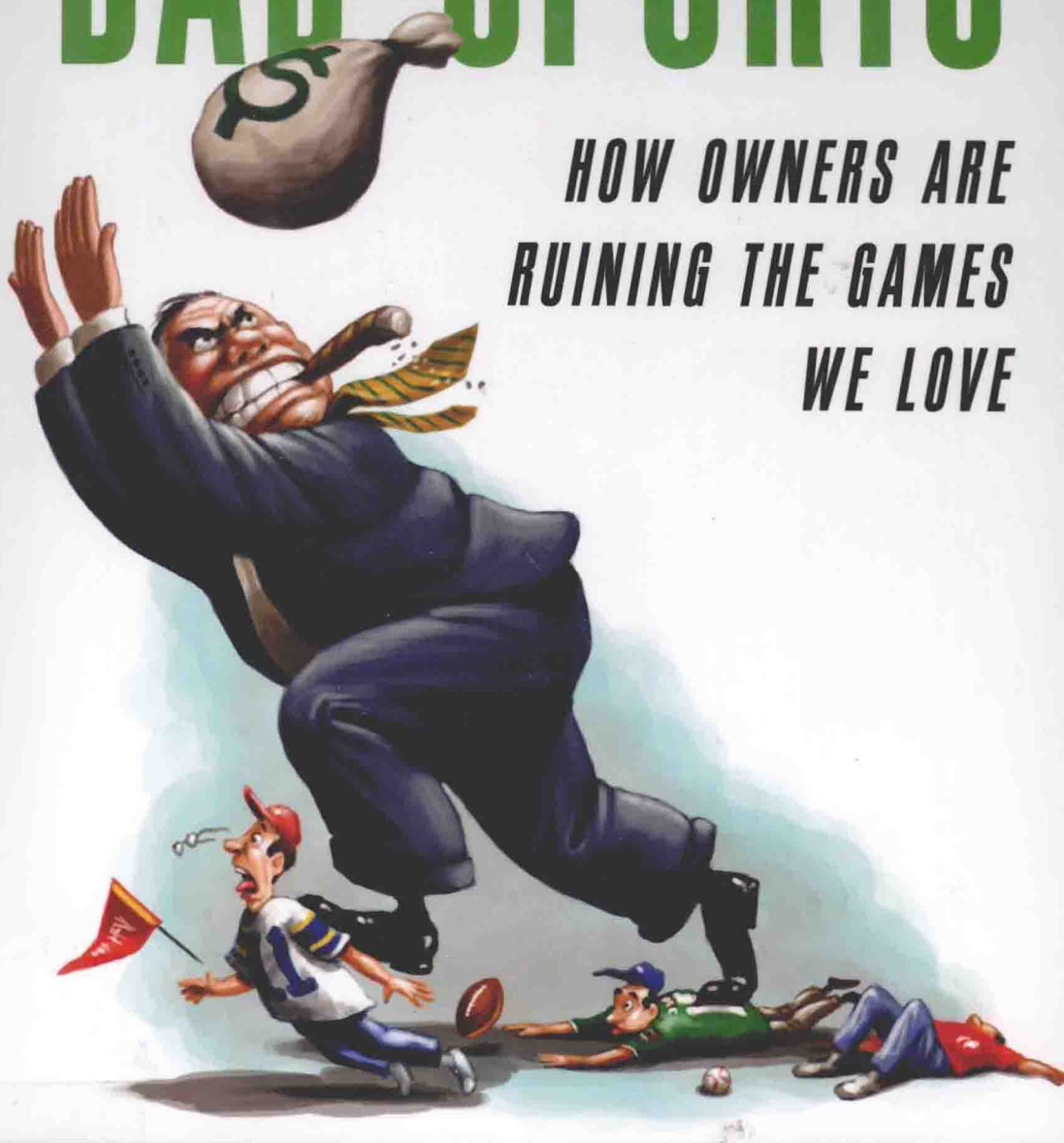


"NOT SINCE HUNTER S. THOMPSON HAS A SPORTSWRITER SHOWN THE RIGHT SNARL FOR THE JOB."

—NAOMI KLEIN

# BAD SPORTS

*HOW OWNERS ARE  
RUINING THE GAMES  
WE LOVE*



**DAVE ZIRIN**

HOST OF SIRIUS/XM'S *EDGE OF SPORTS* RADIO SHOW

AUTHOR OF *WHAT'S MY NAME, FOOL?* SPORTS AND RESISTANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

# BAD SPORTS

---

*How Owners Are Ruining the Games We Love*

**Dave Zirin**



*Scribner*

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY



SCRIBNER

A Division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

Copyright © 2010 by Dave Zirin

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book  
or portions thereof in any form whatsoever. For information address  
Scribner Subsidiary Rights Department, 1230 Avenue of the Americas,  
New York, NY 10020.

