

The Impact of Sports on American Cities

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At a high school in Crosby, Texas last fall, football players pulled game jerseys over their shoulder pads while their three coaches donned jackets to conceal another sort of protective equipment- bulletproof vests.

The Crosby team had lost the week before and the coaches had been threatened with death if it happened again.<sup>1</sup>

In a 1978 Jets-Steelers game at Shea Stadium in New York, spectators dropped a security guard over a railing to a concrete walkway 15 feet below. The guard suffered a fractured skull, concussion and neck injuries.

The 1981 football season saw 31 arrested for battery and disorderly conduct at a Bears-Rams game in Chicago. The fans had attacked security men and ushers.<sup>2</sup>

These are just several examples of the social impact of sports in America. Although I am not setting out to examine sports violence, I felt these stories reflected the importance of sports to some people. Sporting games are no longer games when people's lives are put in danger.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the impact of professional sports on American cities. Since this could be an endless topic, I will focus on the feelings and behaviors of fans, images of cities as a result of losing sports teams and financial considerations of professional sports.

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<sup>1</sup>USA Today, October 19, 1983, p. 8A.

<sup>2</sup>Lisa Twyman, "Violence: Out of hand in the stands," Sports Illustrated, LVIII (1983), 62-76.

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Being a self-professed "sports nut", I hope to maintain objectivity in presenting some general conclusions to my research. Basically, sports and cities share a common bond and have deep influence on each other and the lives of the people associated with each.

To begin, what is the impetus behind cities wanting professional sports franchises. The recent move of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis is a good case study to examine this question.

Indianapolis had been one of the most populated cities and largest television market without a baseball or football team. The city decided to try and change that situation several years ago.

The decision to construct a 61,000-seat, \$80 million domed stadium four years ago was a calculated risk by Indianapolis. Although the facility can and will be used as a convention site, skeptics would have labeled the Hoosierdome a "white elephant" if no professional team had been attracted.

Indianapolis mayor William Hudnut explained the reasoning for this vigorous pursuit of professional sports, especially a football team.

"We feel that we would be a good city for the NFL and we recognize the impact an NFL franchise would have on our city," Hudnut said.

"It would galvanize and unify our spirit," the mayor continued. "It would mean some \$25 million a year to our city's economy, to say nothing of the hundreds of jobs that

would be created. And on top of that, the enhancement of our city's image and the national prestige of being in the NFL would be significant."<sup>3</sup>

Robert Welch, an Indianapolis businessman, had been one of the civic leaders behind this project. Welch had hoped to become the owner of an expansion franchise in the NFL.

"I was hoping to own a team coming to this city," Welch said, "but the most important thing is for Indianapolis to become a major league sports city. The people here deserve professional sports."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, city officials name economic impact, image and prestige as reasons for wanting to become a professional sports city. Fans have their own reasons for desiring major league sports franchises.

"It is something I have been waiting for all my life," Tim Schenley, an Indianapolis factory worker, said. "You can have a favorite team from somewhere else, but it's not the same as rooting for your hometown team."

Bill Ryan, a high school student, said, "Now when we talk about the football games, we can talk about our team. I have never had the chance to go to a professional football game, but now I will."

Downtown restaurant owner Ed Manson looked at the prospects of professional sports from the business angle.

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<sup>3</sup>USA Today, March 8, 1984, p. 8A.

<sup>4</sup>The Indianapolis Star, April 3, 1984, p. 5.

"We're not hurting for business now," Manson said, "but this can only help the economy. I'm also a sports fan and I think this will be great for Indianapolis."<sup>5</sup>

In this time of celebration for Indiana residents, the story is different in Baltimore. Maryland officials and Colts fans have not taken the loss of their team without a fight.

Baltimore mayor William Donald Schaefer said there is a big difference between a sports franchise and some other business.

"Unlike businesses that affect a city through employment alone," Schaefer said, "a sports team affects its heart. There is a protective spirit, a pride, a tradition, an obsessiveness that supersedes a won-lost record. The team belongs to all of the people in the city and the surrounding area."

Schaefer also addressed the ideas of image and prestige.

"The largest and most viable cities are the ones with major league franchises. The publicity that comes with Baltimore's name being included in the NFL cannot begin to be attained in any other way."

The mayor concluded by saying "owners may leave without a care, but a city weeps for the loss of part of its youth, spirit and pocketbook."<sup>6</sup>

Cincinnati is a city similar to Indianapolis in some ways, but very different in others. The Queen City has had one sports team for a long time, but went through the process of acquiring another within the last 20 years.

