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Sport as Business - The Nomadic Franchies of the NFL

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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Over the last several years I have had a running disagreement with a colleague over whether sport is simply a business or if it means something beyond the bottom line. Is there, or was there ever any sentiment in sport? The recent developments involving Cleveland and Baltimore raise these questions once again.

On the one hand I am inclined to simply dismiss all this whining and wailing coming out of Cleveland as so much nonsense. Teams have been moving in the NFL with some abandon for the last several decades as the demographics of the nation change, as the greed of the owners pulls them from city to city, and as the inducements to move offered by cities escalate at geometric rates. Franchise relocation is simply a response to the market.

In the past few decades there is more than a little precedent for what Art Modell has done. In Oakland Al Davis pulled up stakes for Los Angeles in search of sky box and pay-per-view money. While in L.A. he was constantly warning that if he didn't get more of this or that he would take the team to some other major metropolis that was willing to empty its coffers into his pockets. The move itself was fought by the powers running the league, but the courts sided with Davis. The NFL was powerless to resist life, liberty and the pursuit of greed. Al then turned around and went back to Oakland for more coin of the realm.

Baltimore became a city longing for an NFL franchise because of Robert Irsay's move to Indianapolis under cover of darkness. The image of the Mayflower Moving Vans pulling out of Baltimore still is etched in the memory of Colt fans. Now of course history has turned on its head as the sight of moving vans returning to Baltimore will end the NFL drought in the city. It is now Cleveland that is left to hold the empty stadium.

But let's not stop here. The Arizona Cardinals were once the Chicago Cardinals and the St. Louis Cardinals. Who mourned for those cities when the Cardinals flew away? And who will mourn for Phoenix when the Arizona Cardinals go off to Los Angeles or maybe even Cleveland in the next few years?

The Los Angeles Rams were once the Cleveland Rams, and they are now the St. Louis Rams. The Rams were in Los Angeles just as long as the Browns were in Cleveland. Yet, the weeping and wailing was not heard across the nation when the Rams left la la land.

And please don't forget the Bucs as they also threaten to move out of Tampa in search of sky boxes in Orlando, Los Angeles, or wherever cities may be giving away the farm.

As all of this has proceeded the Houston Oilers are making serious preparations to head to Nashville, the most popular non-destination in sport today. While the Bengals are constantly making noises about the need to get out Cincinnati.

And we should not forget that without the shedding of a single tear the Jets and Giants left New York for New Jersey, but have retained the name of the city from which they fled. As the Lions did when they abandoned Detroit for Pontiac.

What then is the tradition that is being defended here? Should we get all misty about the fact that little children who went to Browns games in the fifties have become adults who frequent the dog pond, or gather in cities across America wearing team logo merchandise to Cleveland Brown Fan Clubs at sports bars to see their beloved team beamed off a satellite dish?

Are these sentimental feelings an important part of modern sport? Can we talk of tradition for a team that has been in one location for only twenty-five or fifty years? Do people have a right to retain the sports franchises in their cities?

One supposes that the correct answers to these questions are yes. That a sports franchise that uses the name of the city does so to form an emotional attachment between fan and team through the city. Civic pride and pride in the team are related, and owners in a sense profit from the relationship. But so do the cities. So when the relationship ends shouldn't we just regard it as the end of a financial arrangement, the termination of a business deal?

If the Magic left Orlando tomorrow would you feel betrayed? If the Orlando Magic were called the DeVoss Magic would you be as attached emotionally to the team? Has the success of the Magic done something to and for the identity of this city? The answers to those questions will give you a clue to just how much sentiment there is sport, and should say something about the obligations of owners to cities as well as to fans.

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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