

The Devil Advocates ~ FUTURE NOSTALGIA by DR. SETH C. HAWKINS



Imagine that you have been named public relations director of an American League franchise, one that has fallen upon difficult times, but has had a varied and interesting past. Attendance is poor, from a variety of causes that include last place, a failing farm system, a vastly over-rated manager who has stayed long past his time (but who is not Cito), and the second-ugliest stadium in MLB. The present is depressing and the future looks grim. But this is baseball, so fortunately, there is nostalgia and history to fall back upon: use the past to distract from the present.

Having taken anti-nausea pills as a precaution, you work up the nerve to enter the 1980s architectural disaster where the team and fans endure an average of 1.48 needless pitching changes per game. Someone has hung a bedsheet in a patently transparent try to hide several thousand unsaleable seats: on it are garish photos of players whose numbers have been retired, but half of the Hall of Famers from the franchise's history are missing! You vow to correct this flaw.

Five minutes of research yields the names and backgrounds of the five immortals in question. One was virtually the founder of the franchise, a turn-of-the-century player who managed the team for twenty years, was the owner, and who built the stadium used by the franchise in its early glory years. But the nickname affectionately given to him by history is unknown to the young.

Two of the neglected and forgotten both became player-managers at 27! One had 2285 career hits and a lifetime .301 average. He took the team to a World Series, and made Cooperstown in 1963. His later counterpart played for your team for twelve years, and managed them for seventeen of his twenty-nine years as a manager. Neither is anywhere to be seen.

A fourth man, in simpler times, did what would be unthinkable today: he retired with 2987 career hits. He has a short, easy-to-remember name, and is the last obstacle one climbs over before reaching Roberto Clemente. He's not there either.

Worst of all, the indisputably greatest player in the history of the franchise has been erased as a nonentity as if Stalin were re-writing history. Only Cy Young won more games than this man. When the franchise was in dire straits, he did year after year what Carlton and Clemens did once: win a huge percentage of his team's victories. It took prodigious efforts in changed times to break his long-standing records for career strikeouts and consecutive scoreless innings, but his career record for shutouts lasts, not even remotely challenged. He was one of the kindest, noblest, most ethical men, a rare saint in a collage of charlatans, as in any sport. And officially, he does not exist, when at the least, there should be a statue of him on the plaza.

The franchise reached six World Series, and won three. However, to preserve and maintain the falsehoods mentioned above, current management shortchanges the fans' historical heritage by denying the first three appearances.

You bring these inconsistencies to the attention of the top executives, with a detailed plan for correcting these injustices. You are immediately fired.

Well, all of you know the names of these five great men who have been so summarily insulted. And there is only one franchise in MLB that so thoroughly reversed the old fable, and pretends that the emperor never owned those crown jewels: the franchise temporarily [more on that later] known as the Minnesota Twins.

There really is no point, no justification in pretense. When you go to the Metrodome, you are watching the Washington Senators, the real ones, not the confusingly fake later imitation that then decamped to Dallas-Fort Worth. Needless to say, they could sure use a Bucky Harris or Joe Cronin to manage them, and a Walter Johnson to enact the expectations unreasonably heaped on the faltering shoulders of young Radke.

To deny the full history of the franchise is shameful, inexcusable, patently fraudulent, a lie as big as the outdoors that one leaves for the over-chilled Teflon marshmallow. So the nickname was changed. That's no excuse. Other franchises that had short stays in prior locations, like the Milwaukee Brewers and the New York Yankees, at least incorporate the statistics in the franchise records. Harmon Killebrew correctly laments his "lost" hits. He should sue. Admittedly, the current Baltimore Orioles have an enormous disparity between their seedy past as the St. Louis Browns, and their successes in their current disguise. But even so, the descendants of George Sisler have as legitimate a gripe as the currently living Killebrew.

