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After Stormy Offseason, Nationals Lack Electricity

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Tuesday, April 11, 2006; A01

The Washington Nationals' home opener this afternoon against the New York Mets will have little of the momentum that accompanied last year's debut, when Washington turned out to hail the return of baseball to the nation's capital after an absence of more than 33 years. Vice President Cheney, not President Bush, will throw out the ceremonial first pitch. There are expected to be empty seats, a far cry from last year's glitzy, celebrity-filled sellout. Ticket sales and profits for the season are likely to be down as well.

As the team begins its second season at RFK Stadium, the Nationals are coming off an offseason filled with controversy. But instead of typical baseball debates, such as who would play shortstop, there were disputes over how much baseball would contribute for a new, publicly built stadium along the Anacostia River waterfront. Eighteen months after the franchise was moved from Montreal to Washington, the team still doesn't have an owner. The heart of the franchise's fan base can't watch most of the games on television because of a yearlong fight between Comcast and the network that owns the rights to broadcast Nationals games.

The uncertainty contributed to the fact that top players didn't sign with the Nationals during the offseason, hurting the team's on-field prospects. And the one marquee attraction the team acquired in a trade, slugger Alfonso Soriano, turned into a \$10 million distraction when he initially resisted a move from his regular position, second base, to the outfield.

"What you've got in D.C. is a set of circumstances, which make it difficult to tell how strong that franchise is going to be," said David Carter, a principal at the Sports Business Group in Los Angeles. "It's a unique set of challenges. What's happening here is a lot of people focusing on this as a sprint, and the Nationals in Washington, D.C., is going to be a marathon. That's not to say you don't want to get off to a great start."

Last year, the team earned a \$30 million pretax profit on 2.7 million tickets sold, a far cry from the empty seats and money-losing seasons in Montreal. The Nationals challenged for the National League East Division until the last two weeks of the season. But the sprint turned into a stall during the offseason, when Major League Baseball and the District held months of negotiations over the details of a lease under which the Nationals will occupy a new, \$611 million ballpark to be built in Southeast Washington. The D.C. Council finally approved the lease in February after MLB, whose 29 franchise owners bought the club in 2002 when it was still in Montreal, agreed to pay \$20 million toward the cost of the stadium.

Commissioner of Baseball Bud Selig refused to sell the team for \$450 million to one of eight bidding groups until the city and MLB signed the lease agreement. MLB President Robert A. DuPuy told a congressional committee last Friday that Selig intends to name an owner in the next couple of weeks. While baseball officials say that all eight groups remain in the running, the leading candidates are believed to be the family of Theodore "Ted" Lerner, patriarch of a local real-estate empire; a group of Washington investors led by Indianapolis media executive Jeffrey Smulyan; and a syndicate of Washington investors led by local businessmen Fred Malek and Jeffrey Zients. Atlanta sports business executive Stan Kasten is leading a group and is also in the running, according to sources.

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The negative publicity has taken its toll at the box office. Season ticket renewals are running at around 85 percent, lower than the 90 percent-plus that is the norm in the industry. Today's opener is expected to draw about 42,000 fans to RFK, which seats 45,250. Tickets were selling at face value over the weekend compared with last year's inflated prices on the secondary-ticket market. The team is hoping to draw 2.6 million this year, which would still be successful but is a drop from last year's 2.7 million.

Nationals President Tony Tavares said the drumbeat of negative publicity surrounding the lease as well as the uncertainty over ownership of the team has taken its toll on the team's business prospects.

"We are going to have to rise to the challenge and do more creative promotions to get people in here," Tavares said. "You get obstacles in life and you succeed by overcoming them and not letting them stop you. We are going to overcome these challenges."

The Nationals' television exposure is so woeful that a House committee held a hearing last week to urge Comcast Corp., the largest cable provider in the country with more than 21 million customers, to settle its difference with Mid-Atlantic Sports Network and allow Comcast's 1.3 million customers in the region to receive Nationals games.

