

## The Washington Nationals: Wishful Thinking or An Error in Judgment

Written by Wayne G. McDonnell, Jr.  
Sunday, 14 June 2009 10:13

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*The following is a guest article by Wayne G. McDonnell, Jr.*

On the thirtieth day of September in 1971, 14,460 fans walked through the turnstiles at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium in Washington, D.C. to pay their final respects to the game of baseball in our nation's capital. As the Senators were about to put the finishing touches on a 7-5 victory against the New York Yankees, hundreds of raucous fans invaded the ball field in a desperate search for mementos and memories that would last them a lifetime. As the masses circled the bases and forcefully ripped blades of grass and dirt from the playing surface, victory was whisked away from a franchise who had long grown accustomed to losing. For as long as one can recall, the Washington Senators were infamously remembered for the old saying "Washington, first in war, first in peace, last in the American League." With only one out to go in the top of the ninth inning, the Senators had to forfeit the game due to the unruly behavior of their disappointed fans. By 1972, baseball had twice abandoned a community whose origins date back to 1884 in the American and Union Associations. In assessing the Senators' body of work since the turn of the twentieth century, it is safe to say that baseball in Washington, D.C. has been synonymous with losing. With the exception of a 1924 World Championship and the Hall of Fame career of Walter Johnson, the Washington Senators are infamous for finishing fifth or worst in their respective league or division fifty times during the 1901-1971 seasons.

Since the Senators' departure for the plains of Texas in 1972, many have publicly yearned for baseball to return to Washington, D.C. As the echoes of excitement and enthusiasm grew in intensity with each game at Oriole Park at Camden Yards in the decade of the 1990's Washingtonians became envious of their neighbors and wanted to bask in the glory of baseball's newfound renaissance. However, their exuberance was met with cynicism and trepidation. Many believed that Washington, D.C. was a transient market and building a consistent fan base with disposable income would be terribly difficult. Plus, any new baseball franchise in the metropolitan area would have to confront Peter Angelos and the Baltimore Orioles regarding territorial rights. To add to the frustration, Major League Baseball had already

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aggressively expanded into markets such as Miami, Tampa Bay, Denver, and Phoenix. While each of these teams have experienced the thrills and agony of World Series competition, it is safe to say that numerous financial dilemmas have marred their brief existences as professional baseball franchises.

When Major League Baseball triumphantly announced its return to our nation's capital for the start of the 2005 season, all matters of concern and doubt about Washington, D.C.'s viability as a major league city were overshadowed by the plight of the Montreal Expos. Almost immediately, Washington, D.C. became a safe haven for a vagabond franchise. Instead of splitting time between a disinterested audience in Montreal and a passionate, yet economically challenged audience in Puerto Rico, the Expos would now have a temporary home at Robert F. Kennedy Stadium until their new state of the art \$700 million dollar ball park was ready for competition. The community was applauded for the size of its metropolitan area, an educated and prosperous audience and vast development projects. Washington, D.C. was supposed to be an emphatic answer to a lingering question that haunted Major League Baseball for the better part of a decade. However, it has quickly turned into an enigma and possibly, an even more complex question without an appropriate answer in sight.

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After Major League Baseball sold the newly named Washington Nationals to Ted Lerner in 2006 for \$450 million dollars, they not only realized an estimated profit of \$330 million dollars on the sale, but they felt as if the franchise was in good hands with seasoned baseball executive Stan Kasten involved with the ownership group. On top of that, they even found a way to appease Peter Angelos regarding his territorial monopoly with a guaranteed franchise value for the Orioles and a majority stake in the Mid Atlantic Sports Network. Even though a potentially damaging conflict with the Orioles was avoided, the Nationals and Major League Baseball would not see the last of negativity engulfing the franchise.

The Nationals' first year in Washington, D.C. was viewed as an overwhelming success. The team had finished the season with an 81-81 record and drew 2,731,993 fans. Major League Baseball was alive and well in our nation's capital and Washingtonians greatly contributed to the 265 percent increase in attendance over the previous year in Montreal and Puerto Rico. However, as the years progressed, certain trends and substantial declines in attendance became evident. Between the 2005-2007 seasons, there was a 28.85% decline in attendance. Also, the Nationals finished with a 225-261 record and a .463 winning percentage during this period. However, the most disturbing statistics come from the 2008 season. As the Nationals christened their new ball park, a papal visit and an opening night appearance on ESPN's

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Sunday Night Baseball were the only highlights of the season. The Nationals finished with a 59-102 record and drew 2,320,400 fans to Nationals Ball Park. They ranked nineteenth in all of Major League Baseball for attendance last season and averaged 29,005 fans per game with an average maximum capacity of 69.24%. After the first thirty games of this season, the Nationals are averaging 20,698 fans per game with an average maximum capacity of 49.41 percent.

While their on the field performance in recent years can be summarized as uninspiring and even dreadful, the Washington Nationals have also had to confront several unfortunate circumstances in the front office as well. Disarray and acrimony could be terms that apply to the Nationals' executives and management philosophies. Rumors of poor employee morale, absentee ownership, miserly attitudes and the overvaluation of naming rights have plagued this franchise for the better part of two years. To make matters worse, former Senior Vice President and General Manager Jim Bowden was involved in two controversies that depicted the franchise in a negative manner. Not only was he arrested for driving under the influence in the spring of 2006, but he also resigned from his position due to a federal investigation involving improprieties regarding the signing bonuses of Latin American players. The "bonus skimming" accusations led to a domino effect within the organization as special assistant and former major league pitcher Jose Rijo was relieved of his duties along with the Nationals' Director of Operations in the Dominican Republic, Jose Baez.

This week, the Washington Nationals made a monumental decision regarding the future of their franchise by focusing their efforts on pitching in the 2009 First Year Player Draft. Besides selecting San Diego State University's pitching phenomenon Stephen Strasburg with the first overall pick and Stanford University's closer Drew Storen with the tenth pick, the Nationals also drafted twenty-eight other pitchers. Out of the thirty pitchers selected, twenty had college experience. Almost immediately, Drew Storen signed his professional contract with the Nationals. Now, the Nationals must prepare for an elaborate and possibly contentious negotiation with the draft's most coveted player. There is no doubt that a myriad of statistical analyses, forecasts, player comparisons and projections will be exchanged between the two parties during the negotiations. While the price tag for Scott Boras' pitching prodigy Strasburg will be exorbitant and grossly overvalued, the Nationals have no other choice in the matter but to offer Boras' client a contract that almost immediately meets his demands. They cannot afford the embarrassment of dealing with the fallout of another unsigned first round draft pick or risk losing Strasburg to an independent or Japanese ball club. While the Nationals were handsomely compensated for their failure to sign pitcher Aaron Crow last summer, the same cannot happen with Stephen Strasburg. This moribund franchise needs to send an emphatic and resounding message to their fans and all of Major League Baseball. Right now, there is no reason for anyone to purchase a ticket to a Nationals' game unless the Phillies, Mets or Dodgers are in town. It is an inferior product with obvious flaws and deficiencies in management and implementation. However, one should not blame the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area for the Nationals' attendance woes. Baseball can and will survive in this market. Washingtonians are so desperately looking for a reason to support the Nationals, but they

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haven't been given one just yet.

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