

Baseball fans want to root, root, root for local team



ON NOV. 9, 2010, the Lackawanna County Multipurpose Stadium Authority voted to sell Northeastern Pennsylvania's Triple-A baseball franchise to the SWB Yankees for \$14.6

million, intending to insure the existence of professional baseball in the region for at least another 30 years and to provide for the building of a new stadium. But what good is the deal if local fans don't support the team?

There's no question that the SWB Yankees have been successful on the playing field. Since they began playing in Lackawanna County in 2006, the team has compiled a record of 424-289 for a .595 winning percentage. And, last season, they became the first club in the 126-year history of the International League to capture five straight division championships. And yet their attendance rates have continued to decline.

With an average attendance of just over 4,530 fans per game in 2011, the team set an all-time low. That's considerably less than the average game attendance for the Lehigh Valley Iron Pigs (9,249), or the Louisville Bats (8,716), or the Round Rock Express (8,587); none of whom have the kind of winning tradition that SWB Yankees enjoy.

So why can't the team draw more fans?

There are several reasons. First, Mandalay Baseball Properties, which once operated the franchise for the stadium authority and

COMMENTARY

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now is co-owner with the New York Yankees, has always demonstrated a quiet arrogance towards the fans.

Unlike other Triple-A clubs as well as the old Red Barons, Mandalay never bothered to create a summer baseball camp for youngsters, a player's speaker's bureau, an autograph table where fans could meet and greet players before the game, or any community service activity that required the sweat equity of players. Thus, the fans don't feel close to the players at all.

Second, the SWB Yankees charge \$10 for general admission with no discount for age, while most other Triple-A clubs charge \$7 for general admission and offer discounts for children and seniors. In addition, concession prices at PNC Field are comparable to those at many of the small-market major league ballparks. In a rust-belt region like northeast Pennsylvania, the working person simply cannot afford to pay those prices, especially during a recession.

Third, the organization promotes the "Yankees" while downplaying its "Scranton/Wilkes-Barre" affiliation. Unlike other Triple-A teams that acknowledge their hometown on their cap or jersey, one has to

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squint to see the "SWB" embroidered on the blue band around the red-and-white hat that has long been a symbol of the New York Yankees.

Nor is there any trace of the rich tradition of anthracite baseball forged by the Scranton Miners and Wilkes-Barre Barons of the old Eastern League. Instead, the concourse at PNC Field featured posters of Yankee Hall of Famers who never set foot in the place.

In a region where fan loyalties are divided between several major league teams, there is no reason to follow the SWB Yankees if you are a Phillies, Mets or Red Sox fan. What minor league fans want - and deserve - is a local team that cares about the region where they play and the people who live there. Instead, the current ownership of the SWB Yankees cares only about the almighty dollar.

If that doesn't change soon, the franchise will have serious problems filling seats at its new ballpark, no matter how successful the team is on the diamond.

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