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The Expos to DC

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Expos to DC
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It is one of the great cities of North America. It is a city that loves its sports. It is a city that loves baseball and has a rich baseball history. On Wednesday the last Major League game was played at Olympic Stadium before an angry crowd of just over 30,000 fans.

Bud Selig was not there to say adieu to the Expos and their fans and tell them what great pleasure it gives him to see the Expos finally off the baseball map. For several years now Selig has done his best to kill off this franchise, but somehow they refused to die. Now they will just go away to that hotbed of baseball intensity, Washington D.C., a city that has failed to support two franchises in the second half of the twentieth century, and will now be given the opportunity to perform the reincarnation of a baseball soul.

Baseball in Canada goes back into the early 19th century as it does in the United States. Some Canadian historians have even tried to claim that the game of baseball had its origins in Canada rather than the United States. In point of fact the evidence for such a claim is no weaker than the similar claim that baseball was invented in the United States, and of course stronger than the claim that baseball was invented in Cooperstown by Abner Doubleday.

Montreal fielded a team in the International League from 1928 until 1960 and French Canadians displayed considerable passion for the home team. In 1945 the Montreal Royals became a farm club of the Brooklyn Dodgers, and in 1946 Baseball's Great Experiment began in the city of Montreal when Jackie Robinson was sent there to begin the process of desegregating baseball. Compared to the racist atmosphere in other cities in the International League, Montreal proved an oasis of tolerance for Robinson as the French community welcomed both Jackie and his wife, Rachel.

The other Dodger of fame associated with the city is Tommy Lasorda who pitched for the Royals for nine seasons between 1950 and 1960. He holds the all-time International League record for career wins at 125 and led the Royals to five International League championships.

In 1969 Montreal entered the National League as one of two expansion teams. They played in Jarry Park, a temporary stadium and minor league facility that held just over 30,000 fans and was perhaps best known outside Montreal for the swimming pool beyond the right-field fence. One might consider this feature a working class precursor to the hot tub at the BOB in Phoenix. Jarry Park, where 1.2M fans paid to see the first season of Expos baseball, turned out to be an eight year temporary home.

Some would argue that things only got worse when the team moved into their new ballpark, Olympic Stadium, build for the 1976 games. This grand mausoleum turned out to be an unfinished white elephant and financial disaster for the city. Once the retractable dome was finally added it didn't work properly and in some ways its history seemed to foretell the fate of the Expos. As the stadium was poorly conceived and designed, the team after its initial ownership was gone would be a tale of mismanagement on a colossal scale. What could go wrong did. What couldn't go wrong also did.

The Expos never reached the World Series although they came close in 1981 when they were within one game of the elusive prize. Rick Monday's name lives in infamy. Then in 1994, in what may have been the worst fallout from the strike, the Expos who had the best record in baseball saw their dreams of a World Series again vanish. They never recovered from the loss sustained in this combination of disasters.

By then the team was into a run of looting owners and over the next decade, the last of its existence, the Expos became the developer and supplier of major league talent for the rest of the major leagues. The roster of all-stars coming out of Montreal to entertain fans in other cities is impressive: Pedro Martinez, Moises Alou, Larry Walker, Marquis Grissom, and John Wetteland all were sent on from the 1994 team, and over the years many more went down the same road out of town, including most recently Vladimir Guerrero. The Montreal fire sales are legend and include a great manager, Felipe Alou.

If you ever want to destroy a sports franchise the Expos experience would be a wonderful model. Jeffery Loria's time in Montreal is a study in the Darth Vader School of Marketing and Management as he did his best to hide the fact that Expos were in still residing in the city. For his efforts Loria was rewarded by Bud Selig with the Florida Marlin franchise. Major League Baseball purchased the Montreal franchise for \$120M and then threatened the Expos with contraction. When the new owners

come on board in Washington Major League Baseball will turn a handsome profit on the deal. To ensure that Montreal fans would stay away and that the team would have a difficult time succeeding on the field the Expos outsourced home games to Puerto Rico, and were forced to play a schedule which looked like something concocted by Philip Roth.

To ensure greater failure budgets were severely limited, trades were made difficult, and the Expos were forbidden to expand their roster after September 1. This helped to guarantee exhaustion and preclude any change to improve bench strength on the remote change that the team was actually in a pennant race. Bud Selig left nothing to chance and then blamed the Montreal fans and the city of Montreal for not supporting "their" team. All this from a man some are now praising as the Great Baseball Commissioner of all-time.

It is not likely that Bud Selig will ever join Le Grande Orange in the Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame. No doubt this will not concern the Commissioner as he leads baseball out of one of the largest markets and historic baseball cities in North America. Vive Le'Bud!

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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