Minor League Baseball- Boom Or Bust To Communities Essay, Research Paper

Minor League Baseball: Boom or Bust to Communities?

Despite the occasional disappointment, minor league baseball provides many

communities with economic development and an improved quality of life. Communities as

small as Elizabethtown, Tennessee or as large as Phoenix, Arizona have shared the

common bond of being the homes of major league farm teams. This is referred to as the

National Association of Professional Baseball, or more commonly known as the ?minor

leagues.? As the popularity of major league baseball seems to be decreasing due to the

recent player strike, free agency, and anti-trust labor laws, minor league baseball has

generated excitement that can only be associated with baseball in the good old days. This

excitement is a purity of spirit which the majors no longer possess. ?It is baseball in its

simplest form– just ball, bats, gloves, and lifelong dreams. The parks are generally small,

the players, hardworking young men whom local fans are likely to run into the next day at

the mall or maybe the corner bar. A family of four can see a game, eat dinner–maybe

even pick up a souvenir or two–without having to consider a second mortgage. No

lockouts, no holdouts, no five-dollar beers, and the umpire is the only one who can call a

strike. ?Just the national pastime, played the game it is,? says one editor of The Minor

League Baseball Book.

There are currently 156 teams that are part of the National Association of

Professional Baseball. This number will grow in the next few years with the addition of

two expansion teams at the major league level. There have also been a number of

independent leagues formed which are said to be the ?future of minor league baseball.?

The success of these teams have shown how the value of these franchises have grown over

the past ten years. In the past, class AAA teams would sell for three hundred thousand

dollars while a smaller class A team went for fifty thousand. Today the class AAA teams

are being sold for as high as five million dollars while class A teams are going for around

one million. The best example of the fact that franchises have grown in value over the

years is the Reading Phillies. Joe Buzas, a minor league baseball entrepreneur, has owned

and operated twelve minor league teams in seventeen cities since 1956. In 1976, Buzas

bought the Reading Phillies franchise for $1. Ten years later in 1986 he sold it for

$1,000,000.

The addition of minor league baseball to communities can provide many benefits.

The greatest benefit is the overall economic lift that minor league baseball brings to a

community. Minor league baseball provides additional jobs. Initially, local individuals

build the stadium. This project takes from six months to a year. An average of 15 full-

time and 125 part-time individuals ranging in age from high school students to older,

retirees are employed at the stadium.

The stadium will be beneficial if it?s useful for the baseball fan as well as any

resident. For approximately seventy nights a year, a stadium will provide an opportunity

for the baseball fan to view professional baseball up close, to identify future stars and to

follow their careers, and to get a glimpse of current major league players who

occasionally are assigned to a minor league team for rehabilitation purposes or who are in

the last stages of their career. The stadium, however, should be more than that. It should

be a community facility that provides many types of recreational resources. A new

stadium is capital improvement and should have a life of more than two decades. If the

stadium and team are to be evaluated as a true community resource, they must serve the

entire community. If a stadium is utilized during the winter months, when baseball is not

played, not only will a community?s quality of life be enhanced, but the economic

development function of the stadium will be maximized as well.

The addition of minor league baseball to an area can be an important tool in

revitalizing an area. The best example that comes to mind is the Harrisburg Senators

located in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. In 1980, after three decades of decline, Harrisburg

was one of the most distressed cities in the nation. It had lost its credit rating and faced

bankruptcy. By 1988, under the leadership of Mayor Stephen Reed, Harrisburg had

become the leading city in economic growth among those with a population 50,000-

75,000. The turn around of the city gained recognition when Harrisburg was named the

second best investment city in eastern United States. Harrisburg officials have identified

several benefits that the city has derived from the presence of the Harrisburg Senators.

The most important benefit has been the redevelopment of City Island. City Island was

Reed’s announced site for a future stadium. The mayor anticipated using the stadium as

the centerpiece for the redevelopment of City Island. The mayor viewed the stadium as

the anchor for an economic development project that would be highly visible and would

help attract large crowds of people to the island. This would lead in making other events

on the island more feasible. Reeds dream became a reality in1986, when they began

construction of Riverside Stadium on City Island. In March 1987, the Pittsburgh Pirates

class AA team began play in Harrisburg. Harrisburg’s inaugural season was nothing short

of spectacular as the Senators won the Eastern League championship and attracted

223,000 fans their first year. Their success continued throughout the 80’s and into the 90’s

with attendance of 216,940 in 1988; 200,196 in 1989; 223,533 in 1990; and 233,423 in

1991. Their attendance in 1988 and 1990 was the highest in the Eastern League. The

success of the Senator’s made the revitalization of City Island possible. The city has

constructed another sports field, where a minor league football team and community

soccer team play. Concerts also are held on this second field. Riverside Village provides

a number of food stands that attract downtown workers and residents and city visitors to

the island. A marina and a riverboat, which presents an hour-long

cruise, have been established off the island. City officials estimate more than 600,000

people visit the island annually. The most activity, however, takes place from April to

December. The Harrisburg Senators remain the principal attraction, but other features and

activities on the island are becoming established in their own right.

