

The Rams Move On

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The City of Angels, Los Angeles, the second largest city in the United States, the second largest television market, the city of cars and air pollution, the city waiting for the next big earthquake, etc. etc. etc. It is a city that has not had a team in the National Football League for over twenty years. It is remarkable that the so-called New National Pastime had no presence in LA for two decades and still claimed this high position in American sport.

For the past eighty years Los Angeles has loomed large in the History of the NFL and has shaped the league in significant ways. The centerpiece of course was and is the Rams. The Cleveland Rams became the Los Angeles Rams, left L.A. for Anaheim, and then fled the shadow of Disney for St. Louis. Now it will return to the city it dumped, meaning Los Angeles and not Cleveland. In every case the moves were about money, but in most cases these moves had unintended consequences for both the NFL and professional football.

The Cleveland Rams joined the NFL in 1937 and operated with some success until World War II. The Rams closed operations during the 1943 season suffering in terms of availability of personnel and declining revenue. When they returned in 1944 and then into 1945 they continued to bleed red ink despite the fact that the Rams were NFL champions in 1945. With the approach of the 1946 season the Rams faced the prospect of competition from the new Cleveland Browns of the All America Football Conference, something the Rams were not likely to survive.

After the championship season Rams' owner Dan Reeves made a pitch to move his team to Los Angeles. NFL owners turned him down. Reeves announced that his franchise was finished, and

walked out of the league meeting in dramatic fashion. The owners reconsidered, sent George Halas to Reeves' hotel room to bring him back to the meetings, and the move was approved.

Going west was certainly significant for the NFL and when the Rams sought a lease to play their games in the LA Coliseum something of more significance took place. There were objections to the lease from the African American community calling on the Coliseum Commission to require any team playing in this public facility be open to players without regard to race. The Commission accepted the argument and the Rams agreed to sign African American players. The NFL that had been segregated since the early 1930s was now desegregated. These events preceded Branch Rickey's signing of Jackie Robinson making the NFL not Major League Baseball the first major sports league to desegregate.

In the early 1970s the Los Angeles Rams were part of a franchise trade between Carroll Rosenbloom who owned the Baltimore Colts and Robert Irsay who bought the Rams when Dan Reeves died in 1971. Rosenbloom had long wanted to buy the Rams but if he sold the Colts the taxes would be quite high. So CR arranged for Irsay to buy the Rams from the Reeves estate for \$19M, then traded franchises with Irsay, throwing an additional \$4M for Irsay into the deal. This had consequences ultimately for both cities.

In 1978 for a number of reasons CR requested permission to move the Rams to Anaheim. Before that happened Rosenbloom drowned while swimming in the Atlantic Ocean near his Florida retreat. His wife, Georgia, inherited the Rams and proceeded to fire all of CR's people, forced out CR's son Steve, and took over the

running of the team. In 1980 she moved the Rams to Anaheim. This opened the LA market.

Al Davis, the Oakland Raider owner, decided he wanted to move his team to Los Angeles. He negotiated a lease with the Los Angeles Coliseum Commission and prepared to move the Raiders. Commissioner Rozelle and a majority of owners tried to stop the move, Davis and the Commission sued the NFL, and in the end defeated the league in court. Free agency had come to NFL owners and this set off an era of franchise movement. Baltimore to Indy, St. Louis to Phoenix, and numerous other threats to move designed to leverage cities, counties and states to build new stadiums; this is a process that has changed over the years, but has never ended.

Al Davis' suit not only opened franchise movement in the NFL, but it also broke much of the power and control that Commissioner Pete Rozelle had over professional football. The losing fight over the Raiders and Los Angeles left the Commissioner a much weaker figure in relation to the owners, and left him tired and ready to move on. Davis took the Raiders to LA in 1982 and stayed there until 1996 when he moved back to Oakland in 1995 having failed to strike gold at the Los Angeles Coliseum.

Having moved from Cleveland to Los Angeles and then on to Anaheim, the Rams rejoined the franchise movement parade and headed off to St. Louis in 1995 after having failed to get league approval to move to Baltimore. When Georgia Frontiere threatened to sue the league if they denied her the right to move to St. Louis, Commissioner Tagliabue backed away. Thus the St. Louis Rams. The city of St. Louis of course willingly

provided the financial incentive after having lost the St. Louis Football Cardinals to Phoenix in 1987, a team that had come to St. Louis from Chicago in 1960.

Now the Rams are heading back to Los Angeles the city they dumped for Anaheim in 1980. One wonders if this will produce a major change or shift for the NFL, or if it will be no more than a simple raising of the stakes in the stadium game. Looking at the plans for the Rams new home it seems as if the NFL is now moving to the Mega Stadium model pioneered by Jerry Jones in Texas, home of the Mega Church.

Maybe the NFL really does own Sunday.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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