



by Joseph N. Bell

FUNERAL SERVICES were held last year for the professional baseball clubs in Tyler, Port Arthur, Galveston, and Waco, Tex.; in Lafayette and Lake Charles, La.; in Lawton, Muskogee, and Ardmore, Okla. These were only a few of 1957's casualties. These teams were laid to rest in a burying ground already overcrowded, and they will undoubtedly be joined by others at the close of the '58 season.

The demise of professional baseball in these FAMILY WEEKLY cities is symptomatic of the headlong destruction of minor-league teams all over the nation. In the past decade, 33 leagues have died, depriving 268 cities of professional baseball. During that time, attendance has skidded from 40,949,028 in 1948 to 15,496,684 last year in those leagues that survived.

Yet, in this picture of general pessimism, a number of cities have shown their determination to keep professional baseball alive by coming up with some remarkable examples of civic ingenuity and cooperation. It appears that if minor-league teams are to survive, it will take this sort of community action to save them.

Local merchants, particularly, can give the local team a boost and augment their own business at the same time. Consider the case of Dubuque, Ia., which led Class D teams all over the nation in attendance last year.

John Petrakis, Dubuque's volatile general manager, says, "A ball club in the low minors should be civic-owned and should have a local business manager who feels a personal responsibility for the operation of the club. He should see that the cold drinks are cold, the hot drinks hot, and the foul balls retrieved."

Dubuque made money last year by good business organization. By paying youngsters to retrieve foul balls, the team lost only 48 dozen in contrast with 150 dozen the previous year. By selling tickets through local stores for a dime apiece on special nights, interest was built up in the team and the concession take was highly profitable. Programs were given away, increasing the circulation considerably and thereby attracting

three times as many advertisers. And the number of season tickets was materially increased by selling them on time payments, well in advance of the season.

The Atlanta team in the Southern Association made a deal with a chain of supermarkets to use baseball tickets as sales boosters. The stores paid the Atlanta club \$405 per game for the privilege of giving away general-admission tickets with each \$7.50 grocery purchase. The tickets were subject to a 50-cent service charge at the gate. Even so, more than 118,000 such tickets were taken in during the season — and thousands of full admissions were paid by people who accompanied the guests of the grocery chain. Many new baseball fans were created, and the ball club, the grocery chain, and the community all profited as a result.

One of the more imaginative minor-league programs has been under way for several years in Winston-Salem, N.C., where the club made a \$40,000 profit last year with a fifth-place team. The best Winston-Salem gimmick is built around a losing team. A clown, dressed as a Winston-Salem Red Bird, wanders the streets of the

city daily, showing up in residential, business, and industrial districts. When the club is winning, he sells tickets to the game that night at full price; but when they're losing he offers his tickets at a cut rate. Once, during a 17-game losing streak, the tickets skidded in price to a quarter. The clown knows where to find his best markets, and he does a prodigious business.

The Winston-Salem club also works closely with barbers—whom it considers baseball's best friends. All the barbers in town get a knockdown on a season ticket for themselves; in return they promise to mention the local game to customers at least three times a day. Winston-Salem crowds last year averaged 2,200 in a 4,000-seat park.

AT BAKERSFIELD, Calif., general manager Dave Rosenfield of the Bakersfield team is taking full advantage of California's most marketable commodity—girls. He has a corps of beauties dressed in Bermuda shorts escorting customers to their seats and serving them food and drink. And they love it.

A number of minor-league teams are working "Company Nights" into their schedules. A block of seats in the best section of the ball park is offered to a local company at a reduced rate. The company gives the tickets to its employees, often with a concession chit entitling each one to a dollar's worth of food and drink at the park. Sometimes the company even provides a band and party gifts for participating employees. One appli-

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IS MINOR-LEAGUE BASEBALL DOOMED?



determined to kill it, but many communities are proving the national pastime can survive—on a paying basis!

ance manufacturer distributed 4,000 tickets for a Columbus, Ohio, game last year, and put up \$3,000 worth of prizes to be given away at the game. The game that night drew 12,000 spectators with only 2,500 of the free tickets used.