Minor league baseball also brings tourists and visitors to the community.

In addition to the game itself, many travelers will visit local attractions as well as stay in

nearby hotels. The visiting teams brings a strong following with them to many road

games. These are tourists that would not be visiting the area if minor league baseball did

not exist. These baseball fans would not be supporting local restaurants, stores, gas

stations, if minor league baseball did not exist.

Although minor league baseball has been a dream come true for cities like

Harrisburg, it has been a nightmare for other communities. In Hudson Valley, New York,

the community found its case of baseball fever has turned into a ?financial jam and it may

not find the way out for a long time.? Hudson Valley was a community that was still

suffering from a 8,000 job losses from a recent IBM downsizing effort. The prospect of

luring a minor league baseball team sounded like a good way to boost the local economy.

A nonprofit organization was formed, and a plan was immediately developed to build the

stadium. The cost for the stadium would be 3.75 million paid by the county, and an

additional 1.75 million would be financed by the private sector. ?It was supposed to be

the world?s greatest public-private partnership, now, everybody wants the county to pull

their chestnuts out of the fire,? Dutchess County legislator Woody Klose said. Although

the team has been a rousing success and routinely sells out the 4,000 seat stadium, the

group constantly finds themselves in financial debt. Many people in the area blame it on

time. The time factor was the biggest limitation. The big push to get the the stadium built

as quickly as possible forced an overrun of nearly two million dollars. ?In the time most

people built a house, we built a stadium,? said David Avenius, an assistant to the Dutchess

County Executive. Klose said that it is extremely important to get the stadium financing

up front. He still has a recommendation for other communities that want to lure a minor

league baseball team. ?Go into therapy,? Klose said. ?Deep, deep therapy?(Slavin B1).

Some communities that have had financial success, have suffered the loss

of their team because of franchises relocating. Corporations abandon communities where

they have been located for many years, leaving those communities and their residents with

a weakened economy and social structure and without any compensation or resources to

assist recovery. Unfortunately, relocation has played a part in minor league communities

leaving cities with an abandoned stadium. Local officials often cannot respond positively

to an team owner?s demands because of the limited resources available in smaller

communities. This demonstrates the importance of stadiums in city-team negotiations,

and they show how the business interests of team owners and local officials often conflict.

Location decisions of owners tend to be business decisions that are designed to

maximize their financial interests. Joe Buzas, owner of the former Fresno Suns, chose not

to remain in Fresno because of competition from the university for the fans and advertising

dollars. The Fresno Suns had been playing in a run down stadium that received minimum

financial support form the city. Fresno State University agreed to let the Fresno Suns play

at their modern facility. However, the university wanted half of the ticket revenue and all

of the concession revenue the Suns would receive. In 1988, after receiving permission

from the California League, Buzas moved the franchise to Salinas, California. To this day

there is no professional baseball being played in Fresno, California(Johnson 133).

Franchises Relocating have also been based on a community not meeting the needs

or the demands of the owner. Charlotte Knights owner George Shinn wanted to build a

stadium that would be capable of hosting more than a minor league baseball team. To

make his stadium plans work, Shinn had to avoid use restrictions of this stadium and

consequently needed more land than he could obtain in Charlotte. Shinn and Charlotte

officials negotiations eventually failed because both parties had conflicting side issues and

agendas. City staff members struggled to control the stadium issue. They were primarily

concerned about protecting the city?s investment in the new coliseum. Shinn, looking

beyond Class AA baseball, dreamed of a stadium that could potentially accommodate

major league baseball, professional football, and other forms of entertainment. Later, he

viewed the project as a revenue-generating real estate deal. He was not interested in a

stripped-down stadium(Johnson 121).

An important benefit that has been seen first hand by individuals is the

quality of life minor league baseball adds for the community. It provides affordable family

entertainment by charging fans low ticket costs. In Ottawa, Canada, the ticket prices

range from just $4.20 to $8.40 — the least expensive seats cost less than one-fifth of the

equivalent for Ottawa Senators hockey games. ?This is affordable family entertainment.

You can?t make the excuse you can?t afford to come and bring the kids too,? says Ottawa

Lynx owner Howard Darwin(Allen 48). In Frederick, Maryland, and in Hagerstown,

Maryland, any child who comes to the ball game in any sports uniform gets in

free(Morgenson 40). In Scranton Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, home of the Class AAA

Red Barrons, ticket costs are $3.50 for bleachers, $4.50 for upper grandstand and $6.50

for lower box seats. While in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, home of the Major League

Phillies, tickets range from $5 for bleacher seats at to $16 for level seats behind the box

seats. The contrast in ticket prices between the minor leagues and the major leagues have

been seen all over the United States and Canada.

