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The Rays' makeover

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
The Rays' makeover
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The success of the Tampa Bay Rays may seem to be quite remarkable to the baseball world, but it can only be fully appreciated if you have some idea of how truly dreadful this team and this franchise has been over the past decade. Everything associated with or touched by it was a disaster on a scale that is difficult to wrap your mind around.

For most of the country the Devil Rays were barely a blip on the sports radar. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays was some sort of team from somewhere in Florida that your team could pound on. Or if you had no horse in the American League it was simply the perennial doormat of the American League East. It was a team that all National League teams wanted to draw for inter-league play, and in fact when the Marlins won the National League East there were complaints that they got to play the Devil Rays each year (geographic rival) and pick up some easy and illegitimate wins. For most baseball fans it was easier to just ignore the entire tragic mess.

For those of us living in Florida it was not quite so easy to ignore this abomination on the National Pastime. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays, in their gaudy colored uniforms more appropriate for a softball beer league, were like a huge zit despoiling the face of baseball. Everything about them was wrong, bad, pathetic, or just plain terrible.

Let's start with the home field. It does not qualify as a ballpark, doesn't rise to the level of a stadium, and clearly is not an arena. What then is Tropicana Field? It once was the Suncoast Dome, became the ThunderDome when the Lightning skated there, and finally became "The Can" or as the Orange Juice people would have it, Tropicana Field. From the outside it looks like a UFO that somehow arrived in a forsaken area of St. Petersburg, a city best known for its reputation as "God's waiting room."

The inside of "The Can" has changed over the years. When the Devil Rays started playing there and I first made a trip there, it had clearly earned its moniker in the most unattractive meaning of the name. "The Can" had been sitting there for nearly a decade when the Rays arrived. Even a quick makeover could not salvage it.

"The Can" had a kind of grimy look built into its paint job, the floors always seemed a bit slimy, and a kind of gloom hung in the air. Most attractive of all were the birds that flew around this indoor facility. At first I thought they were mechanical devices to give a bit of an outdoor feel to the venue, but indeed they were real and left deposits to attest to their reality. "The Can" made the Metrodome seem like Dodger Stadium. It was several years before I could bring myself to return to "The Can" even though it was such a pleasant and bird friendly environment.

One of the first signs of change was a concerted effort by Ray's ownership to clean the place. In recent years the birds are gone and the slime is gone, but despite the paint job and the cleanup, "The Can" still maintains its essential unattractiveness. As we all now know, "You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig."

The other problem with "The Can" is location. If this venue were on the other side of Tampa Bay it would attract more fans from Central Florida and Tampa. Even if you live in Tampa, the drive to a Rays game across the causeway and on to downtown St. Petersburg can be an ordeal. For those of us in Orlando it is a major ordeal. I can drive to a hockey game or football game in Tampa in just over an hour, while a trip to "The Can" may easily turn into two "slow and go" hours.

Once there, or if you stayed home and watched the Devil Rays on TV, you were likely to see a dreadful exhibition of baseball. In four seasons the Rays lost the most games in baseball. Year after year the Rays finished last in the American League East with only one exception in 2004. They never won more than 70 games in a season. Bad pitching, combined with poor fielding, supplemented by inept base running, combined with the inability to drive in runs, made them a painful thing to watch. The baseball played by the Devil Rays was so bad that very little of it was shown on television, and when they were on television they had local announcers who matched their level of play.

It was not surprising to me that the crowds at Devil Ray games were small. What surprised me was that anyone was there at all, as loss piled upon loss, and losing season followed upon losing season. Then in the past four years the Rays began to accumulate some very good young players, finally using their draft choices wisely and building a strong farm system. The ownership changed with the much, and deservedly maligned, Vince Naimoli finally

selling the team to a new and energetic ownership that brought in new management. They also hired Joe Maddon as manager.

Over the past two seasons the talent began to show on the field, although it did not immediately translate into wins. Last year I saw the team early in the season and it looked like a much improved group. Still they went out and lost 96 games and finished with the worst record again. This season came the change as the Rays won 97 games and finished atop the American League East and had the best home record in baseball. When they swept the Red Sox early in the season it caught some attention. When they swept the Cubs in June it raised more eyebrows. But the most telling development came when the Rays went into the All-Star break on a seven game losing streak, leaving everyone wondering if they were reverting to form. Coming out of the break they stopped the slide and then remained strong in August, and tough in September, fending off every challenge the Yankees and Red Sox sent their way.

Slowly as July turned into August and then September, the fans started coming to "The Can" in significant numbers to see the home team rather than the visitors. It was slow at first, but by early September the fever was growing. The cowbells were ringing and Mohawk hairstyles and wigs were multiplying. The real question that lies ahead for this franchise is whether or not these fans caught in the heat of the pennant race will return in April and stay throughout the long hot Florida summer in the numbers that this remarkable group of owners, administrators, manager, coaching staff and players deserve.

This was the most successful exorcism in centuries as the Rays won their division, the first round of the playoffs against the White Sox, and the American League Championship from the Red Sox, dealing with adversity that came in waves. It may seem unlikely to those around the country who have read about the transformation, but for those of us who have witnessed it, this season of the Rays has been something approaching a miracle.

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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