First Scribner hardcover edition July 2010

SCRIBNER and design are registered trademarks of The Gale Group, Inc.,  
used under license by Simon & Schuster, Inc., the publisher of this work.

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact  
Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-866-506-1949  
or [business@simonandschuster.com](mailto:business@simonandschuster.com).

The Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau can bring authors to your  
live event. For more information or to book an event contact  
the Simon & Schuster Speakers Bureau at 1-866-248-3049  
or visit our website at [www.simonsspeakers.com](http://www.simonsspeakers.com).

Text designed by Paul Dippolito

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Zirin, Dave.

Bad sports : how owners are ruining the games we love / Dave Zirin.

p. cm.

1. Sports—Management. 2. Sports—Economic aspects—United States.
3. Stadiums—United States—Finance. 4. Sports facilities—United States—Finance.
5. Sports and state—United States. I. Title.

GV713.Z57 2010

796.06'9—dc22 2009049920

ISBN 978-1-4165-5475-2

ISBN 978-1-4391-7574-3 (ebook)



**ALSO BY DAVE ZIRIN**

*A People's History of Sports in the United States*

*Welcome to the Terrordome: The Pain, Politics,  
and Promise of Sports*

*Muhammad Ali Handbook*

*What's My Name, Fool? Sports and Resistance  
in the United States*

*To Izzy and Jacob. Little brothers unite!*

*And to the memory of Dennis Brutus,  
Andrea Lewis, Lester Rodney, and Howard Zinn.*

*I'd rather own than be owned.*

—STEPHON MARBURY, BASKETBALL PLAYER,  
WANDERING SEEKER OF TRUTH

# **BAD SPORTS**



# Contents

<i>Intro: Diogenes in High Tops</i>	1
<b>1</b> <i>When Domes Attack</i>	9
<b>2</b> <i>Business, Never Personal</i>	24
<b>3</b> <i>The Keyser Soze Principle</i>	32
<b>4</b> <i>The Boss: George Steinbrenner as Throwback and Role Model</i>	45
<b>5</b> <i>Clay Bennett, the Seattle SuperSonics, and the Question of Ownership</i>	57
<b>6</b> <i>Money Laundering for the Lord: Charlie Monfort and Dick DeVos Keep the Faith</i>	75
<b>7</b> <i>Peter Angelos and the Shredding of the Oriole Way</i>	95
<b>8</b> <i>Dan Snyder: When Costanza Got Hair</i>	108
<b>9</b> <i>Donald Sterling: Slumlord Billionaire</i>	123
<b>10</b> <i>The Wal-Mart Way: David Glass and the Kansas City Royals</i>	133
<b>11</b> <i>James Dolan: Serpent in Eden</i>	141
<b>12</b> <i>The NHL: Skating on Slush?</i>	149
<b>13</b> <i>The Unholy Gall of the Paulsons</i>	155
<b>14</b> <i>For a Few Steroids More</i>	160
<b>15</b> <i>“What’s a Scouser?” Tom Hicks Goes European</i>	168
<i>Outro: Looking Toward Green Bay</i>	181
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	189
<i>Notes</i>	191

# Intro: Diogenes in High Tops

*In a rich man's house there is no place to spit but his face.*

—DIOGENES

I once had a coach who could spit tobacco hard enough to break a window. He smelled like a hamper and only wore pants that came with a drawstring. And every last person on the team loved the guy. He always said to us, “Sports is like a hammer, gents. And you can use a hammer for all kinds of things. You can use it to build a house, or you can use it to bash somebody’s head. Choose wisely.”

In the twenty-first century, far too many sports fans have a headache that is rapidly entering migraine territory. It’s not just the 1,440 minutes a day of televised sports coverage causing the damage. It’s not even the sports talk radio blabbocracy that is making people reach for the Extra Strength Tylenol. The headache comes from the idea that we are loving something that simply doesn’t love us in return. If sports was once like a playful puppy you would wrestle on the floor, it’s now like a house cat demanding to be stroked and giving nothing back. It’s the way it gets harder to sit through a full game, or the way you go a year without making it to the ballpark and fail to even notice. It’s the extra commercials tacked on to a broadcast, as companies attempt to use the games to “brand” our subconscious. It’s when you decide to finally take the trip to the park, look up the ticket prices, and decide immediately to do something, anything, else with your time. It’s the way you don’t feel the same urgency to watch every second of every game for fear you might miss something magical. As economic times get tougher, the question of what to trim out of the budget doesn’t become a question at all.

