

PHILLIES DESERVE TO LOSE ROLEN... AND FANS

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

SCOTT ROLEN'S recent decision to opt for free agency rather than sign a long-term contract with the Phillies cuts to the heart of the organization's problems with their dwindling fan base.

Not that Rolen had won over the hearts of the faithful by any means. He is too aloof to be embraced by the fans in this city.

But no one can dispute that he is the best defensive third baseman in the major leagues, or that his work ethic is unparalleled on a young team that is desperate for any kind of leadership in the players' ranks. What's more, Rolen wanted the same thing as the fans: to win now. It isn't going to happen any time soon for three reasons that have become operating principles within the Phillies organization.

Keep a small-market mentality: Despite the fact that Philadelphia is ranked fifth among the top sports markets in the nation, Bill Giles, Dave Montgomery and company haven't capitalized on that advantage because they refuse to spend the money in the free agent market.

If the Phillies rank in the bottom six or eight major league teams in terms of gross revenue, they have nobody but themselves to blame. In today's game owners have to spend money to make money. And not just on new stadiums.

Strive to be competitive instead of a world champion: When Rolen asked that any long-term contract be tied to a team payroll comparable to those of other big market clubs last spring, he was forcing ownership to make an immediate commitment to winning.

Instead of putting their money where their mouth is, the Phillies naively believed they could secure the services of their Gold Glove third baseman with a \$140 million offer and win with a team of promising youngsters. Money was not the issue for Rolen, playing for a perennial contender is.

Like Curt Schilling before him, Rolen knew that unless some proven veteran talent with post-season experience were added to the line-up, the Phillies would have difficulty getting to the World Series. Anyone who watched the team down the stretch realized that they lacked a Jason Giambi with a take-charge attitude to put them over the top.

But they'll never go after that kind of player because they're more concerned about the gate than a world championship.

Take the fans for granted: Since 1993 the front office has done very little to make the Phillies attractive to the fans, on or off the field.

"Community involvement" is usually nothing more than a tax-deductible sponsorship for a group of spoiled young millionaires, some of whom are woefully underachieving.

How about some sweat equity to show that the players really do care about the fans? Instead we get the quiet arrogance of so-called "stars" who refuse to make themselves accessible. The front office condones their boorish behavior by hiring outside staff to run the team-sponsored summer baseball camps and RBI program. And yet the Phillies wonder why they played before an ocean of empty blue seats last season.

Fans don't want to hear anymore about ownership and their financial woes.

Giles, Montgomery and the other penthouse paupers should have sold years ago to a multi-media magnate that could compete with the Yankees, Mets, Braves and Dodgers, both on the field and in the free-agent market.

The Phillies not only deserve to lose Scott Rolen; they deserve to join Montreal, Minnesota and Florida as the front runners for contraction. The fans in this city will guarantee it next season. ★

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