NFL Expands to Jacksonville - Bob Woolf Obit

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The Jacksonville Jaguars are the newest entry into the major sports explosion in Florida, as Jacksonville was awarded an NFL franchise a little over a week ago. Jacksonville joins Charlotte as the latest cities to be anointed by the power brokers in the National Football League. For the privileged Jacksonville has already spent several million dollars to secure the franchise, and now ownership will pay out $140M in franchise rights, while the people of Jacksonville will donate $121M for renovation of the aging Gator Bowl. In addition the new franchise owners will receive only one-half their share of the television rights for the first three years of their existence.

For Jacksonville it was quite a coup. This lowly North Florida would-be metropolis suddenly became big league, defying the odds. In fact things looked so bad last summer that Jacksonville was ready to pull out of the sweepstakes. Only NFL Commissioner Tagliabue's urging kept them in the hunt.

As the 54th largest media market in America it seemed virtually impossible that Jacksonville could secure a franchise against the competition of St. Louis, Memphis, and Baltimore. The city has a population of under 700,000 and the five county area is less than a million people.

Ownership groups in St. Louis and Baltimore were unable to put together an acceptable package. While the people in Memphis must be jumping off the West Memphis bridge knowing there were beaten out by Jacksonville, Florida, the capital of south Georgia. Maybe too many NFL owners saw what happened to Tom Cruise in Memphis and decided that they didn't want to go into a town crawling with crooked lawyers. It reminded them too much of agents and their peers in ownership circles.

So why Jacksonville? Certainly the long tradition of football there helped, as did the fact that minor league teams in Jacksonville have been strongly supported. It also didn't hurt that the ownership group offered a one million dollar per game guarantee to visiting teams. Then there was the assistance of Tagliabue and other top NFL officials, along with the effort last summer in which 10,000 preferred seats were sold on five year commitments. Finally J. Wayne Weaver, a shoe executive from Darien, Connecticut, who headed the ownership group was well liked by league officials and the other owners. Jeb Bush and
former Kansas City Chiefs safety Deron Cherry, an Anheuser-Busch distributor, are the other principal owners.

The NFL is now in Jacksonville, Tampa, and Miami. Where was Orlando in this quest? If the NFL was ready to go into Jacksonville, certainly they would have jumped at the opportunity to locate in Orlando. But they did not have that option, as there was no ownership group in the City Beautiful.

It's too late for the NFL in Orlando, but city officials can take heart from the fact that Jacksonville is now a big league city. This can only be a good sign for the future of major league sports in Florida. Orlando must continue to organize itself and aggressively pursue big league sports, if it wants them. It is clear it can get them, as the Jaguars are the sixth new major league sports franchise in Florida in less than a decade.

The other notable event last week was the death of Attorney Bob Woolf, the man who invented the concept of the Sports agent. As a lawyer in Boston in 1965 Woolf signed on with Boston Red Sox pitcher Earl Wilson to handle off-field activities, endorsement contracts, and money management. The following year when Wilson was negotiating his contract with the Red Sox he asked that Woolf be allowed to represent him. The team refused, and so Wilson spent much of the negotiating time running out to the telephone to seek Woolf's advice. This was the beginning and it soon led to other athletes seeking Woolf's services. Sports salary negotiations have never been the same.

Among Woolf's clients over the years were Larry Bird, Carl Yastrzemski, Doug Flutie, Bernard King, John Havlicek, Thurman Munson, Derek Sanderson, Ruben Sierra, Larry King, and the New Kids on the Block. By 1971 Woolf was so deeply involved in contract negotiations and agent work, both in and out of sport, that he gave up the remainder of his law practice to concentrate on his new specialty. By his own estimate he negotiated in excess of 20,000 contracts.

Bob Woolf's death is a reminder that it has been a very short time indeed since the players reached equality with ownership in negotiation, and a very short time since athletes have become the new millionaires of America. As the first agent, Bob Woolf will be remembered as a revolutionary force in modern sport, and as an agent who never brought disgrace to what is too often a less than savory occupation.
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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