Fun has become pain, and sports have become expendable. Ask a junior high classroom whether they know or even care about sports, and the answer should send a chill up the spine of all league commissioners. In my mind, this is a tragic state of affairs. How did sports become so overbearing in our culture, and yet so distant from our personal embrace? When, as fans, did we develop the equivalent of battered spouse's syndrome? And who is at fault for this state of affairs? There are certainly fans who blame the players for being too wealthy and too aloof. If only they didn't live in gated communities, only emerging to charge for autographs. There also are nonfans who blame the fans themselves. If only they would stop buying tickets and merchandise, the game would change. But the days of pointing the finger at players and fans have to end. If a car's brakes failed, you wouldn't blame the driver. All eyes would be on the manufacturer. If professional sports have been beating us over the head with their hammer, it's the owners who need to answer for this sorry state of affairs. Players play. Fans watch. Owners are uniquely charged with being the stewards of the game. It's a task that they have failed to perform in spectacular fashion.

These are the caretakers, and yet, with barely a sliver of scrutiny, they are wrecking the world of sports. The old model of the paternalistic owner caring for a community has become as outdated as the Model T. Because of publicly funded stadium construction, luxury box licenses, sweetheart cable deals, globalized merchandizing plans, and other "revenue streams," the need for owners to cater to a local working- and middle-class fan base has shrunk dramatically. Fans have become scenery for television broadcasts.

The fastest-growing sector of fans? People who love sports, but hate what they are becoming. I interviewed a focus group of more than three thousand fans for this book and this feeling of resentment was the common denominator. As one person said, "I still check out the games but I feel no connection. It's like sex that I feel dirty about afterward."

Yes, people watch but, with rare exceptions, no longer see sports as a linchpin of community cohesion. Because owners believe that they don't need the fans, they do more than put the interests of those who don the foam finger last: they have also, in a novel and unprecedented manner, used the ballpark as a showcase for their politics, which tend to be of

the right-of-center persuasion. We have seen a hyperpatriotism and even a religious program being brought to the often publicly funded playing field. They seem to be saying that it's their world and we just live in it even if our taxes pay for their stadiums with every unfilled pothole and underfunded library. It's time to upset the setup.

Whether you are a sports fan or not, sports affects the national discussion and economy like never before. It shapes how we understand our cultural landscape and is a prime economic player in the game of urban politics. It also rests under a dizzying maze of government anti-trust exemptions and secrecy like no other business of comparable size. The reason why the bulk of owners are unknown, hiding in the darkness, is that the light is kind neither to them nor their spreadsheets. Like the fey Blanche DuBois, they are favored by shadows, and certainly financially they deeply "depend on the kindness of strangers"—us.

This book is going to argue that every last shred of absolute power they possess should be stripped from their hands. The sports fan, Joe Twelve-Pack, Plain Jane, Mario Marginalized, needs to have a seat at the table, particularly if our teams get even one solitary dollar of public money. If a team owner is particularly abusive to a community, local fans should be able to divvy up the shares and buy the team back. This is not just about tax justice. It's about a project of reclamation: a grand adventure to change the game.

I didn't feel that way before starting this project. I wanted to speak to every last owner who would talk to me. I wanted them to defend the way our modern athletic industrial complex is run. I wanted to see if they felt their teams were still the vital cogs to our communities that they once were.

I spent the last year trying to land an interview with any one of them. The goals of the interview were straightforward: to find an owner who believes in the good of sports before the good of their pocketbooks; someone who cares about the long-term health of the product over short-term gain; someone who thinks players don't sign away their humanity just because they sign a contract; someone who doesn't see publicly funded stadiums as a divine right; someone who sees his team's health as a community political trust instead of an individual political opportunity. I was searching for an owner who would openly address why, despite the unprecedented

popularity of sports, so many fans are down on the games themselves. I wanted to ask how ownership can be so at odds with the pulse of fans. Like Diogenes, I was just searching for an honest person.

