

\$450 million down payment on MLB team

By Jim Litke
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's easy to be cynical about business deals struck in Washington, D.C., and never more than when the seller is major league baseball.

Five years after taking control of the Expos-cum-Nationals, commissioner Bud Selig is on the verge of naming the ownership group that will fork over \$450 million for a franchise that was once marked for contraction and has been running on life support ever since.

Go figure: Demand for baseball teams is still running so far ahead of supply that three groups of bidders are fighting each other tooth and nail to the wire for the privilege.

"Life's about making adjustments, that's for sure," said former Dallas Cowboys running back Calvin Hill, a longtime Washington, D.C., resident and minority partner in a group headed by former Seattle Mariners owner Jeff Smulyan.

"Obviously, every group has been vetted and everybody can meet the asking price. What it should come down to, in my mind, is what group is best able to represent baseball in a way that MLB would like to be viewed in a city as important as Washington."

After setting and then blowing through one dead-

line after another, a beleaguered Selig claims he's still having an almost-impossible time making up his mind.

"My wife says she's never seen me agonize like this. It outstrips everything, even labor," he told the Washington Post last week.

But what he said next was even more revealing.

"My daughter, Wendy, said, 'Look at it this way: Whichever group you pick, you can't go wrong. They both fit your classical criterion,'" Selig recalled. "You could have no groups."

Since three groups believe they're still in the running, you can imagine the discomfort Selig's use of the word "both" caused.

Handicappers took that to mean that the race had been narrowed to a group fronted by Fred Malek, a one-time Nixon administration henchman who lobbied long and very loudly to bring baseball back to Washington, and a second headed up by real estate developer Ted Lerner, who has done nearly all of his seedwork out of the public eye. If those handicappers are right, it came as news to Smulyan.

"Each of us brings something different to the table," he said in a telephone interview Sunday night from Indianapolis. "What's been fascinating to me is the interplay of the community.

There's obviously a lot of political stuff taking place behind the scenes."

If you read between the lines, what it comes down to is this: After years of putting off the decision with little justification, Selig is not just fighting his usual paralysis; he's wrestling with his conscience, besides.

Major league baseball strong-armed the D.C. city council into picking up most of the tab for a yet-to-be-built new stadium for the Nationals that will top \$600 million. For that kind of commitment, council members want not just a strong local presence in the winning ownership group, but active and visible minority participation.

What baseball wants is a group with both those things, plus considerable experience operating a franchise and a willingness to spend enough to make up for years of neglect. The problem is that none of the three groups hits every mark, which means Selig could play eenie-meenie-minie-mo if he wanted and be done with it.

When asked what role the council's desires would play in a final decision, MLB President Bob DuPuy replied in an e-mail: "The decision... will not be dictated by the wishes of any particular constituency, although the opinions of

everyone involved will be given consideration and respect."

Smulyan's group includes an unprecedented 25 percent minority stake, a strong selling point if MLB is serious about drawing African-American players and fans back into the mix. But the bid is hampered by Smulyan's out-of-town address and questions about his financial wherewithal.

Malek's group has deep roots and deeper pockets, but his past partisanship in the political arena and his rush to add minority partners with more name-recognition than baseball savvy has some locals feeling uncomfortable.

Lerner's group is flush, and claims it has complied with baseball's request to add broad minority participation, but won't name names. In a similar vein, the group may have enlisted Stan Kasten, a former Atlanta Braves executive and longtime Selig favorite to the partnership, which might be enough to tip the scales in its favor.

In the meantime, it's not just Washington residents whose patience is wearing thin. Off to a horrible start, team president Tony Tavares, GM Jim Bowden and manager Frank Robinson and even some players are showing signs of

stress. There's been at least one spat in the hallway, some quick hooks applied to the lineup and the threat of more to follow.

So if nothing else, a decision on ownership should make life in D.C. a little easier, right?

"If they think getting an owner will solve all their problems," Selig told the newspaper, "they are kidding themselves."

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NBA playoff seeding still up for grabs at bottom of bracket

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this is as tough as it gets," 76ers coach Maurice Cheeks said on the team's Web site. "We have a lot of work to do in the offseason, and I plan on sitting down with (team president) Billy (King) as soon the season is over. We

don't ever want to be in this position again. This is not a good feeling."