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<sup>5</sup>The Indianapolis Star, April 4, 1984, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup>USA Today, March 8, 1984, p. 8A.

The Cincinnati Reds are major league baseball's oldest team, dating back to 1869. The only moves made by the Reds have been in the 1930's and 1970 to newer and more modern stadiums.

The Reds have had periods of success, going to two consecutive World Series in 1939 and 1940 and winning four National League pennants and two World Series in the 1970's. There have also been a number of lean years as far as wins, but Cincinnati fans have stood by their team all the way.

"The Reds have been a tradition with our family," Kevin Stenger, 24-year-old Cincinnati resident said. "It was just natural to cheer for the hometown team while growing up."

George Castel, an usher at Reds games for 21 years, said, "The summer is something I look forward to all year. If I wasn't an usher, I would be at all the games anyway because Cincinnati baseball means everything to me."<sup>7</sup>

Former mayor and current television news anchorman Jerry Springer discussed the ever-present qualities of image and prestige.

"Cincinnati is Reds baseball," Springer said. "It has been that way for a number of years and will probably stay that way. The first person people think of when mentioning the city is usually Pete Rose, Johnny Bench or even Ted Kluzewski or Ernie Lombardi."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Personal interviews at Riverfront Stadium, April 6, 1984.

<sup>8</sup>The Cincinnati Post, March 31, 1984, p. 2.

In the 1960's, professional football was in the expansion era and Paul Brown was looking to get back into the football world after having served as Cleveland's head coach for over 15 years. He selected Cincinnati as the site for an expansion franchise.

City officials promised Brown a new riverfront facility to go with a core of enthusiastic fans to fill the stadium. After all, baseball games did not last the entire year and fans needed something to do during the fall and winter.

Cincinnati took the Bengals to their hearts even though the young team suffered through several losing seasons. Five years of moderate success followed before the team fell on hard times again. Fans criticized the players and management a great deal, but deep-down loyalty never wavered.

"Pro football was new to this area in the late 1960's," Brown said. "We have seen some decreases in attendance during down periods, but our relationship with the city and most of the fans has not changed."<sup>9</sup>

Two fans offered differing viewpoints on their support of the Bengals, but both agreed that the team is an integral part of the city.

"I have been rooting for the Bengals since day one," Chuck Pearson said. "They will be my team no matter how they play and something Cincinnati and the area can be proud of."

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<sup>9</sup>Mike Dodd, "Bengals Track Record Good in Cincinnati," Bengal Report, IX (1983), 12.

Joe Thompson said, "I'm not really a big football fan, but I guess the team is good for the city. It helps the economy and means a lot to a lot of people."<sup>10</sup>

Chicago presents another unique sports situation as the baseball Cubs and White Sox, football Bears, basketball Bulls and hockey Black Hawks have experienced less than successful seasons over the past 20 years.

Despite these poor records, Windy City fans have continued to support their teams and share a special identification with their professional sports franchises.

Some Chicago fans take the liberty to joke about their affections, but they remain loyal to the hometown teams.

"I am a Bears and Cubs fan for the most part," Steve Kinser said. "It is similar to banging your head against the wall or maybe backing George McGovern in a presidential race."

Another fan, 68-year-old Arnie Willard, said, "We used to win a lot 30 or 40 years ago and I enjoyed those times very much so I have to stick with my teams and wait for them to win again."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the story of several Cubs fans best exemplifies the state of the Chicago sports enthusiast. These people are among the group known at Wrigley Field as the Bleacher Bums.

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<sup>10</sup>Personal interviews at Riverfront Stadium, April 6, 1984.

<sup>11</sup>Giovanna Brev, "Losers," People, XII (1979), 86.

"I've been disappointed for 31 years," said Joe Mantegna, 31-year-old Bleacher Bum. "My father got so tired of the Cubs losing that he became a Chicago anything fan- basketball, hockey, soccer- any team that might win. The same is happening to me. If Chicago had a midget lacrosse team that won, I'd support it."

Mantegna's Uncle Lou said, "I watched my first game here at Wrigley Field in 1916. They were losing then."

In addition to trying to intimidate or distract opposing players, Bleacher Bums are known for betting on pitches and calling beer vendors by their first names. One fan is a blind man who comes to every game with a transistor radio.

"It is just a good time at the ballpark," Bill Winters said. "I have good friends there and spending a couple of hours out there lets me relax."

Considering that the Cubs have not won a pennant since 1945 and that all games are during the day and televised, it is amazing that they have drawn at least 900,000 fans in 24 of the last 35 seasons.<sup>12</sup>

The Bears also continue to fill Soldier Field, fans cheering the hard-hitting hometowners against Green Bay, Detroit, Minnesota and the other NFL rivals.