Minor league baseball has also done a tremendous job of providing good quality

baseball as well as providing entertainment at the game. This has been done with a wide

range of promotions. In some stadiums around the United States and Canada, promotions

have been the major reasons for fans attending the game. In Prince William, Virginia,

home of the Class A Cannons, general manager Kenneth Shepard has come up with a valet

car wash and a preferred parking pass for season ticketholders. For $2, you can have your

car washed while you?re watching the game; and for $75 a year, fans can have their own

assigned parking spot(Morgenson 9). Robert Rich, Jr., president of Rich Products Corp.

in Buffalo, the nation?s largest family owned frozen food manufacturer, has owned the

Buffalo Bisons since 1983 and was among the first to make his games ?events.? He puts

on a weekly fireworks display, sponsors at least three major concerts a season — last year

the Beach Boys, Aretha Franklin, and Huey Lewis and the News came to town — and

dreams up contests where fans participate on the ball field. Rich explains, ?Thursdays are

Pizza Hut Pop-up Night. Before the game, contestants come out onto the field and try to

catch three pop-up fly balls. If someone catches all three, everybody in the stadium gets a

free pizza from Pizza Hut?(Morgenson 9). In Wilmington, Delaware, promotions include

the Dizzy Bat Race, Dirtiest Car of the Game, Frisbee Toss, and minor league baseball?s

version of ?Let?s Make a Deal.? There is no limit to the creativity that they have come up

for promotions at minor league baseball games

Another aspect that has played a part in adding to the quality of life has been the

attitude of the fans. Unlike the fans at the major league games who seem to keep to

themselves and have intolerable attitudes, fans are unusually friendly at minor league

games. Leanne Pagliai is Vice-president of the High Desert Mavericks, a Class A San

Diego Padres farm team in Adelanto, California. Pagliai has a theory: ?Our commuter

society is so splintered today, citizen?s can?t bond as much as a community anymore;

minor league baseball is a chance to get together with your neighbors.? Darwin explains,

?Away from the world of world-class, people behave normally. They are decent and

friendly. They have time to chat. The fans are not impatient with the ball players. The

ball players, paid salaries that are smaller than those of many fans, are approachable and

nice. They give balls to kids.? Darwin also credits his success in Ottawa because he was

able to spot a desire by the fans to be part of something small(Gordon 9).

In Durham, North Carolina, minor league baseball has had an impact on the

community both positively and negatively. They were an established franchise that began

to head in the wrong way. Durham, like many communities that have face ?hard times,?

learned from their mistakes and bounced back to become the most nationally known minor

league team. Durham is located in North Carolina and is part of the “research triangle”

along with Raleigh and Chapel Hill. In the 1980’s, Durham’s economic image began to

struggle. In the mid 1980’s, the North Carolina Symphony moved its home from Durham

to Raleigh. This was believed to be caused by Durham’s lack of respect in the Carolina

region and harmful intercity competition. Another problem was the prohibition by the

state legislature against Durham annexing Research Triangle Park. This was also due to

the declining city image.

Durham in the 20th century had a rich tradition of minor league baseball. Durham

housed the headquarters of the National Association of Professional Baseball Leagues

from 1933 to 1947. The Bulls were one of the most successful teams in the minor leagues

in the 40’s, 50’s, and most of the 60’s. However, towards the end of the 60’s, Durham

began to experience some “hard times.” This was due to poor management and the

decadence of Durham Athletic Park (DAP). In 1971, Durham began its final season as the

home of the Durham Bulls.

In 1980, Miles Wolff brought minor league baseball back to Durham. Wolff spent

$2500 for the rights to the team and $25000 to restore Durham Athletic Park. In 1988,

the Durham Bulls and minor league baseball got national attention with the success of the

movie “Bull Durham.” A year before “Bull Durham”, Raleigh officials tried to lure the

Bulls from Durham in hopes that a higher-level team would be brought to the

Raleigh-Durham area. This attempt failed and baseball in Durham remains to this day.

The Bulls were one thing that intercity rivals Raleigh and Chapel Hill did not have. This

was recognized as substantial to the city of Durham’s image. Durham to this day is the

most recognized minor league baseball team. It has led the Carolina League attendance

for the past five years and has built a new stadium where the Bulls began playing last year.

Their old stadium remains a historical minor league baseball landmark where high school

and local college baseball games are played. The Bulls are also the leading memorabilia

seller in the entire minor leagues.

Not every community will achieve the success of Durham, North Carolina, because

there is no 100% guarantee in minor league baseball. However, the majority of towns and

cities throughout the United States and Canada hosting minor league baseball teams have

experienced many benefits. Economic growth and development, community identity and

pride , affordable family entertainment, and an improved the quality of life indicate that

minor league baseball is here to stay.