

March 8, 2005

SPORTS OF THE TIMES

Interleague Battle for Los Angeles

By SELENA ROBERTS

TEMPE, Ariz.

IN the instant the owner Arte Moreno shrewdly inserted the name Los Angeles in front of his haloed Angels, the hallowed Dodgers began mistaking their identity crisis for identity theft.

Wait just a Hollywood minute, cried the Dodgers. We're L.A., they said.

As if stamping themselves as Lords of La-La Land, the Dodgers have put billboards along the city's tangle of freeways with a logo that reads "This is L.A. Baseball."

One of the advertisements features, on a backdrop of Dodger blue, in progressive stages of a pitching windup, an apparitional image of Sandy Koufax changing into a more defined picture of Fernando Valenzuela that gives way to a vivid color photo of Odalis Perez.

Call it a time-lapsed ode to glory, with each billboard and bus sign underscored with the words "Think Blue."

So why are the Dodgers seeing Angels red?

Once, the Dodgers viewed the Angels as the harmless outpost team of Gene Autry's benevolent dreams. Now, to emphasize the end of amicability, the Dodgers will continue referring to the Angels as the Anaheim Angels, not as the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim, in their news releases. As a tweak to Moreno, Frank McCourt, the owner of the Dodgers, reportedly ordered Dodgers caps stitched with "Los Angeles Dodgers of Los Angeles" as gag gifts.

Who knew a Los Angeles rivalry could exist after Kobe and Shaq split up?

There is no doubt McCourt will be rooting for the City of Anaheim to win its breach-of-contract lawsuit against Moreno in its attempt to restore "Anaheim" before Angels. Today, the sides will meet in court to decide a trial date.

"The process has been untidy to say the least," David Carter, founder of The Sports Business Group and an instructor in the management and organization department at the University of Southern California, said yesterday. "The tactics have been in question more than Arte Moreno's strategy."

In no attempt to offend Anaheim by depicting it as Mayberry R.F.D., Moreno simply wants a broader brand identity and revenue stream for his team in the nation's second-largest media market, all in an

attempt to keep it among the top five in payroll but the bottom 10 in ticket prices. Perhaps feeling a bit threatened by Moreno's ambitions, McCourt would love to stop Moreno from claiming an ever-expanding slice of an undecided fan base that is growing east of Dodger Stadium in what is called the Inland Empire.

"I think what is happening is both teams understand the rapid growth in Southern California," Carter said. "The travesty is, both franchises had a great opportunity to build up their fan base in the off-season but became bogged down with public relations and community relations.

The defining difference between them? Moreno possesses one essential item McCourt does not own: a reservoir of goodwill. True, the teams won their divisions last year and each purged popular players in the off-season, but the cost-conscious Dodgers have emerged as the team with a fuzzy plan for the future.

The Dodgers signed J. D. Drew instead of recommitting to Adrian Beltre and kept the anger-challenged Milton Bradley. The Angels gladly let go of the problem child Jose Guillen, but they also said goodbye to the beloved David Eckstein and Troy Glaus, but filled in their roster nicely with free agents like Orlando Cabrera.

Granted, the Dodgers have a less forgiving fan base than the Angels, but Moreno's team certainly looks like the championship contender of the two. If any skepticism exists about the Angels, Moreno seems to have the credibility to ease the doubts.

This is not to say some Angels fans of Orange County residency have not felt betrayed by Moreno's name games but most still see the wisdom in his vision of the future.

"This is a hell of a market we're in," Moreno explained to reporters as spring training opened last month. "To stick our head in the sand and not reach out to the market is a disservice to our fans."

Moreno has spent many games sitting in the stands with Angels fans and countless hours assembling his blueprint for the franchise. What's in a new name? An identity that has reach.

"There is more buzz now, particularly with the name change," said the longtime Angel Garret Anderson yesterday. He added:

"The Dodgers have a lot more history. But I think we're going in the right direction as far as marketing."

This is what McCourt must fear: Fans driving from all parts of the Los Angeles area to embrace the Angels.

"There are five teams in California," Moreno said. "And we want our own identity."

To the Dodgers, that might sound like a threat. In reality, the Dodgers' identity has not been stolen by the Angels - not by a long shot - but it can end up in crisis if ownership is not careful.

E-mail: selenasports@nytimes.com