackmail by pro football and baseball. You should not capitulate to blackmailers. You don't deal with hostage situations. You don't deal with terrorists. I put these teams in the same category. —*Maryland state senator Julian Lapides*

It was late on the night of March 29, 1984, when a dozen moving vans backed up to the football training complex in the Maryland suburb of Owings Mills and took the Baltimore Colts away.

Since 1953 the Colts had been an institution as fundamental to Baltimore's self-image as crab cakes or Edgar Allan Poe. Now, overnight, this symbol of the city was to be reborn as something called the Indianapolis Colts and disappear forever into an indoor football stadium in the American heartland.

A few spectators gathered in the rain to watch as the worldly belongings of Baltimore's football team were loaded up for the six-hundred-mile drive west. The movers, imported from Indianapolis by Colts owner Robert Irsay for the occasion, packed away helmets and pads, file cabinets and film projectors, as Pinkerton guards kept onlookers at bay.

"It's unbelievable, the callousness of this man," Colts fan Brian Yaniger told a crowd of assembled reporters. "Just because he has a couple of bucks, he can tear a whole city down on his whims."

The Colts' move was hardly the first time a pro sports team had switched cities. In 1958, after all, the Dodgers had famously fled Brooklyn, and six of the National Basketball Association's inaugural eight teams had moved from their original homes by 1963. The first great era of sports-franchise migration ran from 1952 until 1968—when the Kansas City (née Philadelphia) A's ended their two-decade westward flight by settling in Oakland. In the interim, more than a dozen sports franchises took up new residences.

But those were different times. Jet travel had abruptly made bi-coastal leagues a reality, and the great population shifts away from the urban centers of the Northeast to the suburbs and the Sunbelt had opened up new markets for pro sports. By the time the Colts took flight, the major sports leagues had already expanded into most of the attractive locations, and franchise shifts had become rare. Before the Oakland Raiders moved to Los Angeles in 1982, no established football team had switched cities in two decades. Baseball hadn't seen a move in twelve years; basketball and hockey had undergone unprecedented expansion but little franchise movement since the early '70s. Sports fans in Baltimore, like their counterparts across the nation, had grown secure in the expectation that their team would still be there to cheer on next year.

Besides, the team's absentee owner, Robert Irsay, had just been handed \$25 million in city-funded stadium improvements to quiet his earlier threats to leave town. And the team was moving to Indianapolis, of all places—a city no larger than Baltimore, with only a single major-league team to its name, the fledgling Indiana Pacers basketball club—a prototypical hick town derisively nicknamed *India-no-place*.

The Colts' move, clearly, was something new and frightening: a team leaving its home of three decades not for lack of support (the Colts had continued to attract large crowds in its last years in Baltimore), but solely for the lure of greater profits. "If the Colts can be moved that way," wrote *New York Times* sports columnist Dave Anderson following the team's midnight flight, "any other franchise

area in any sport can wake up some morning to find itself without a team.”

They were prophetic words. The Colts’ move may have seemed an anomaly at the time, but in retrospect it was the dawn of an era. In 1984, corporations large and small were learning as never before how to supplement profits by extorting money from their hometowns under threat of moving across the country or overseas. The sports industry may have come late to this game of “corporate welfare,” as it came to be known, but it soon had adopted the tactic for its own. Whereas a manufacturing plant could win perhaps tens of millions of dollars this way, the final tab for a single sports subsidy could run as high as half a billion dollars.

The Colts’ sudden move led to a series of events far beyond anything that could have been imagined that spring night. By the time the dust had settled, another football team had been taken from its diehard fans, and two cities had undertaken the building of four new stadiums, leaving taxpayers in two states to pay close to \$1 billion in construction costs. The resulting transfer of public funds into private pockets would lay claim to public schools and fragile urban neighborhoods, leave democratic checks and balances in shambles, and enrich a handful of owners—real-estate barons and wealthy industrialists—by hundreds of millions of dollars. The flight of the Baltimore Colts may have seemed like the end of the world for the team’s fans, but for sports owners, it was the beginning of a lucrative dream that has yet to end. Before long, Cleveland, another urban center similarly struggling to survive the shifting industrial landscape of the 1970s, would be drawn into the musical-chairs game of relocating sports teams and earmarking public funds for stadium construction. Within a decade, nearly every major city in the nation was being asked to mortgage its future to the sports industry, and Robert Irsay was beginning to look less like a singular demon than the harbinger of a scam of historic proportions.

It all started, inauspiciously enough, with the Hoosier Dome.