

More payroll cuts likely for Marlins

Don Smiley plans to reduce player payroll to \$16 million by the 1999-2001 seasons

By Steven Wine
The Associated Press

MIAMI — The World Series champion Florida Marlins aren't finished dismantling, if team president Don Smiley has his way.

Smiley, who is organizing a group of investors to buy the team, plans another drastic reduction in player payroll, to \$16 million or less for the 1999-2001 seasons.

To meet such a budget, the Marlins likely would be forced to trade stars Gary Sheffield, Bobby Bonilla, Alex Fernandez and Charles Johnson. Smiley considers the cuts necessary for the Marlins to make a profit while he seeks a new ballpark with a retractable roof.

"It's tough," said Johnson, the Marlins' Gold Glove catcher. "It's something the organization feels

they have to do, and as players we have no say-so. We have to go with the flow."

The Marlins reduced the payroll from \$53 million last year to \$33 million this season, which ranks 20th among the 30 major-league teams. The only teams with payrolls below \$16 million are Pittsburgh (\$13 million) and Montreal (\$9 million).

Smiley disclosed his budget plans this week in an outline to more than a dozen prospective investors. The figures were confirmed Wednesday by a source close to the group's negotiations with current owner H. Wayne Huizenga.

The source said Smiley may cut the payroll to as low as \$12 million.

Fans are already bitter about the breakup of the team. Attendance

has declined 28 percent this season, and the Marlins drew the two smallest home crowds in franchise history on consecutive nights this week.

Further belt-tightening would leave in doubt the future of manager Jim Leyland and general manager Dave Dombrowski, who may prefer to find a more competitive situation. Leyland considered quitting after one season with the Marlins because of last winter's payroll purge, and Dombrowski is in the final year of his contract.

The Pittsburgh Pirates had a payroll of \$17 million in 1996, the year Leyland resigned as manager because he was frustrated about the team's financial situation. Leyland declined to comment Wednesday.

Cutting the payroll to \$16 million would be impossible unless the Marlins trade Sheffield, their \$10 million-per-year slugger.

Smiley's plan calls for a positive cash flow of \$7.8 million in 1999.



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