A city with no Sonics: How life will change if NBA leaves Seattle

By MIKE LEWIS
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He remembers the sinking feeling in a way only the three-time jilted can, as sort of the sports fan's version of the Kubler-Ross stages of grief: denial, anger, more denial, bargaining, beer, decapitation of bobbleheads.

For the first, he was a young man, a shiny college grad working for the San Diego Rockets when the ownership in 1971 announced a move to Houston. The second was when the city's subsequent pro basketball team, the Conquistadors of the American Basketball Association, arrived one year later and folded 36 months after that.


Fifteen years. Three vanished basketball teams. In San Diego for all of it, Binkowski doesn't just feel Seattle's potential pain, he has a masochist's expertise. "There's pride in a community that associated with these teams," said Binkowski, now 58 and the executive director of the Holiday and Poinsettia bowls.

"Sport fans have a lot of civic pride. There's no upside to losing a team," said the man who knows better than most. "It hurts. It really does."

Seattle might want to stock up on municipal-grade ibuprofen.

Last week, the Sonics added Kansas City to the short list of prospective suitors. The Midwest city, already replete with two popular major sports league franchises, has a sweetheart deal-ready, tenant-free luxury arena set to open this fall -- just the kind of place Sonics principal owner Clay Bennett covets.

If the Sonics should go -- and privately many people close to the situation expect exactly that -- there are a few things the Emerald City should expect: a negligible economic impact; a long, wishful hoops hangover; and no replacement team for a generation at the earliest.

One highly placed league official who asked to remain anonymous noted: "If an NBA team is going to relocate from a city, it's highly unlikely that the NBA would return to that city anytime soon."

Just ask sports fans in San Diego, which lost its last team in 1984. Or in Kansas City, which lost the Kings the following year.

Kevin Gray, president of the Kansas City Sports Commission -- a man hoping to lure the Sonics away -- was five years out of high school when the Kings bolted from his hometown.

"It was disappointing. I was a big fan," he said. "Look how long it's taken us to get back in the market."

On this point, Ernie Hahn agrees.

As general manager of the San Diego sports arena, he's been a part of nearly every discussion to get a team back to his town. He says the hurdles are enormous.

"If a city were to lose an NBA team right now -- if it's not L.A. or New York or Chicago -- getting another team is extremely difficult," Hahn said. "There's 5 million people within 20 miles of the (San Diego) arena. But you are talking about $250 million for a new arena and $300 million for a franchise."

"That's hard to find."

But, at least, most cities can bear the loss financially.
If you like having a team that you can be proud of, then that matters. And that's while that's interesting, Sauer conceded it's cold comfort for sports fans.

"We looked at nearly every move you could imagine," said Sauer, a national expert on sports economics. "If there were something significant -- employment increases, big tax benefits -- we'd see it, but we don't. If there is any benefit, it's small potatoes."

Simply put, Sauer said, municipalities sizable enough to host a major league team generally have budgets large enough to dwarf any sports-related income. For example, city officials said income generated by Seattle's pro sports teams is at best a nominal part of the $1.7 billion budget.

And a considerable portion of the money generated, such as in sales taxes, likely would come in anyway. "These are discretionary dollars," said Seattle Deputy Mayor Tim Ceis. "They are going to get spent somewhere else."

Researcher Kurt Rotthoff agreed. When he was working with Sauer, Rotthoff found that in some cases, jobs declined when a team arrived and rose when the team moved.

"In some cases, we found an inverse effect. The numbers (when a new team arrived) came up negative."

While that's interesting, Sauer conceded it's cold comfort for sports fans.

"If you like having a team that you can be proud of, then that matters. And that's what you should make your decision on -- not on economics," Sauer said. "Teams don't have much of a positive economic effect, if any. Sometimes, it's negative."

"But we care about (professional teams) disproportionate to their economic effect."

There is a value to civic pride, to water-cooler talk, economists and casual fans agree. And to the degree a town feels that pride, it will feel the abandonment when a team goes.

The Rockets, after all, were among the top 25 percent of teams in the league in attendance when the owner left for Houston after a tax dispute with the city manager.

Ceis, who was 12 when the Sonics era began, formerly shared season tickets. But the city has grown up since then, he said. It's not just that city on the corner of the country that builds airplanes anymore. Seattle has plenty of reasons for civic self-worth, he said.

"At one level locally, there (would be) a sense of loss because there are some people who are basketball fans and for them it's a part of their entertainment and cultural experience," he said. "In terms of our image as a city, I don't think (the Sonics' effect) matters -- maybe it did 40 years ago when they first came here."

For all of his loss, Binkowski agrees.

When San Diego lost the Rockets, it was a provincial, coastal border town much like Seattle when the Sonics arrived. The loss of three teams hardly stopped the city from becoming a major commercial center in California and with other successful sports franchises and broad national appeal.

Still, once a city loses a team, it's hard to stop wanting another.

"I still see this as an NBA city," he said. "I'm still an NBA fan. I always will be, even though the NBA isn't here anymore."

WAITING FOR THE NBA TO RETURN

SAN DIEGO

Years waiting: 23
Metro population: 2.8 million
Remaining major league teams: Baseball, football.

KANSAS CITY

Years waiting: 22
Metro population: 1.7 million
Moving on: The Kings moved to Sacramento, Calif., in 1985 after 13 seasons in Kansas City.
Kansas City.

**Remaining major league teams:** Baseball, football.

**VANCOUVER**

**Years waiting:** 6

**Metro population:** 2.1 million

**Moving on:** The Grizzlies moved to Memphis in 2001 after six seasons in Vancouver.

**Remaining major league team:** Hockey.

**AND ONE CITY THAT QUICKLY REPLACED ITS TEAM**

**CHARLOTTE**

**Had to wait:** 8 months

**Metro population:** 1.4 million

**Moving on:** The Hornets moved to New Orleans in 2002 after 14 seasons in Charlotte.

**Short wait:** The NBA granted the city a new franchise only months after the Hornets’ departure. The Bobcats, an expansion team, began play in 2004.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, sportsencyclopedia.com

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