Keeping the nickname, and especially the uniform style, does seem to induce guilt to retain the truth. Even with two moves, the Philadelphia Athletics, at the moment in the City Where There Is No There There (Gertrude Stein), admit to Lefty Grove and Connie Mack and the others, and have "angered up" (Satchel Paige) the White Elephant to adorn proudly the uniform sleeve. Whatever one may say about Ted Turner being the third most tasteless and crass owner in MLB, he put his team in Boston uniforms for one night of their interleague return to the Hub, to the decaying dump that they borrowed for a World Series when it was bright and new (an image as difficult to conjure as imagining Don Zimmer as a slim infielder, but I saw that). If Lefty Tyler came back from the grave, he would recognize those home uniforms. The traitorous evil Dodgers, who abandoned me way back when, did fail to re-create the marble rotunda of Charles Ebbets, but they do count correctly their World Series appearances. Christy Mathewson's name has stayed more consistently on the outfield fence in San Fiasco than has the name of that windy misbegotten stadium.

BUT A GOOD POLICY ANALYST DOES NOT MERELY GRIPE! He lives by the rule that, when one identifies a problem, one is obliged to come up with a workable solution. Now, a big-time policy analyst, one who could, say, both get Mario Cuomo elected and ignobly driven to performing snack-food commercials in a hurried expulsion from office, should be able to solve two problems at once. And I shall, for we still need a retractable-roof stadium paid for by the taxpayers.

Here is what we will do.

Sell the intermittently-guised "Minnesota Twins" to a coalition of which the St. Paul Companies (insurance folks have lots of

spare cash) are the chief investor; the reason for designating them will soon be evident. Since the Mill City is about to let the leftist loonies prevent a stadium via referendum, let us turn next to magical Mayor Norm, who, despite the attempted betrayal of the city's economic and cultural future by Sandy Judas, was able to turn the mush of legislators' brains into clear, crisp ice. Forget the riverfront. Forget the site near the Embassy Suites. There is an even better site, at which, by the condemnation-by-fiat known as eminent domain, Mayor Norm can rid the city of an architectural blight, upgrade another building, and put the ballpark near the guys and gals who will have voted for it. In addition, we will bring back the lost heritage.

What we do is condemn the entire big block between I-94 and University and between Marion and Rice. Tear down the ugly Sears. You can have a Sears anywhere, but a ballpark is aided by easy access from the interstate (you will never get me to say "freeway," for that is the language of where the Dodgers went). Tell the Kelly Inn folks to sit tight: all will be well. I think there is a church to be torn down, but it isn't a historically important building, so it doesn't matter. They can find another church.

Now we have a nice big space with which to work, and we will begin at the southwest corner, and get HOK to make us a two-deck semi-replica of Washington's Griffith Stadium, with reasonable outfield distances, and a capacity of about 48,000. In the notch in the center-field wall, we'll place replicas of the six row houses, and stadium employees will live there at low rents. We will have Gerten's find us the biggest transplantable tree they can, and plant it in the same place the old one was in D.C. Oh, it will be so beautiful, and it will be named Walter Johnson Field. In the leftover land to the north, we will build a brand-new Kelly Inn, and they will make lots of money in season. We'll put up a tall parking garage, but with terra-cotta cladding, and in the off-season, those legislators will have extra parking space for visitors.

You know, we'll even solve a third problem (before we mention the second one): the way in which St. Paul gets shortchanged in the national media. No more shots of the State Capitol or Mickey's Diner with the wrong city name on them. The insurance company won't allow a "Minnesota" designation. And we can fool part of the legislature into imagining [can't use the verb "thinking" with that group] that we named the team after them.

Yes, folks, how sweet it will be to see the retractable roof close over an April snowfall at Griffith Stadium-resembling Walter Johnson Field, at the intersection of Joe Cronin Way and Sam Rice Street (see, one of the streets doesn't even have to be fully re-named), as a capacity crowd that parked in the Bucky Harris Garage cheers when Governor Norm Coleman throws out the first ball, and Bob Casey comes out of retirement to intone: "Ladies and Gentlemen, here are your St. Paul Senators."