

Why the Fan Base of the Tampa Bay Rays Gets Harsh Judgment

Written by Maury Brown
Friday, 04 October 2013 01:26



They say that life isn't fair, so get used to it, but there's times when that cold splash of reality in such a neat package isn't enough. Being critical isn't something that is fun (although snark is often the soup de jour these days).

Such is the case when it comes to my view of the Tampa Bay Rays fan base. I have been critical of them (but I don't hold all fans to the same measure). When one gets out in front of a touchy issue with fans, having a bull's-eye on your back comes with the territory.

I just published [an in-depth report on the 2013 MLB attendance for the regular season](#) on Forbes. Within, I write this:

The season ends as the sixth-highest all-time and the league was quick to point out that all of the top 10 seasons in attendance have been over the last decade. The Los Angeles Dodgers led the majors with 3,743,527, the first time they led the league since 2009. At the other end of the spectrum, despite being consistently competitive on the field, the Tampa Bay Rays ended the season with a total of just 1,510,300 or an average of 18,646 per game. They were the only

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club to see average attendance below 19,000 per game.

Whether on Twitter, Facebook, or elsewhere, fans of the Rays have taken offense to my position. Instead of addressing them individually, here's my answers as to their responses:

Why Do You Bash on the Rays, but Not on Indians Fans?

Cleveland ranked 29th in attendance this season after the Miami Marlins got a strong push from playing the Tigers in their last series of the season at Marlins Park. While Progressive Field was sold out for the AL Wild Card game against the Rays, it's one of the only shining moments at the gate all season for Cleveland. In fact, as the Indians were coming down the stretch in the dogfight with the Rays and Rangers, they had some of the worst attended games of the season for the league. On Sept. 3 against the Orioles they drew just 9,962 and six days later against the Royals they drew 9,794. In fact, for the season they had 5 games that were under 10,000 in attendance. But, I hold a harsher view of the Rays fans over the Indians due to this: the Indians haven't been successful in the standings before this season since losing the ALCS in 2007 and prior to that they hadn't been in the playoffs since 2001 when they lost to the Mariners. The Rays have been in the postseason four of the last six seasons, including the World Series in 2008. While neither club should be seeking out fans at the end of the season in a tight race, the Rays have had much more success that should be drawing fans in.

But the Ratings Are High!

Against the abysmal attendance, the Rays television ratings have been up substantially this year. So, bashing isn't fair, it's the ballpark that's the problem, right? That may well be. There's no disputing the fact that the ballpark is in a bad location and as a dome, doesn't exactly stack up with newer ballpark experiences, but the television ratings don't pay dividends like the gate does, at least not now. That's because regardless of how those ratings move, the rights fees are locked into the agreement. The Rays may benefit from the ratings when their new deal comes up, but for now, ratings increases don't garner an effect on the bottom line. The gate still holds a massive amount of weight in the revenue game for the Rays.

With Centralized Money, the Rays Are Profitable

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Without revenue-sharing, the Rays wouldn't likely see any profits. The point is not whether a club is profitable, it is the flexibility that comes with increased revenues. There has never been an owner or GM out there that when asked whether they wanted more or less revenues to work from, they selected "less". You don't have to have a \$200 million payroll to be successful, but being able to work from more addresses risk aversion. So, if fans want to see this kind of success continue, having to live off the revenue-sharing pie isn't the way to go.

Why Do You Care?

This is the one that is often said of national writers. That because we don't live in a particular market, our feelings are somehow diminished. What most every baseball writer has is a love of the game. We like it to thrive. We want to see smart, well run organizations be rewarded for the hard work. In that, the Rays are my AL organization of the last 5 years. They have done incredible things in terms of developing talent, and doing almost magic in wrapping that talent up early to long-term contracts. The Rays in any other position would be reaping massive benefits from seeing the gate humming. I'm not saying that the Rays in the Trop are going to be a top 5 attendance draw, but they should absolutely be outdrawing Houston, Kansas City, Seattle, and be at least where Oakland is at.

When Will You Stop?

Maybe the best thing that could happen is a World Series victory for the Rays. It would show what a club can do with so little. It is also the highest a club can go, so at that stage, you'd get a real feel for whether it's the ballpark or the fans that make the Rays a habitual bottom feeder in the attendance standings. They say winning cures all ills. It hasn't yet in Tampa Bay. Maybe a World Series cures all ills for the Rays. That would be the best news of all.



Maury Brown is the Founder and President of the [Business of Sports Network](#), which includes The Biz of Baseball, The Biz of Football, The Biz of Basketball and The Biz of Hockey. He [writes for Baseball Prospectus](#)

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and is a

[contributor to Forbes](#)

.

He

is available as a freelance writer

.

[Brown's full bio is here.](#)

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