

The Seattle Pilots and Their Demise

Since Major League Baseball was founded in 1903 expansion teams have contributed to the growth of Major League Baseball. Teams that have entered the league have had varying levels of success, from World Series Champions such as the Astros and Royals to other teams experiencing different levels of failure. No team has embodied failure of an expansion team quite like the Seattle Pilots, who existed for one year, in 1969, before going bankrupt and moving to Milwaukee to become the Brewers. Numerous reasons accounted for their failure including their rundown ballpark, poor management, and aging untalented players. The Seattle Pilots were a failure of a franchise and an unsuccessful attempt to expand Major League Baseball.

In 1969 a four-team expansion was added to Major League Baseball. These teams were the Kansas City Royals, Montreal Expos, San Diego Padres, and the Seattle Pilots.¹ When the city of Seattle was granted a major league franchise it was a big step forward for the city. Major League Baseball believed that Seattle was ready for a franchise because they were in the midst of a great economic time and no other team was located in that portion of the country. The Pilots were only the second professional team in Seattle besides the Sonics basketball team. For Seattle, this was the biggest thing for them since the Seattle World's Fair in 1962, which was attended by approximately ten million people.² The start of the franchise began in 1967 when the President of the Pacific Coast League, Dewey Soriano, and his brother Max convinced the American League to grant Seattle a franchise. From there, William Daley bought a stake in the team and became the owner of the Seattle Pilots. All three figures had a

large impact in shaping the Seattle Pilots but William Daley was the main contribution of finances for the team. Soon after, Marvin Milkes was appointed to be the team's general manager.

The Seattle Pilots had chosen to use Sicks Stadium as their home ballpark. This was a ballpark that had opened in 1938 and was used for a team in the Pacific Coast Independent Baseball League. Accordingly, the ballpark was small and not built for a major league baseball team. When the Seattle Pilots decided to use Sicks Stadium as their home field, construction was rushed to expand the stadium and to fit more people. This created a lot of problems for the ballpark. By opening day construction wasn't done, and for some fans their seats were yet to be built. For a few groups of fans, they had to wait until the third inning until their seat was ready.³ There were other problems throughout the ballpark like the toilet not being able to flush once attendance became too large, and announcers not being able to see all of the playing field. Seattle Pilot announcer Bill Schonely shared his opinion on the ballpark when he stated, "Well, it's let's see, how do you describe it in this day and age? It was nothing in those days, put it that way."⁴ Sicks Stadium was only supposed to be used as a temporary home as ownership was working to build a dome for the franchise. However, the organization had to overcome many obstacles in an attempt to build the dome. It was difficult to find a location as many roadblocks continued to occur. The largest problem in the building of the dome was that the owner was unable to fund the project. Sicks Stadium was a disaster and along with the failure to build a dome, was one of the many reasons that the franchise was moved to Milwaukee after just one season.

The Seattle Pilots had many other problems with their franchise including management and their roster of players. Joe Schultz was appointed to be the manager of the ballclub and was well liked by his players. However, many of the players believed that he wasn't able to make decisions that would help the ballclub win. Many believe that he lacked knowledge in baseball which led to his poor performance. The team's failure to win was not entirely his fault because the roster was not filled with quality talent, which can be blamed on the expansion draft. When the franchise was created there was no free agency for them to acquire players. They were only able to use the expansion draft to put together a roster.⁵ Many of the players that they selected were old and out of their prime and just hoping for one last shot. Steve Whitaker who was an outfielder for the Pilots commented, "We were the orphans of the league, the dregs of the league, castoffs from other teams, trying to resurrect our careers."⁶ The front office staff was able to acquire a few talented players but many of them were traded because they had poor attitudes or were disliked by management. Examples include Gary Bell, Jim Bouton, and Lou Piniella who was traded to Kansas City because management believed he was a hot head.⁷ Between the poor management by Joe Schultz and unreasonable trades by the front office led to a ninety-eight loss season and the eventual demise of the Seattle Pilots.⁸