In Ancient Greece, Diogenes the Cynic carried a lamp in daylight, engaged in his quest for an honest man. I was ready to be proudly cynical as I went about my task. Cynicism, in the classical sense, isn't about rudely doubting the best intentions of others like some flannel-wearing, grunge-era slacker. It's about the search for truth. As Simon Critchley, author of *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, wrote, "Cynicism is basically a moral protest against hypocrisy and cant in politics and excess and thoughtless self-indulgence in the conduct of life. In a world like ours, which is slowly trying to rouse itself from the dogmatic slumbers of boundless self-interest, corruption, lazy cronyism and greed, it is Diogenes' lamp that we need to light our path."<sup>1</sup>

I was ready to shine the lamp, to be skeptical, to actually rejoice in the face of good intentions but recoil at hypocrisy. But not one owner took the bait. We sent out a hundred letters. We made a thousand phone calls. I even dropped in on an office or five. I was very polite. I didn't have a camera. I wasn't trying to be a somewhat-more-svelte Michael Moore. I just wanted to chat. And yet their lips were sewed tighter than a mob boss in front of a congressional inquiry. I contacted all the appropriate offices, set up appointments, but as soon as questions were submitted in advance, I was done.

One owner actually did get back to me, and for that I am grateful. I almost dedicated this book to him. His name is Ed Snider, and he is the CEO of Comcast Spectacor and the power behind the Philadelphia 76ers and Flyers. I learned from Mr. Snider that he believes the best thing about being an owner is that "you never get bored." The worst thing is that "the salaries are entirely out of whack." I learned that he has "never had the problem" of a player with objectionable political beliefs. I learned that he believes owners need to be "visible to the fans. The fans should be able to identify with the owner, and the owner should be able to identify with the fans."<sup>2</sup> I learned little else. After a few more aphorisms, the dial tone was in my ear and I was yesterday's reporter.

Why does the taciturn Snider, in the pantheon of owners, qualify as loquacious? Maybe they just don't like talking to sportswriters. When it

comes to some of my brethren, I could not be more sympathetic. As the late Hunter S. Thompson put it, with his delicate sensibility, "Sportswriters are a rude and brainless subculture of fascist drunks, a gang of vicious monkeys jerking off in a zoo cage . . . more disgusting by nature than maggots oozing out the carcass of a dead animal."<sup>3</sup> Not exactly someone any sane person would want to join for a cup of coffee.

Maybe owners have just written off the media as irrelevant to their grand plans. As the Napoleonic Daniel Snyder, owner of the Washington Redskins, has shown, if you don't like the press you're getting, one option is just to buy your own. Or maybe their lips were sealed because of my own minor, low-frequency reputation as something of a muck-raker who has opposed the public funding of stadiums, the crackdown on players for political outspokenness, and the general ham-handedness of ownership. Either way, it's that inscrutable voice of ownership that is missing from this book. But their silence is, in its own way, a powerful commentary.

It's not that all sports owners are venal, snacking on baby seal quesadillas with Goldman Sachs executives before going to their publicly financed dog fight. The issue is that evil or not, accountability and accessibility do not rank high on their to-do list.

We shouldn't expect sports owners to reform out of the goodness of their hearts. They represent corporations trying to max out every last cent. But it's one thing when we pay insane ticket prices and then also shell out money for both parking at the stadium and then the shuttle to get from the parking lot to the stadium entrance. That can be enraging, but it's still our choice. It's another thing altogether when the owners both call for and receive public funds and taxpayer dollars. We need to insist that by taking our money, they are entering into an unspoken agreement not just with the various mayors, governors, or political lackeys eager to lick some sweet salt off the rim, but also the citizens themselves. One theme we will return to over and over in the following pages is that if our dollars are to be used, we must have some say in the way the teams are operated. One of the fans I interviewed, James Generic, said to me, "I can't stand how the owners extort money from the public on the stadiums and then charge freaking seven bucks for a beer at a game!"

We have every right to demand to be treated like humans. And there

is no human who should have to suffer a plastic bottle of Coors Light for seven dollars.

By looking at a series of the more high-profile and nefarious owners, I hope to make a simple case: well-intentioned or otherwise, owners in the twenty-first century are destroying what took more than a hundred years to build. Some simply aren't fit to lead. Throughout this book we will hear other voices: those of the fans I spoke to. Sports fans at times are presented as being just a step up on the evolutionary scale from a feces-tossing baboon. But their words here are of people sick and tired of feeling like going to a game is an expensive exercise in masochism. Sports fan Harvey Bender said to me bluntly, "The only connection owners have to their communities any longer is profit extraction."

I will start by looking at the man who set the mold and then didn't have the good grace to break it: New York Yankees boss George Steinbrenner. The press now speaks of the wheelchair-bound eighty-year-old patriarch with a very understandable and reverential nostalgia. This was a man of his time, the larger-than-life paternalistic owner. But while Steinbrenner may be a throwback to a different style of ownership, he is also a "throw forward" whose style and persona have spawned a series of crude clones, as little Boys from the Bronx populate the owners' boxes of the sports world. Big Stein copyrighted the patent on the idea of repeatedly threatening to move your team and squeezing the taxpayer to the point of wheezing. He may have invented this method of business, but others have perfected it. I will look at how Oklahoma City Thunder owner Clay Bennett, like Steinbrenner on steroids, took the hoops team of Shawn Kemp, Gary Payton, and Slick Watts, the Seattle SuperSonics, and tore them from their roots, implanting them in his hometown of Oklahoma City.