"You have to like the way the Bears play," Phil Ward said. "They are tough and aggressive and that is what the people want to see. Winning isn't everything, although it would be nice once in awhile."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

Another example of continuous support is the New England area's love affair with the Boston Red Sox.

Attendance at Fenway Park averaged 1.85 million through the 1970's- high mark in the American League. The average per game in 1979 was 29,000 in a park that seats only 33,538.

There are 77 radio stations in seven states that carry all the Red Sox games. Over 40 radio, television, newspaper and wire service people cover each home contest. Fans can vent their frustrations on six different talk shows.

Bill Crawley, Red Sox director of public relations, said, "We don't need giveaway promotions, guys in bird costumes or dogs that catch Frisbees. Here, the game is the product and we draw around two million people, which is beautiful. Still everybody seems to think he owns the club or knows how to manage better than Zimmer (manager Don)."<sup>14</sup>

Staying on somewhat the same subject, I plan to take an in-depth look at a city that was once nicknamed "Losersville USA." The growth of professional sports in Atlanta definitely was an interesting situation.

Before 1966, the only nationally known team in Atlanta was the Georgia Tech football team. By 1977, however, the city had the baseball Braves, football Falcons, basketball Hawks and hockey Flames. (The Flames have since moved to Calgary.)

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<sup>14</sup>Larry Keith, "Hoping For The Best, Expecting The worst," Sports Illustrated, LI (1979), 20-25.

The sports boom coincided with the economic boom as the nation's population and business were shifting to the Southeast. Atlanta was the hottest growth town in the country as office buildings, apartment houses and hotels were built one after another.<sup>15</sup>

The sports explosion began with mayor Ivan Allen authorizing construction of a stadium in 1964 before he had a reliable commitment from a football or baseball team. Charlie Finley and Bill Bidwell had promised to deliver the A's and football Cardinals, respectively, but both backed out.

To get the Braves from Milwaukee in 1966, Allen agreed to pay their moving costs and any legal bills and also granted the team all the revenue from stadium concessions.

The NFL quickly slipped a team into the city the next year to beat out the AFL, but the management was hurriedly formed and turned out to be less than adequate. They had the chance to lure legendary coach Paul Brown, but failed.

The Hawks arrived from St. Louis in 1969 and the Flames came through expansion in 1972. Tom Cousins, a real estate tycoon, built the Omni and bought controlling interest in both teams.

"My whole and sole reason for getting involved in sports in the first place was real estate reasons," Cousins said. "I'd never seen a pro basketball game myself. The only guy I'd ever heard of was Wilt Chamberlain."

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<sup>15</sup>Ron Firmite, "Losersville USA," Sports Illustrated, XLVI (1977), 76-78.

The Flames arrived with good management, but a lack of success on the ice and debts at the box office have been their problems. All four of the city's sports operations had gaps, soaked up money and left the city's sports fans wondering why they should support losing teams.<sup>16</sup>

The Braves had one of the true stars in baseball, all-time home run king Henry Aaron. He chased Babe Ruth's record in front of sparse crowds, people figuring the chances of seeing the Braves blow one were considerably better than seeing Aaron hit a homer.

Aaron even got death threats in Atlanta. When he went to the Milwaukee Brewers in 1975, he told reporters it was nice to be back in the major leagues.

Other bleak spots for the Braves were Dick Allen's refusal to play in Atlanta, popular hero Rico Carty being beaten up by Atlanta policemen, old favorite Eddie Mathews being fired as manager and a newspaper sports editor being shot as he left the stadium after a game.

The Hawks tried to build around Pete Maravich, but then traded him for draft choices that were supposed to turn the franchise around. Then they failed to sign those draftees, David Thompson and Marvin Webster, and the fans would not forgive them.

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 81-82.

The Falcons unwise management has already been documented as they have gone through coach after coach and team executives have become famous for throwing tirades against the local media.

Hockey is in such bad financial shape everywhere that the Flames continue to lose money and attendance dropped nearly 5,000 from the 13,000 average in the team's second season.<sup>17</sup>

In a 1977 study, Atlanta ranked alongside Cleveland as the city with the worst attendance percentage. The Braves dropped from 1.5 million in their first year to 535,000 in 1975 and the Falcons average fell almost 20,000 a game between 1966 and 1976.

The attendance issue raises the question of racial tension in Atlanta. Some people said the Flames doubled the Hawks in attendance because hockey is a white game and Atlanta is a redneck town.

