

# **Competitive Boosterism: How Milwaukee Lost the Braves**

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“Baseball is a business, not a sport.” This constant refrain is driven home daily by the news of astronomical sums spent to buy teams, pay players, and build stadiums for the national pastime. But as baseball mutates from sport into business, a much bigger chunk of the economy has gone in the opposite direction. What used to be the business of urban economic development is now the sport of competitive boosterism -- and major-league baseball is a coveted trophy to be won.

I define competitive boosterism as the active participation of local elites in luring trade, industry and investment from other cities to their own cities. For the last thirty years, baseball has been only the most visible aspect of this new high-stakes game played between cities in fierce competition for economic development. The most traumatic example of baseball’s competitive boosterism was the shift of the Milwaukee Braves franchise to Atlanta in 1965. Once the most popular and successful team in baseball, the faltering Braves were purchased by young men who borrowed a lot of money. Modest profits in Milwaukee did not meet the cost of carrying their debts, so they quickly moved the team to Atlanta, where they landed a rich television contract.

Robert Goodman’s The Last Entrepreneurs: America’s Regional Wars for Jobs and Dollars (1979) and Douglas Watson’s The New Civil War: Government Competition for Economic Development (1995) detail the dire consequences of public competition for private investment. The civic tug-of-war between Milwaukee and Atlanta over the Braves franchise resembled more familiar bidding wars for jobs and factories. It was waged between civic leaders and private businessmen-boosters of the two cities. At stake in this game were not runs scored, but rather the economic value

associated with professional sports and with membership in the exclusive “major league” of cities.

Atlanta won the Braves with high-powered competitive boosterism led by Mayor Ivan Allen, Jr., who forced through his pet project of a stadium before his city even had a team. Losing the Braves helped revive civic boosterism in Milwaukee, and the city fought back with a lawsuit refuting charges that Milwaukee was a “bad baseball town.” Bud Selig, now the acting commissioner of baseball, organized Milwaukee’s public relations campaign and eventually brought major league baseball back to his city.

The Braves episode reflected the larger economic struggle between Frostbelt and Sunbelt in the 1960s. But it could have been avoided if major-league baseball had shared television revenues, like other sports -- or if baseball had been subject to antitrust law, like other businesses. Baseball’s unique antitrust exemption gives a few millionaire owners the power to restrict the nation’s supply of baseball teams and to blackmail cities into competing for the privilege of hosting them. This is only the most blatant example of the increasing leverage corporations wield over cities by forcing them to compete with each other for jobs and investment.