Comcast is suing the Baltimore Orioles over an unrelated issue -- the case has been thrown out of court twice -- and refuses to air MASN, the home network of the Nationals that is jointly owned by the Orioles and by MLB and which will televise 154 Nationals games this year. Although five other cable and satellite providers reaching 2 million fans in the region have agreed to carry MASN, the games cannot achieve maximum distribution without Comcast. MASN, Comcast and MLB officials told Congress last week that they would hold a meeting to try to reach an agreement, but a near-term solution is unlikely.

All those factors have trickled into the mind-set of the fan base. Ted Fraber, a 47-year-old computer programming manager from Bowie, described himself as a "huge fan" of the Nationals. But he said he was "disappointed and disgusted with everything that's gone down for two years.

"Me, my wife and two sons get all decked out and will go to a half a dozen games this season," Fraber said. "So I'm psyched to be rooting for my team, but still frustrated and disappointed with no owner, no television and all that kind of thing."

On the field, the team has been surrounded by controversy as well. A turbulent offseason began with another six-month contract extension for General Manager Jim Bowden, the man enlisted with building the roster. But it wasn't until mid-December that the team rehired its most well-known face, Manager Frank Robinson, a Hall of Famer as a player who will turn 71 this summer.

At baseball's winter meetings, Bowden found that some of the best players available in free agency -- such as pitchers A.J. Burnett and Kevin Millwood -- were wary of Washington's situation, and the Nationals missed out on all their top targets.

"You're entering into a situation where basically there's no assurances, no certainty to any aspect," said Darek Braunecker, the agent for Burnett, who eventually signed with the Toronto Blue Jays. "It's a tough battle for them. It's an unfair battle for them, is what it is."

Unable to improve the team significantly through free agency, Bowden made the move that defined the team's offseason, trading popular outfielder Brad Wilkerson and two other players to the Texas Rangers for Soriano, a four-time all-star at second base. The Nationals already had an all-star, Jose Vidro, entrenched at second base. Soriano, in turn, said definitively that he would not move to the position where the club needed him, left field.

The situation grew to such an impasse that the Nationals took the field for one spring training game with only eight men, a stunt meant to highlight Soriano's apparent insubordination. Two days later, Soriano finally followed the team's orders, but the tone had been set. The spring was filled with injuries and left the Nationals feeling unsettled.

"It was the worst spring I've ever been through," Bowden said. "I've never seen anything like it, things blowing up all the time. But we have to move on. It doesn't matter if we play well during the season."

Last year, the Nationals thanked the crowds at RFK Stadium -- where the stands along the left field foul line bounced with excitement during a Washington rally -- for providing the energy that got them off to a superlative start. The team stood in first place in the NL East for two months, and the fans, players and coaches said, were a significant reason why, especially considering the team was accustomed to competing in front of crowds of 8,000 or so in Montreal.

"It's what you want as a big league ballplayer," said Vidro, a 10-year veteran who has spent his entire career with the Montreal-Washington franchise. "To have those fans cheering for us, it was special. We need that again this year. I hope they're back."

Yet as of yesterday morning, a fan could still purchase four seats in RFK's lower bowl for today's opener, and even with a significant walk-up crowd, the game isn't expected to be sold out.

"That's a little surprising," Robinson said. Robinson is at the start of his 51st season in baseball, and the first game at RFK last year -- when Bush threw out the first pitch and Nationals right-hander Livan Hernandez masterfully handled the Arizona Diamondbacks -- ranks among his greatest thrills. He knows it can't, and won't, be duplicated.

"There's no rush to go out there," Robinson said. "The excitement has worn off a little bit -- the newness of it. . . . I think a lot of it this year is going to depend on how we play."

Yesterday evening, the Nationals packed up and left Houston after a seven-game road trip in which they won twice. They headed north, an uncertain future in the standings and at the gate ahead of them.

Svrluga reported from Houston.

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