The officials of Hartford, Conn. recently opened the public till for the benefit of the owners of the New England Patriots in exchange for the "pride and presence of a professional football team" for exactly eight days every year (perhaps one or two more, if they're lucky enough to get into the playoffs). Among other perks, the city is spending $350 million to build the Patriots a new stadium with the usual expectation that this will somehow turn the city around, both in terms of civic pride and the local economy.

Extensive research by Baade and others have repeatedly demonstrated that the "economic benefits" story is a canard. The sports industry in this country may be "big business" but compared with the economy as a whole it represents little more than a blip in the gross domestic product. The jobs created for the most part are either short-term (construction) or low-wage (stadium service and team administrative employees), and are relatively few in number. On the other hand, the burden on local governments is considerable, especially in this time of anti-tax sentiments. Pressure on governments to reduce spending and services is increased by such stadium deals since they commonly contain provisions allowing for huge tax reductions (or outright elimination) for the teams piled on the new debt burden of building the new stadium. With nothing to fall back on, other government services lose out.

More than anything else, Cagan and DeMause's book impressed on me what a powerful influence professional sports have on a large segment of the population. Why are governments so willing to hand over the dough to pro teams (sometimes against public opinion, even referenda results)? The authors quote Arthur Rolnick, vice-president of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank:

"In some sense, they come out of it a hero. The businesses that are involved with these things, they love this deal, they're getting big benefits, and you can bet that they're going to support this guy's campaign. For the public, they're against it, maybe, but it's one of many issues, and when it comes time to vote, there's a million other issues, and this thing's probably already been done, and so they move on. So it looks like, the way the political aspects of it work, there isn't much downside for these guys (i.e., the politicians)."

Another factor is that powerful motivator for local politicians: Pride in Place. Many people go into politics out of strong identification with their local surroundings. The celebrity cache of attracting or maintaining a major-league team for one's hometown is a big deal for many politicians. During Minnesota's last "stadium debate" in the mid-1970s,
a local figure declared that without major-league teams, the Twin Cities would be just a "cold Omaha" (2).

The prestige argument has been one wielded for a long time by local governments and businesses. While major-league teams add to a community's entertainment opportunities, it can be easily argued that there are now so many forms of entertainment (particularly in large metropolitan areas) that adding one more is of dubious benefit. The authors quote Paul Jadin, the mayor of Green Bay: "Without the Packers, we'd be just another town of 100,000." While it is certainly true that the Packers have given Green Bay recognition it is doubtful that it has done much more than that. I have been to Green Bay and it has little to recommend it. Towns of similar size (Duluth, Iowa City, even Fargo) are more interesting and attractive. Look at the other end of the spectrum: I seriously doubt that the loss of the Rams had any measurable impact on Los Angeles' status as a great city.

Then there is the "fan" factor. Many politicians are good old-fashioned fans. Minnesota's outgoing governor, Arne Carlson, has long declared himself to be "Minnesota's Number 1 Fan" (3). When the current stadium debate first started up a couple of years ago, he immediately stepped into the fray before the issue had even been defined, chastising the mayor of Minneapolis (Sharon Sayles-Beslton, a career politician with no personal interest in sports, far more interested in addressing social and economic issues) for not taking a more proactive stance. Despite the popular governor's badgering and bargaining, the issue went dormant last winter when the state legislature rejected all proposals for public funding. The hoax of the Twins moving to North Carolina was revealed and Carl Pohlad's chances for a new stadium were virtually nil.

But wait! The Vikings are then bought by a Texas businessman (Red McCombs) and take off on their greatest season in more than 20 years. Sure enough, the stadium issue has begun again, this time centering on new digs for the Vikings and the dismal U. of Minnesota football Gophers. Why the Gophers, too? Well, Carlson is also an alumnus of the university. Like a small boy desperately trying to come up with reasons to persuade his mother to buy him a coveted toy, this politician is aggressively seeking to satisfy what is for him an emotional need, a personal attachment irrespective of its bearing on wider public affairs, not to mention public expenditures. He is doing this openly and unabashedly. No one seems to recognize this outrageous conflict of interest.

Despite the emphasis I've placed on Minnesota examples, much the same applies to the many other examples the authors cite. Particularly distressing are the cases of Tiger Stadium and Comiskey Park, where public wishes were clearly ignored and genuine efforts to achieve solutions that would cost less, attain many of the owner's stated objectives, play well for baseball, and have minimal effect on the surrounding community, were repeatedly dismissed. Not only do owners expect the public to pay for their stadiums, but they demand full authority over its location and design. Owners know they will find many eager pigeons in government and the business community. The authors show that there are several persons for hire whose job it is to mislead and manipulate reluctant legislators and negative public opinion to guarantee the maximum
welfare check for their owner clients. The constant theme is that owners know
governments will pony up the bucks: the only issue is how much.

Sports are a highly emotional endeavor, but especially so for spectators. Player and fan
alike can enjoy "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat". But players in the midst of
the game can act in ways that have a direct bearing on its outcome, while the fan can
scarcely claim this ability, and is left to watch, cheer, and hope. Sports spectatorship is
much like many other passive viewing activities, be it television, a play, or a movie. The
difference with sports, however, is that fans like to claim ownership of their teams. "We
live in Minneapolis. The Twins are our team. Kirby Puckett is my favorite player. Etc."
The owners play off this sentiment for all it's worth, even though events all through the
game's history demonstrate that this sentiment is false. "Well, baseball is a business after
all..." goes the long standard line; and yet the game continues to enjoy a legal status based
on the charade that it is a game and not a business. Are we so desperate to maintain this
illusion that we will pay any price? Is it reasonable to divert funds from social services -
services that affect people's lives - to support an amusement? In demanding public
funding for new stadiums to keep "our" team in "our" town, I wonder if owners and
baseball's executives are little more than pimps beckoning to us with promises of love,
when we should know that all bets are off once the money changes hands.

The controversial nature of this topic and the scandal-sheet title suggests a mudraking
polemic, but Cagan and DeMause's writing is generally direct and matter-of-fact. Despite
their considerable research and the ocean of footnotes, this book is actually fairly brief
and contains little extraneous or unnecessary material. Before I read this book, I was
generally opposed to public financing of sports stadiums. Now, however, I find myself
rabidly opposed. In fact, along with whiny, overpaid players, grasping, equivocating
owners, interleague play, realignment, the 1994-1995 strike, domes, stadium noise, and a
variety of other factors, I find this book's message to be yet another blow to the wedge
being driven between me and the contemporary major-league game.

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1. Art Modell said this in a Cleveland Magazine interview a couple of years ago. The full quote is: "The
pride and presence of a professional football team is far more important than 30 libraries."
2. This is often attributed to Hubert Humphrey in this context. Humphrey did coin the phrase, but used it to
stress the importance of the Twin Cities as a single metropolitan area, saying "Each [city] without the other
would be a cold Omaha." A local business/political figure, Harvey MacKay, applied this phrase to the
stadium situation.
3. Carlson recently completed his second four-year term, choosing to retire than run for a third term.