At Miami, the Bulls felt much better after riding their late-season surge to a second consecutive playoff spot. They locked up their berth with a 117-93 victory

over the Heat behind 26 points from Luol Deng.

"We played well. We clinched it. It's just a good feeling," Deng said. "Now we've still got to play for a higher spot."

That's what all the East teams want to do, since

eight place means a first-round series against Detroit. That's why Washington wasn't satisfied after securing its spot.

"We are relieved," center Brendan Haywood said, "but we're not satisfied."

N.C. Central closes final spring scrimmage in CIAA

By Bonitta Best
THE TRIANGLE TRIBUNE

N.C. Central

The Maroon and Gray football scrimmage game held last weekend on NCCU's campus was just "icing on the cake" coach Rod Broadway said. The real work was done during spring football practice.

Broadway was just happy to come away with no injuries in a game that saw starting quarterback Stafford Brown make his debut. Brown, a red-shirt last year, filled in for Adrian Warren, who was not allowed to participate in spring drills. Warren does have one semester of eligibility remaining.

"Stafford did a good job," Broadway said. "He's a talent, and he's going to be a good player."

The Eagles are coming off their first football championship in 25 years and going into their last season in the CIAA. Central has applied for admission to move up to Division I-AA in football and join the MEAC.

Broadway said he has approximately 25 new players, and his main focus was to see them improve individually.

"We want to get guys improved individually and fundamentally," he said. "And we want to get guys playing hard and fast, and we were able to do that."

Still, the occasional breakdown in coverage did not go over well.

"Guys were not playing as hard and as fast as they can play, and we're not going to

tolerate that," he said.

Shaw

Of the 65 players participating in spring drills, only 48 were healthy enough to play in last weekend's scrimmage at Chavis Park, but coach Deondri Clark was happy with what he saw. "I liked their heart, they never gave up even though they didn't have anyone to substitute for them," Clark said. "There were lots of enthusiasm, nobody was dragging, and everybody played hard just like it was any other game day."

A lack of depth have plagued Clark the last two seasons, or rather a lack of recruiting budget. But a \$50,000 gift from alumnus Willie Gary eased the purse strings some this season.

However, Clark is still short at some positions, including the most vital — quarterback.

Three-year starter Jeremonty Kimbrough is no longer on the team, though he's still in school. That leaves Clark with just two QBs: last year's backup Darion Mack and Justin Ross.

"Jeremonty didn't come to morning workouts, so he can walk on in the fall if he wants to play, but he won't be a scholarship player," Clark said. "With two quarterbacks, it doesn't take but one blow to be down to one."

The Bears finished second in the Eastern Division last season after winning the conference title and the CIAA championship the year before. Shaw had a chance to win back-to-back titles but lost its last two games of the season.

St. Augustine's

Coach Michael Costa lost only three starters — two on offense and one on defense — but what a trio they were.

Gone is defensive lineman Tyrone Pettaway, wide receiver Eddie Montgomery and quarterback Darrell Nesbitt.

Pettaway was the 2005 defensive player of the year, while Montgomery and Nesbitt were all-conference.

Thaddeus Williams started at quarterback during the Falcons' Blue and White scrimmage on campus last weekend, but Costa said he is expecting a couple of QB transfers in the near future.

As usual, St. Aug's defense

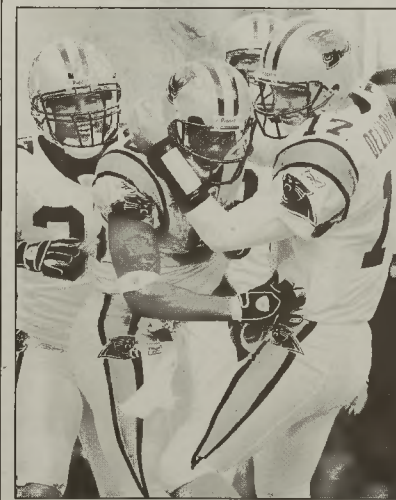
stood out.

"We're playing good defense — very good," Costa said. "Offensively, we can run the ball a little bit. We miss Montgomery with his speed and Darrell with his athletic ability."

Costa admits last year's collapse is still fresh in his mind. The Falcons won their first eight games before losing their last two and a chance at a championship ring.

But he plans to use the loss for motivation.

"It's a good motivational factor," he said. "It gives us something to really work towards because we know we didn't finish last year."



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