

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

THOSE who blame the woes of this year's Phillies on manager Larry Bowa, his coaching staff and general manager Ed Wade are off the mark. The real problem is the owners.

For a team that was a sure bet to clinch the National League's Eastern Division, the Phils have been a personal heartbreak, but not an unexpected one if you've followed the team as long as I have.

The Phillies are the only pro team I've ever cared about. I spent my childhood, adolescence and adulthood paying their escalating ticket prices. Volunteered my coaching services at their summer baseball camps. Raised money to have former Phillies speak at community programs. Spent enough money on team memorabilia to outfit a small country. Promoted my love for the team among my three sons.

And, for 10 years, I wrote about their history. I've made no profit from the commitment. Ac-

tually, it's cost me quite a chunk of change. But I never really minded until now, because I genuinely believed in the team and that the ownership would one day bring another world championship to Philadelphia.

Like most die-hard fans, I used to get angry at owners Claire Betz, Alexander, Mahlon and William Buck, and John Middleton because I felt they gave minority shareholders Bill Giles and now Dave Montgomery carte blanche to run the club with little accountability to the fans. That anger sometimes vented itself in my writing, and caused a rift in the friendships I once enjoyed with people in the organization. I regret that.

I know that Giles and Montgomery are good people who want to win just as much as the fans. The problem is they don't know how. This season has made

that fact indisputably clear.

It's not a matter of spending \$93 million on a team that, on paper, should be remarkably successful. It's a matter of knowing baseball the way former general manager Paul Owens knew the game. He knew what was in a player's heart and soul. He could tell the difference between a kid who was hungry and a pretender. He knew how to put together a scouting system as well as a winning team, whether they looked good on paper or not.

Most of all, Owens knew how to get the most out of his scouts, manager and team by making them accountable.

It serves no purpose in listing the litany of mistakes in player and administrative personnel the Phillies have made over the last 22 years. Giles and Montgomery are not baseball men;

they are businessmen.

Giles knows the promotional business better than most. He has brought a beautiful new ballpark to Philadelphia. Montgomery came up through ticket sales. He knows how to fill the ballpark as well as how to generate the revenue to pay the exorbitant salaries the players are making. They've done those jobs well and deserve the appreciation of the fans. But it doesn't mean they, with the help of Wade, the GM they hired (who began his career in the Phillies' public relations department) can put together a winning team.

"Consistency" and "desire" are the true signs of a winner, like the Yankees, Athletics and Braves. But with the exceptions of the pennant-winning seasons of 1983 and '93, the Phillies have demonstrated neither. The '83

team was the last hurrah of a club put together by the previous owners, the Carpenter family, and '93 was, by most accounts, a fluke when a trash-talking team of veterans caught lightning in a bottle.

The failure to build a consistent winner is the fault of the current ownership and the personnel decisions made by the front office, administrators hired by Giles and Montgomery.

When this disappointing season is over, you will hear the predictable excuses from the brain trust: injuries, the greater parity in the division because of revenue-sharing, and plain bad luck.

It's a tradition and an insult to my intelligence as a fan.

If the team's owners really care about the city and its fans, they'd sell to a group that could bring us a winner. Anything else is the epitome of selfishness. ★

William Kashatus wrote "September Swoon: Richie Allen, the '64 Phillies and Racial Integration."

The owners gotta go!