For the first half of the season, the Seattle Pilots played average baseball but then began to slope downwards in July and August. This was mainly caused by injuries and veteran players no longer performing. As the team continued to perform poorly attendance dropped and the ball club was losing money. Ownership had now realized

that they weren't going to make a profit by the end of the season. In an attempt to create a profit the Pilots organization raised the prices of tickets. This plan did not work as the worst team in baseball now had the highest ticket prices. As the season began to decline so did the revenue, which led to the failure of the Seattle Pilots organization. At the conclusion of the season, William Daley withdrew his investment from the team leaving them bankrupt.⁹ The demise of the organization was now forthcoming.

In the offseason, rumblings began of the franchise moving to Milwaukee. The city of Milwaukee had recently lost the Braves to Atlanta and had an empty Major League ballpark. It was one that was much more suitable than Sicks Stadium in Seattle. Once this became public news, the MLB had originally stated that they would help the franchise to find a buyer to turn around the struggling franchise and to keep it in Seattle. The franchise was still unsure as to if they would be moving to Milwaukee or staying in Seattle. The confusion continued throughout spring training until eight days before opening day for the 1970 season.¹⁰ Bud Selig had bought the team, saving it from bankruptcy and concluded that it would be best for the franchise to move to Milwaukee. Mr. Selig did have some bias towards this decision as he was originally from Wisconsin and had attended the University of Wisconsin Madison.¹¹ He was in favor of having a major league baseball organization back in his home state. However, it was still the best choice as they would now be able to play in a respectable ballpark, among many other reasons, that would benefit the franchise relocating.

When the Seattle Pilots had moved to become the Milwaukee Brewers, they were still unable to find success in the win column. Each of their first three seasons

concluded with at least ninety losses. The first time that the organization finished with a winning record was in 1978, the teams ninth year in Milwaukee.¹² Despite the organization having limited success in the past, they are still located in Milwaukee and have not undergone any more location changes. Almost a decade later, in 1977, the Seattle Mariners organization was created. The ball club was much more successful in creating revenue despite never claiming a World Series title.¹³

The Seattle Pilots were an unfortunate attempt to create a major league baseball organization. No other team has ever lasted only one year in a city before deciding to relocate. The Seattle Pilots were also one of a few other sports franchises to ever go bankrupt.¹⁴ The organizations' lack of talent, poor management, and rundown ballpark led to their eventual demise. Today, the Seattle Pilots are only remembered for their short time in Major League Baseball.

Notes:

¹ Jim Caple, "Seattle Pilots barely remembered except through Brewers, 'Ball Four'," *ESPN*, August 24, 2016.

² "Century 21 World's Fair," *Seattle Municipal Archives*.

³ "Sicks Stadium," *Ballparks of Baseball*.

⁴ Feliks Banel, "Seattle Pilots broadcaster Bill Schonely looks back to the pre-Marines days," *MYNorthwest*, April 13, 2016

⁵ "1968 MLB Expansion Drafts," *Baseball Reference*.

⁶ Larry Stone, "Endearing & enduring: The 1969 Seattle Pilots," *The Seattle Times*, July 9, 2006.

⁷ "The Seattle Pilots: Short Flight Into History," YouTube Video, posted by "OllieOllie55," November 25, 2014.

⁸ "1969 Seattle Pilots Statistics," *Baseball Reference*.

⁹ "Seattle Pilots," *Baseball Almanac*.

¹⁰ Matt Blitz, "The Only Major League Baseball Team To Go Bankrupt: The Story Of The Seattle Pilots," *Today I Found Out*, September 5, 2014.

¹¹ "Bud Selig," *National Baseball Hall of Fame*.

¹² "Milwaukee Brewers Team History and Encyclopedia," *Baseball Reference*.

¹³ "Seattle Mariners Team History and Encyclopedia," *Baseball Reference*.

¹⁴ Darren Rovell, "10 Sports Franchises That Have Gone Bankrupt," *CNBC*, June 28, 2011.

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