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W. S. Miller

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BOOK REVIEW

THE SPORTS FRANCHISE GAME: CITIES IN PURSUIT OF SPORTS FRANCHISES, EVENTS, STADIUMS, AND ARENAS

Kenneth L. Shropshire

[University of Pennsylvania Press 1995]

xii + 102 pp., \$24.95

Since the early 1950s, owners of professional sports franchises have routinely used the perceived economic and non-economic benefits of their teams to entice governmental leaders around North America to build or refurbish playing facilities for their teams at the taxpayers' expense.

But as governmental coffers have continually tightened, the costs of building or refurbishing facilities continue to escalate, and fans and legislators have come to the realization that professional sports are a business, and not a game. This process has come under increasing scrutiny for all parties involved, thus causing many municipalities to reevaluate their roles in the process. For example, legislators in Quebec City and Winnipeg, after comparing costs of keeping their teams with the supposed economic and non-economic benefits of a sports franchise, have chosen to opt out of the process and let their teams relocate elsewhere. This process, and the decision-making factors used by its various participants, serve as the basis for *The Sports Franchise Game*, an enlightening new book written by Professor Kenneth L. Shropshire.

The Sports Franchise Game begins with Professor Shropshire identifying five questions that serve as key factors in determining why the "game" is played. These questions include: (1) what value does a sports franchise bring to a city?, (2) why is the competition for these franchises so vigorous?, (3) when should a city battle for a franchise?, (4) should a city only concern itself with the bottom-line dollar value of a franchise?, and (5) should a city build a stadium or arena in the hopes of attracting a franchise?

Shropshire begins to answer these questions in the introduction and the first two chapters of the book by giving the reader a concise, yet enlightening, background of some of the economic and legal factors of the "game." This discussion is followed in chapters three through seven with six real-life examples showing how the aforementioned economic and legal factors combine with political factors to form the "sports

franchise game.” The book concludes with Professor Shropshire offering his opinions on how the “game” will be played out in the future.

The introduction, along with laying out the aforementioned questions, examines the economic and social aspects of the sports business in the 1990s and illustrates how these aspects have become so intertwined that it is difficult to separate them from each other. As Shropshire adeptly notes, “In the pursuit of a franchise, it is often confusing to distinguish between the actual dollar-and-cents value of a franchise and other, less tangible societal values. This blend of the economic and social values helps explain why cities ardently pursue sports franchises and major sporting events.”

Unfortunately, the introduction also illustrates one of the few problems of *The Sports Franchise Game*. In dealing with a cutting edge issue such as sports facility financing, some of the material can become outdated rather quickly. For example, Shropshire states, “Today the trip is usually to a publicly financed facility in the suburbs. For better or worse, we will not be able to go back to the days of team-owned stadiums in the heart of the inner city.” A majority of the sports facilities proposed over the past year will, in fact, be team-owned and located in or near each respective city’s downtown area. These flaws are relatively minor and do not detract greatly from the overall effectiveness of the book’s message.

Chapter One, “The Sports Franchise Game,” begins the main discussion of how the “game” works by giving the perspectives of each of the participants as they decide whether to enter into the “game.” First, Shropshire shows the reader how the economics of sports have changed in the 1990s and how this change created the need for sports franchise owners to maximize and control their facility’s revenues, thus, from the owners’ perspective, accelerating the pace of the sports franchise game. The author follows this with a discussion showing why municipalities decide to get into the “game,” such as for the attainment of a “big league label” or to facilitate an overhaul of a municipality’s image to the rest of the world. Shropshire concludes by offering examples of the price that some municipalities have paid to attain this “big league status” and how the valuation of such status is nearly impossible to measure in economic terms.

Chapter Two, “Impact Studies and Other Quantitative Analyses: Inconclusive Conclusions,” provides a general overview of the methodology, conclusions, and criticisms regarding impact studies and their role in the sports franchise game. Shropshire, a professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, offers numerous illustrations

to show the flaws present in most impact studies. The author follows this with a well-balanced discussion of why such studies should be viewed with caution by all participants in the sports franchise game. The chapter concludes somewhat humorously with a famous quote from Mark Twain, slightly amended by the author, "There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics. Impact studies may be a combination of all three."

The next four chapters of *The Sports Franchise Game* offer a variety of real-life examples to show how the aforementioned economic and legal factors combine with the political reality in each municipality to form the process that is known as "the sports franchise game." These examples, which include relatively recent deals completed in Philadelphia, San Francisco, Oakland, Baltimore, Indianapolis and Washington D.C., are generously interspersed with commentary from Shropshire explaining why the "game" played out as it did in those respective cities.

In the final chapter, "Putting the Pursuit into Perspective: The Value of Sports," Professor Shropshire offers opinions on how he believes the game will be played in the future, especially from the municipalities' perspective. Issues such as the franchise owners' continually growing need for stadium revenues, the idea of public/private partnerships, and the value of a sports franchise in a community serve as the main focal points of the discussion. While the author writes from the municipalities' viewpoint, chapter eight, like the rest of the book, offers valuable information for all participants in the sports franchise game.

The Sports Franchise Game is a valuable addition to the sports field because it examines all of the factors, not merely the economic factors, that municipalities use or should use when deciding whether to be a part of "the sports franchise game." Also, unlike other similar treatises, Shropshire does this examination in an evenhanded manner, which only adds to the book's overall value to the field. The book's main flaw is that due to the fluidity of the sports facility financing field, some of the material is somewhat outdated. But if the readers use this material in context with the examples given, they will learn a great deal about the process that is "the sports franchise game."

W. S. MILLER

