

5-18-1998

## Wayne Huizinga and the Dismantling of the Florida Marlins

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### Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Wayne Huizinga and the Dismantling of the Florida Marlins" (1998). *On Sport and Society*. 115.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/115>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
May 18, 1998

If the Florida Marlins never win another game, they will already have won too many. This weekend came the latest episode in the baseball version of a "scorched earth policy" usually done as an army retreats in defeat and humiliation. The man orchestrating this operation, Marlin owner and pyramid king of South Florida, H. Wayne Huizenga, has produced another Blockbuster Deal worthy of a man who began his career in trash and is now selling used cars. The only difference here is that Wayne is scorching the earth in victory, and then producing the defeat and humiliation.

By now the major outlines of the story are familiar. Prior to last season Huizenga decided that he would validate his belief in the power of money. He went out and bought players in order to buy a World Series for South Florida. It worked. For \$53M Huizenga put a team on the field that beat the highly touted Atlanta Braves for the National League pennant and then went on to beat the Cleveland Indians in the World Series. Both the Cleveland and Atlanta organizations have been praised as models for nineties and expansion teams have studied their approach carefully.

But Huizenga knew that life is really only about money. If you have enough of it you can get whatever you want. He did.

In the process he also accumulated a few problems. The \$53M payroll was more than the Marlin fan base could support in a season when the tropical monsoon was particularly active. This problem could be easily solved. Huizenga called for the taxpayers of South Florida to build him a new stadium with an umbrella over it. The Voice could be heard, "Built it or I will leave."

Before the victory celebrations had ended Huizenga further threatened the area with a fire sale of champions. He claimed losses of \$34M, a figure that no one could believe and a figure no one could validate in the maze of interlocking enterprises and tax write-offs that characterize contemporary sports finance.

Even if he lost money, and for the sake of argument I will accept that he did, Huizenga proved that he didn't understand baseball economics when he decided that selling players was a way to deal with the problem. Anyone with so much as a cursory knowledge of the game knows that teams make their biggest

profits in the year AFTER winning a pennant. Season ticket sales go up, advance and group sales increase, and the daily walkup jumps.

This translates into more parking money, more concession sales, and more logo merchandise sales. The streams of revenue swell their banks the year after a pennant or World Championship. In a place like South Florida where a championship in baseball had never been seen, the enthusiasm was overwhelming and the cash registers would never keep pace in the new season. Unless.....

Unless someone did something really stupid. What could have been more stupid than an attempt to extort the fans over a stadium during the middle of the victory celebration? Well, how about dismantling the team before season ticket sales began. Huizenga's genius led him to do both.

The pitching staff went first, followed by several star players, and then this week the rest of the story. Kevin Brown, Al Leiter, Dennis Cook, Rob Nen, Tony Saunders, Ed Vosberg, Kurt Abbott, Moises Alou, Jeff Conine, Alex Arias, and Devon White were gone before the season started. This weekend Gary Sheffield, Bobby Bonilla, Charles Johnson, and Jim Eisenreich followed. Craig Counsell and Edgar Renteria remain from the World Series starting line-up, along with pitcher Levon Hernandez.

And what of the two players acquired from Los Angeles? Mike Piazza and Todd Zeile should not unpack their bags as they will be out of Miami before the trading deadline. The Marlins have vowed to get their payroll under \$16M and getting rid of Piazza and Zeile will get the payroll below that figure.

The big news is that this trade is the largest in the history of the game involving players carrying \$115M worth of contract. The bigger news is that this will nearly complete Huizenga's scorched earth policy, and the biggest news is that there was nary a word about any of this from Acting-Commissioner-for-Life Bud Zelig.

Unlike Bowie Kuhn who invalidated Charles O. Finley's attempt to sell Vida Blue to the Yankees for \$1.5M and Joe Rudi and Rollie Fingers to Boston for \$2M in 1976, Selig has remained silent. Kuhn found these sales likely to undermine "public confidence in the integrity of club operations."

Given the fact that a term like "integrity" is seldom used in connection with the Marlin owner, and given that there seems to be no sense of any "club operations" in this South Florida venture, it may never have occurred to Selig that Kuhn's logic might apply.

Whatever the case the deal has gone down and the destruction of the 1997 World Champions of Major League Baseball has been completed. The results are clear. The fans are staying away in droves from Pro Player Stadium (attendance is down forty percent), and players, fans and manager are demoralized.

Jim Leyland, darling of the media in better times, says he will not stay around another year to preside over what has become a triple-A graveyard. Neither will the fans.

If you think Wayne Huizenga could not really be this stupid, then I would suggest that you look at issues like tax write-offs and reducing capital gains on this team he is trying to sell. Maybe Wayne is not dumb as he seems. Maybe only the taxpayers who subsidize major league sports are.

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

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