New and Old Nationals:
A Short History of DC Baseball
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Baseball returns to our nation’s capital this spring. The woeful Montreal Expos - losers of 95 games last year - have become the Washington Nationals. Now, long-suffering DC baseball fans are welcoming the team with open arms and wallets with sales of tickets and merchandise reflecting an excited and enthusiastic fan base. General Manager Jim Bowden has brought in new players and this year’s pitching looks to be much improved. If the offense clicks, this team has a solid chance to match or surpass the 83 wins it garnered in 2002 and 2003. With exciting young stars like Brad Wilkerson and Zach Day the new Nationals (nicknamed the ‘Nats) should be one of baseball’s “feel good” stories this year.

Off the field the Nats still have to contend with Major League Baseball’s bumbling management. Baltimore owner Peter Angelos remains furious over what he considers an incursion into his territory. He has yet to settle with Major League Baseball over the move and paying off the litigious Angelos will be costly. Then there is the more vexing problem facing this team: the Nationals represent baseball’s ultimate conflict of interest. They are owned by the owners of every other Major League team. Thus, there is every incentive to keep the team weak and underfunded (so that it is not competitive with each owners’ primary investment) and there is no incentive to greatly improve the team (which would come at the expense of other teams). This ownership situation has very real on-field consequences. On Labor Day, 2003, the Expos were tied with the Marlins for the wild card lead. When every other National League club expanded their rosters to 40 players for the September stretch run, Major League Baseball, in a cost-saving move, prevented the Expos from adding additional talent. They faded, and the Marlins went on to win the World Series.

Baseball in DC has an amusing, yet ill-fated history. The original Senators – officially named the “Washington Nationals” – suffered through decades of subpar baseball performance before fleeing for Minnesota’s twin cities. During that team’s greatest decade (1924-1934), in which it won three pennants and one world championship, it was overshadowed by the great Ruth-Gehrig Yankees squads. Between 1933 and 1960 the Senators had few bright moments. Following the 1960 season the Griffith family packed up the franchise and moved it to Minnesota. The American League provided DC with a new expansion team in 1969. But once again, the Nats were overshadowed by the newly-christened “Miracle Mets.” Adding insult to injury, the manager of the Mets, Brooklyn legend Gil Hodges, managed the ‘Nats from 1963 to 1967. His success in DC had been (to say the least) limited.

Bob Short, invigorated by the success of the 1969 season, decided his team was close to going over the top. All they needed were a few established stars – to show the youngsters how to win. He traded a promising young infielder to the Detroit Tigers to obtain one-time 30-game winner (and two-time Cy Young Award winner) Denny McLain. He enticed Curt Flood back to baseball after Flood’s battle against the League over the reserve clause. The ‘Nats were perhaps the most promising team in baseball in the spring of 1971.

But that optimism dissipated remarkably quickly. Shortly after helping the team win its opening game, Flood mysteriously disappeared on the way to the ballpark one morning (he would later turn up in Portugal, the battle with Major League Baseball, and his years away from the game, wore on his psyche and his body). The 1971 team finished with a record of 63-96. During that fateful last season of Major League baseball in Washington, Bob Short argued incessantly with the DC City Council. Despite charging the highest admission prices in the American League, Short claimed more than $3 million in losses in his first three years of ownership. The lease at RFK Stadium, he argued, was the culprit. When the City Council refused to negotiate, Short moved the team to Arlington, Texas, where they became the Rangers. In their last two years in DC, the team drew 1,479,945 paying fans, while attendance in their first two years in Texas topped out at 1,349,059 fans. Because of the favorable contract, however, the Rangers generated Short a hefty profit while costing the city of Arlington a fortune.

On the evening of September 30, 1971, slightly over 14,000 fans said goodbye to the Senators, and baseball in DC. The crowd was rowdy and angry. Banners throughout the stadium cursed Short, and as the game moved into the ninth inning - with the Senators holding a 7-5 lead over the Yankees - frustration boiled over. A fan jumped the rail, scammed to first base, pulled up the bag, and started running around the outfield. Laughing, crying, screaming, angry and drunk fans by the thousands then poured out of the stands and swarmed the infield. They desperately tore up the grass, grabbed the bases, and did what they could to express their outrage. The players and umpires retreated to the dugouts and the Senators, fittingly, forfeited their final contest.

But now over three decades later, the bad feelings engendered by Short’s ownership and a decade of lousy baseball have completely dissipated. There are no more “new” Senators fans around anymore. The Nationals are back in town, and all is forgiven. Play Ball!