But they are just the beginning. I will also look at the way politics and the right-wing edge of the evangelical movement are starting to use sports as a soapbox. This fusing of politics and religion spans from former sports owner and former president George W. Bush and his stint as head of Major League Baseball's Texas Rangers, to examining Colorado Rockies owner Charlie Monfort and Orlando Magic boss Dick DeVos.

Then there are the "death-grip" owners, whose presence has been so toxic to their organization and community that they could run the baseball team of All-Star ghosts from *Field of Dreams* and still lose: Dan

Snyder and Peter Angelos of the NFL's Washington Redskins and Major League Baseball's Baltimore Orioles, respectively, have destroyed two of the proudest teams in sports. I also look at Donald Sterling of the Los Angeles Clippers, David Glass of the Kansas City Royals, and James Dolan of the New York Knicks. Three different teams and three different markets but all crippled by ownership incompetence. (Apologies to all Oakland residents that Raiders boss Al Davis was not included on this list.) I also examine how mismanagement is destroying the National Hockey League and how the son of former secretary of the Treasury Hank Paulson, he of the \$700 billion in bank bailout funds, is attempting to extract funds for a public stadium in the liberal enclave of Portland, Oregon.<sup>4</sup> The stories are different, but I hope that they weave together a picture about the many offensive heads on this chimerical creature called ownership. To be clear, there are without question owners who by any objective measure fulfill their responsibilities to their community, owners who treat both players and fans with a measure of respect. My argument here is that owners who pillage their communities should face consequences, and we need to start thinking of ways to remove teams from the clutches of "death-grip" owners. One way is to build movements of fans. In chapter 15, I examine the situation in England where Texas Rangers owner Tom Hicks bought the beloved soccer team Liverpool FC and how fans have refused to be financial roadkill. We also need to start a discussion about alternatives to private ownership.

One possible alternative could be the team in the small city of Green Bay, Wisconsin. The Green Bay Packers, a team owned for decades lock, stock, and cracker barrel by fans, is woven into the tapestry of that city in a way that makes you think you're traveling back to a perhaps fictional time when fans came first. Although rarely discussed in detail, the Green Bay ownership structure could be the living, breathing, successful alternative we have been waiting for.

Mike Lupica of the *New York Daily News* once wrote, "You are owed nothing in sports, no matter how much you care. You are owed nothing no matter how long you've rooted or how much you've paid to do it."<sup>5</sup> I couldn't disagree more. We are owed plenty by the athletic industrial complex. We are owed loyalty. We are owed accessibility. We are owed a return on our massive civic investment. And more than anything, we



should raise our fists to the owner's box and say that we are owed a little bit of goddamn respect. We aren't owed this respect because it's the kind or the human thing to do. We aren't owed any love because we cheered ourselves hoarse and passed the precious rooting tradition down to our children. We are owed it because the teams are ours as much as they are theirs. Literally. By calling for and receiving public funds, owners have sacrificed their moral, if not financial claim, of ownership. It's unrealistic to expect owners to behave better on their own recognizance, but cities and city councils that hand over funds to the sports plutocracy should in turn have some say in the way the teams are operated. As Jesse Barton, a former assistant city manager in Coos Bay, Oregon, said to me, "If the teams truly are a public good, government should acquire appropriate equity stakes in the teams in which they invest. But the owners virtually always resist that. The reason they resist is that the owners know that fundamentally, their teams aren't a type of public good. They know that instead, their teams are a business that serves a particular segment of society, and not the society in general."<sup>6</sup>

The last goal of this book is to ask the question: whose games are these, anyway? Are they the property of owners who let us watch for a price, or are they ours, and owners should merely play the role of caretaker for the generations of fans who animate their games? And if the games are ours, then who should own the teams? Dare we imagine a world without Steinbrenners? It's not like we haven't paid for the privilege.

The classic Coen brothers' film *Miller's Crossing* includes a line where the world-weary Tom says to the crime boss Leo, "You only run this town because people think you run it. The minute they stop thinking it, you stop running it."<sup>7</sup> The first step is bringing these titans of the luxury box down to earth. Up close the flaws become craters, and the steps we need to take crystallize as we conceive of reclaiming the games we love.

This question affects all of us whether we see ourselves as sports fans or not and the cost of not holding ownership accountable can prove deadly.