Camera night is another park-filling promotion in several minor-league cities. Camera enthusiasts are permitted in the park two hours before game time and are allowed on the edge of the field. The players are all on hand, in uniform, ready to pose for any shots the "photogs" want to take. Local camera shops put up prizes for the best pictures and also act as judges in the contest. New fans are attracted, they get to see and know the players close-up, and considerable interest is stirred up by the pictures, which appear in shop windows all over town for days afterward.

A number of civic groups in minor-league cities are also organizing Baseball Booster Clubs. These businessmen's organizations are supplied with Booster Books of 11 tickets for the price of 10, which they sell among their friends and business associates. Thus the baseball team has operating money in advance of the season and strong community support is built up. Through the use of Booster Clubs, the Knoxville, Tenn., team, which finished fourth last year, led its league in attendance with 30,000 more spectators than the league leader.

These are only a few of the intense local efforts being made to save minor-league baseball. The Amarillo, Tex., team doubled attendance one night by staging a three-inning game

between the players and their wives—with the wives using a softball and the husbands batting and throwing opposite their normal way. The Nashville, Tenn., club gives prediction sheets to fans entering the park, and the spectator who comes closest to predicting the final totals wins a cash prize. The Lincoln, Neb., club stages a preseason Breakfast Drive with most of the local business and professional men participating.

IT'S UNFORTUNATE that these things often must be done in spite of, rather than in cooperation with, the people who stand to profit most from healthy minor leagues: the owners of the 16 major-league teams. They have already hurt minor-league baseball badly by withdrawing subsidies, depleting farm teams in the midst of hot minor-league races, poaching on minor-league territory, and giving their sanction to network radio broadcasts of major-league games in minor-league areas. Now they threaten the surviving minor leagues with lethal draughts of network television of major-league games on both Saturdays and Sundays throughout the nation.

This action was resisted violently but without success. Minor-league officials, led by George M. Trautman, president of the National Association of Professional Baseball Clubs, appealed to Reps. Emanuel Celler and Kenneth Keating of the House Judiciary Committee to prevent major-league encroachment of minor-league territory with antitrust legislation. They received only "deep sympathy."

Both Congressmen agreed that it was up to the major-league owners themselves to take the necessary self-discipline. Celler said, "The big leagues will have to stop eating their own young. The time has come for action, not more hearings."

With the Congressional door closed to them, Trautman and his committee appealed to the Justice Department. Again, sympathy was all they received. The Government has taken the apparently irrevocable position that baseball, regardless of its commercial aspects, is not a business but a sport, and therefore not subject to antitrust regulations.

On this point, Larry MacPhail, former general manager of the Yankees, Dodgers, and Redlegs, said recently, "When I broke into baseball in 1931, the sports aspect of the game overshadowed the commercial aspect. Today, major-league owners don't care. They just want to sell razor blades, beer, and gum."

Baseball commissioner Ford Frick usually has aligned himself on the side of the minor leagues in this internecine dispute.

"I sincerely hope that the minors can get Congress to pass legislation enabling us to put restrictions on radio and TV," Frick said recently. "That's what we want. I would put a ban on Sunday TV tomorrow if I could. But if we were to try it now, the Justice Department would sue us." Individual clubs can decline to televise games as they please. However, under Government ruling, any uniform decision on TV or radio involving a number of clubs would

violate the Federal antitrust laws.

Even from a purely selfish viewpoint, the attitude of the major-league owners is inexplicable. The minor leagues are absolutely essential to the continued success of major-league baseball. Only once in a thousand do youngsters come directly out of high school or college ready for major-league competition. The other 999 must be carefully coached and seasoned, often for five or six years. Only the minor leagues can provide this training. Without them, the majors would be lost; yet the big leagues continue to "eat their young" and pick their teeth dispassionately with the bones of dead teams.

But the minor leagues aren't going down without a struggle—and a good many of them aren't going down at all, thanks to imaginative and ingenious promotion.

George Trautman is trying to dissipate the gloomy outlook for the minor leagues with a positive program of action. He says, "Maybe we're making too much commotion over the fact that we're in a tail spin because of big-league television and radio. There's still no substitute for real live ball players competing in God's fresh air and a seat in the grandstand where you can share the electric tension of the crowd."

In the face of such determined optimism, even the short-sightedness of major-league owners can be overcome. Surviving minor-league teams are proving today that any city that wants a professional baseball team badly enough can have one—but only by concerted and enthusiastic action.