

# The realities of life as a Phillies fan

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**S**addled with an aging core and too many unmovable contracts, the Phillies are stuck in the National League East's cellar with little hope of escaping in the near future.

On the eve of the July 31 trading deadline, it doesn't appear as if the desperately needed salary dump will occur. The team still owes struggling first baseman Ryan Howard more than \$60 million. It could wind up paying one-time ace Cliff Lee at least \$40 million through 2015, and as much as \$26 million to unpredictable closer Jonathan Papelbon.

Shortstop Jimmy Rollins, second baseman Chase Utley, and catcher Carlos Ruiz seem to be content to remain with the club. Even if the Phillies could make these trades, it's doubtful they'd get much in return, and the organization doesn't have the talent in the farm system to replace the aging core.

This is the painful reality of being a Phillies fan. But there's another side to the story.

Many of these same Phillies won five straight division titles, two pennants, and a World Series between 2007 and 2011. Their remarkable success compels the self-respecting Phillies fan to ask: "Would I have traded those five years of glory to avoid a prolonged period where the chance of winning another championship was not as great?"

The answer for me is no. Those five years not only allowed me to bond with my sons, but they also provided my boys with excellent role models and inspired a lifelong love of baseball. How can I ask for more?

I don't always agree with how the Phillies do business, but I've come to appreciate their operating strategy, which is defined by three fundamental principles:

**If you build it, they will come.** New ballparks not only generate fan interest, but also the revenue stream necessary to attract star players from other teams and reward homegrown talent so they don't pursue free agency.

The plan of Dave Montgomery, the Phillies' president and CEO, to restore the fortunes of the team revolved around Citizens Bank Park. The building of the retro-classic ballpark resulted in a dramatic increase in attendance, which in turn provided the money needed to attract big-name stars like Lee, Jim Thome, and Roy Halladay, and reward homegrown talent like Cole Hamels, Rollins, Howard, and Utley.

Montgomery learned from the Phillies' first glory era of 1976-1983, which had its origins in the building of Veterans Stadium. The Vet got the city hooked on baseball again after years of cellar-dwelling. It also generated the revenue to attract big-

name stars like Tug McGraw and Pete Rose.

**Sign, cultivate, and retain a homegrown core.** Sustained interest occurs when fans can watch a core of likable players develop and succeed.

Today's Phillies fans "grew up" with Howard, Rollins, Utley, and Hamels, all of whom came through the farm system. They've been great role models for young fans during an era tainted by steroid use, and will be long remembered for winning the franchise's second world championship in 2008.

In the 1970s, owner Ruly Carpenter and his general manager, Paul Owens, also signed, developed, and retained Mike Schmidt, Larry Bowa, Bob Boone, and Greg Luzinski. Those Phillies became household names, as well as heroes of the 1980 world championship team.

**Seize the moment.** Success is cyclical. Whenever a World Series title is within reach, a team must deal for the players who will ensure success, even if it means mortgaging the future.

Ruben Amaro Jr. was hired to maintain a championship-caliber team, not to rebuild it. Not only did he bring power-hitting outfielder Raul Ibanez to Philadelphia, but also three of the best starting pitchers in baseball: Roy Oswalt, Halladay, and Lee (twice).

Those acquisitions allowed the Phillies to repeat as NL champions in 2009 and return to the postseason for the next two years.

Amaro learned from Owens, who in 1979 signed Rose for a then-astronomical \$3.2 million. In 1980, Rose proved to be the missing link to that elusive championship the talented core of Schmidt, Bowa, Boone, and Luzinski couldn't win after three failed attempts in the post-season.

The current franchise is a poorly run business. Leadership tends to make decisions based on the heart instead of economic realities, and does so with little regard for a long-term competitive future.

The enormous salaries of Howard, Lee, Utley, and Rollins, in particular, have burdened the Phillies with an aging nucleus, and their farm system lacks the talent to replace it.

But the huge salaries are actually "rewards" for what those stars already achieved, not for future performance. And the dearth of minor-league talent is the price to be paid for acquiring other stars to keep the postseason run alive.

World championships do not come cheaply. The Phillies will be paying the price for many years to come. True fans learn to savor the good times. If not, they'll only become embittered by the bad ones.

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