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The Oakland Nomads

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE OAKLAND NOMADS
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The announcement last week that the Oakland Raiders would, for the second time in its history, leave the city of Oakland came as a shock to no one. The synergistic relationship between the greed of the National Football League and the greed of the principal owner of the Raiders, made such a move an inevitability on the wheel of time. Such "loyalty" to the city of Oakland and its rabid football fans will not go unrewarded. Indeed, both the Raiders owner and the NFL will make out like bandits once again.

There were actually some reports last week suggesting that were he alive today, Al Davis, would not have allowed this combined fleecing of Raider fans, the taxpayers of Oakland, and those of Las Vegas. Public memory is a fleeting thing and not just in politics.

It may be forgotten that the Oakland Raiders football franchise was born in movement and greed. Oakland was awarded a charter franchise in the American Football League (AFL) in 1960. The franchise had been granted to a Minnesota ownership group that very quickly declined it for greater profits in the NFL. The Twin Cities were awarded an NFL expansion franchise to the same ownership group. Loyal was in short supply as the Minnesota group dropped the AFL like a poison snake and kissed the generous hand of the NFL.

The Oakland franchise struggled and was about to go under after two seasons. Buffalo Bills owner Ralph Wilson stepped up with a loan to save the Raiders from bankruptcy fearing a franchise failure might imperil the AFL and his own investment.

Al Davis joined the Raiders as coach in 1963 taking a losing team and leading them to a 10-4 record. Davis quickly rose

within the ranks of the AFL and during the war with the NFL he was elected Commissioner. He was not aware that merger talks were underway, and indeed they were concluded before he was informed. It was a blow to Davis as he was ready to take on the NFL in fight to the death.

Davis remained AFL Commissioner until the completion of the AFL-NFL merger in 1970 when the AFL went out of existence. Davis then returned to Oakland as general partner and head of football operations. From this position he moved to take over the team squeezing out managing general partner, Wayne Valley, in 1972 while Valley was attending the Munich Olympics. The coup was successful and Davis was in control of the franchise.

Al Davis had a strong dislike of NFL Commissioner Pete Rozelle whose job Davis had hoped to have after the merger. The two men spent the remainder of their days in the NFL at war with one another over any number of issues, some petty, some important. Probably the most important struggle between them was over league governance particularly in the matter of franchise relocation. Rozelle was adamantly opposed to franchise movement and insisted there would be none without the unanimous consent of the owners.

In 1978 the NFL, with Rozelle's approval, allowed the Los Angeles Rams to move to Anaheim. Al Davis believed this opened the lucrative Los Angeles market and began negotiating with the city to move the Raiders to Southern California. This was a complex and long process involving any number of players including the Los Angeles Municipal Coliseum Commission (LAMMC) that was looking for a new tenant for the L.A. Coliseum. Also the LAMMC was suing the NFL.

Ultimately Davis and the LAMMC joined together to sue the NFL over Davis' right to move his team to Los Angeles. Davis was promised improvements in the Coliseum and had dreams of huge

sums of profit from this large market, with pay television a key component of his dream. Davis made the move before the NFL could get to court to try to stop him.

The LAMMC and Davis won their case in court after two trials, the first ending in a mistrial. This turned out to have a major impact on the NFL diminishing Rozelle's control of the league, and setting off a chain of movements and threatened movements by any number of franchises. In point of fact the threat to move was in many ways more profitable than actually moving. Extorting NFL communities by threatening to leave unless a new stadium was built with taxpayer money was one such ploy. In the world according to the NFL, stadiums seemed to grow old or obsolete at an alarmingly fast rate

Local government officials succumbed to the extortion so they would not lose "their" team. It was of course not "their" team, nor the community's team, but simply the team owned by billionaires in dire need of more tax breaks, subsidies, and tax money with which to line their pockets.

Meanwhile the streets of Los Angeles were not paved with gold and the Pay TV market was illusory. As this became abundantly clear, Al Davis began to explore a move back to Oakland, if that city was willing to remodel and expand the Oakland Coliseum. So in 1995 it was, as Al Davis so quaintly put it, "time to go home."

It is now time to leave home once again, leaving the city of Oakland and Raider fans behind to carry the burden of approximately \$20M of bonded indebtedness. The beauty of this particular move for the NFL was that Los Angeles became the default city for any franchise threatening to move.

Extortion worked in many cases, but when it did not there were plenty of communities and their business and political leaders

willing to provide enormous sweeteners to billionaires. The chance to become a "major league city," a term of no meaning but with immense power to seduce and entice, was too much to resist. A few communities refused to be suckered into the game and rejected bond issues and tax increases, but there were always more than enough willing to mortgage the future of a generation or two.

The most recent wave of this activity has taken place in the past year as the St. Louis Rams continued to build on its record number of moves: Cleveland, Anaheim, St. Louis, and Los Angeles. San Diego has abandoned its loyal fan base to return to its AFL roots in Los Angeles. Now the Oakland, Los Angeles, Oakland Raiders, created out of the Minnesota AFL franchise, will move to Las Vegas where it will collect on the Vegas offering of between \$750M and \$950M of taxpayer money.

This caps twenty years of NFL stadium building and stadium renovation. There were three renovations and twenty-one new stadiums over two decades, and according to ESPN.com these ate up \$6.7B in public money. How many roads, hospitals, and schools were not build or allowed to fall into disrepair over this period is anyone's guess.

In many ways this pattern started with the Raiders and was accelerated by Al Davis. The new Las Vegas chapter in Raider history shows that this pattern has been inherited by Mark Davis, son of Al Davis.

The only certainty is that it will not end here.

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.