One outside observer said, "Apparently these people would rather watch a Canadian do something they only vaguely comprehended than watch a black American do something they used to try to do through hoops nailed to their garages."<sup>18</sup>

The city's population is more than 50 percent black and the area is known to be one of the most racially progressive in the South, but locals differ in their estimates as to how many blacks support the Hawks.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

Team officials ranked the percentage of blacks attending games at 15 percent, one of the lowest figures in the league. White Atlantans who stayed away from the games said the percentage was closer to 60. Many said black kids would try to get you to pay not to have the air let out of your tires when you park around the Omni.<sup>19</sup>

Another attendance problem revolved around Atlanta's business reputation. As a regional headquarters for major corporations, Atlanta has a tremendous amount of "foreigners" as Falcon owner Rankin Smith calls businessmen from the North.

"We get all the ethnic groups," Smith said. "It's hard to find a native Atlantan. The foreigners in Atlanta can't be expected to have much sentimental interest in Atlanta's teams."<sup>20</sup>

A third problem is that Atlanta is a town of executives and poor people. Blue-collar people are traditionally strong attenders of professional sports and Atlanta has a big blue-collar gap.

In the final analysis, it appears that Atlanta had just taken on too many teams too fast. One editorial said, "If someone had come through town in the '60s selling memberships in the Holy Roman Empire, Atlanta might have signed up for one of those too."

It was also said by local officials that "more is not necessarily better and we can't afford to do everything."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 85-86.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 76, 86.

The Atlanta sports picture has changed in recent years. The Falcons experienced two playoff seasons and attendance boomed during those years. The Hawks have improved enough to make the playoffs and challenge for the top spot in their division.

The biggest difference, however, has come in the Braves. Ted Turner took over as owner and initiated an extensive public relations program. Promotions increased attendance and an opening of the club's checkbook brought increased quality to the field.

Atlanta won the National League West division in 1982 and has been competitive for the last three seasons. Turner's national television station carries nearly all of the team's games and the Braves have become known as "America's Team."

Turner also bought controlling interest in the Hawks and helped keep the Flames going with sizable loans before their move to Calgary.<sup>22</sup>

The jury is still out on the professional sports scene in Atlanta as things may change drastically in the coming years. The doubt exists yet as exhibited by the comments of two Atlanta residents.

"I think the teams down here are in trouble," Gary Coslet, 30-year-old engineer said. "Pro basketball is going to be in trouble all across the country with the rising salaries and the Hawks are going to be in the middle of it. All the USFL teams in the South are going to affect the Falcons attendance

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<sup>22</sup>Gail Wilkins, "Turner Turnaround in Atlanta," People, XVII (1983), 42-44.

and the Braves need to draw more people to pay their high salaries. It's just getting harder for the average fan to attend games."

Joe Carson, 38-year-old business executive, said, "The Atlanta teams are looking good with the Braves getting better each year and the Hawks becoming a playoff contender. The Falcons just need more consistency to draw the big crowds. We have the good facilities here and the people know their sports and expect to see some winners."<sup>23</sup>

Moving away from the subject of "losers", I plan to take a look at the financial aspect of sports. As we will see, this goes beyond the balance sheets of the ballclubs into the economy and welfare of the city.

Ticket prices, concessions, parking, downtown business fortunes and other economic measures determine the overall effect of professional sports on cities and their surrounding areas. For example, as stated earlier, the recent move of the Baltimore Colts to Indianapolis is expected to generate about \$25 million into the local economy.

One of the best ways to examine this financial picture is to look at the baseball strike of 1981. Although each major league city was hurt by the strike, the facts might best be known in Cincinnati where the city sued the baseball team for losses incurred during the mid-summer stoppage of play.

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<sup>23</sup>USA Today, January 12, 1984, p. 20.

At the beginning of the strike, city officials estimated that Cincinnati's economy would lose more than 900,000 for every home date missed. Some of these losses were broken down to include:

City's share of ticket sales	\$25,000
Parking fees	\$10,000-15,000
Stouffers- food, lodging	\$12,000
Sportservice- stadium concessions	\$65,000
Yellow Cab	\$400

The \$25,000 in ticket sales comes from 7½ percent of gate receipts and a 2½ percent admissions tax. The city also receives all of the revenue from parking except for the stadium garage.<sup>24</sup>

Michael O'Callaghan, resident manager of Stouffers, said the Reds were responsible for 17.5 percent of the hotel's business from June to August of last year and as much as 80 percent on certain weekends. From those figures, the hotel would lose more than \$12,000 each home date and over \$1 million over the course of the season.<sup>25</sup>

Ed Thompson of the Sportservice concessionaires said, "We try to average \$3 per person at a home game. At 21,000 to 25,000 average attendance, that's a loss of between \$65,000 to \$75,000 a game."

The Yellow Cab company said it makes about 80 trips to and from the stadium every home game. At an average of \$5 a ride, the loss equals \$400 for each game missed.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), June 12, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), June 13, 1981, p. 3.

<sup>26</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), June 12, 1981, p. 2.

The majority of the remainder of the money comes from the economic ripple effect- local people and out-of-towners coming to the ballpark, renting hotel rooms, eating at the stadium in local restaurants, going to bars, shopping and taking cabs.

Local business owners expressed concern over the possible effects of the strike and what Reds baseball means to them financially.

Andrew Altes, manager of a lounge on Fountain Square, said, "Business improves tremendously when the Reds are in town. For night games, it goes up close to 30 percent. When people walk back up from the stadium, they hit the closest night spots."

Another manager of a local night club said, "The strike will make an awful dent in business. We get a lot of transient trade from baseball games. I just have to hope and pray it doesn't last long."<sup>27</sup>

As the strike lingered on through July and into the early part of August, the city's losses mounted. With the settlement and resumption of play August 10, most people forgot about the financial strain and concentrated on runs, hits and errors.

Cincinnati mayor David Mann was not one of those who forgot as he still wanted the Reds to pay for rent and other revenue lost from the 24 home dates missed in Riverfront Stadium.

Lawrence McLaughlin, economic consultant for the city, compiled figures indicating that the overall Cincinnati

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

economy directly lost \$414,850 for each of the 14 weekday dates lost and 548,375 for each of the 10 weekend dates.

To get the total impact of the strike, McLaughlin multiplied his figures by 1.9, because he estimated the money turns over by that factor. The total loss to the economy came to \$21 million.<sup>28</sup>

Based on these figures, the city went to court in January of 1982 to try to recover some of the money lost. The suit, filed January 15, 1982, sought \$1,106,232 from the team.

The amount of the suit was broken down in the following manner:

\$263,083 for a percent of admissions.

\$82,217 in lost admissions tax.

\$192,074 for the stadium use charge.

\$325,146 for parking revenues.

\$243,702 for concession revenue.<sup>29</sup>

Dick Wagner, then president and general manager of the Reds, said, "We believe there is no basis for the suit since the abbreviated season generated more than 2½ times the city's guaranteed minimum."

Wagner said the lease specifies that the Reds pay the city a minimum of \$175,000 annually and that the team paid \$461,000 in rent last year from games before and after the strike.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), August 16, 1981, p. 1.

<sup>29</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), January 16, 1982, p. 3.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

The city admits that the Reds' payment exceeded the minimum rent, but that the stadium was held open for the exclusive use of the Reds and they are obliged to pay for that provision.

Mann said he doesn't consider the city's push for payment unfair.

"We don't want blood, just what is coming to the city, because the city's debt to the stadium bondholders still goes on. We weren't relieved of having to pay our bondholders during the strike."

Wagner, on the other hand, felt Mann's actions were politically motivated because he was running for re-election in the mayoral race.<sup>31</sup>

To update this situation, the city lost its suit in Hamilton County Court in November of 1982. It was ruled that the city could not collect damages because the Reds had fulfilled the lease in making their minimum payment and there was no strike provision in the agreement.

Judge Thomas Crush said, "The court will not now create a contract that two experienced parties failed to make for themselves. I'm sure the two sides would have included a strike provision if the possibility had been foreseen when the agreement was made in 1967."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>32</sup>Enquirer (Cincinnati), November 27, 1982, p. 12.

Despite this ruling, it is obvious that the baseball strike had a tremendous effect on Cincinnati's economy. It is also apparent that professional sports franchises, no matter how successful, enhance a city's economy a great deal.

I have examined several aspects of professional sports in this paper, including the pursuit of franchises, cities saddled with "losers" images and the financial ramifications. Impact, image, prestige, pride and economics have been some of the terms that have appeared continuously.

Unemployment, inflation and a balanced budget are three of the primary concerns of the mayor of any large city. All of these can be positively affected by the presence of one or more professional sports franchises.

Winning may not be everything, as exhibited by the dedicated Chicago fans who stay behind their teams despite a marked lack of success or the Atlanta sports scene which has improved over the years from its rocky inception in the late 1960's and early 1970's.

Just having a team or teams seems to be the key factor from the city's standpoint. As stated in the introduction, professional sports teams and cities share a common bond that affects both parties and the people connected with each.

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