

FISHING FOR FANS
WHAT CAN THE MARLINS DO TO BOOST ATTENDANCE AT GAMES?
HERE ARE SOME IDEAS
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A Hollywood executive could not have scripted a better underdog storyline for the 2006 Florida Marlins.

Widely picked by experts to finish with the worst record in baseball, the Marlins made an improbable run at a wild-card berth with a team composed of 22 rookies. In other markets, the Marlins' run would be celebrated with region-wide fervor. But in South Florida, the team's success was met with a resounding thud.

What can the Marlins do to improve next season's attendance? The question has been discussed for years. To its credit, the Marlins' marketing department developed compelling campaigns around stars like the D-Train --Dontrelle Willis -- created clever slogans like "Get Hooked," and launched promotions ranging from family meal deals to a Marlins Mr. Potato Head giveaway. Little worked.

The Marlins' attendance problems run deeper than merely price, parking, or promotions, and attracting more fans will require thinking that challenges conventional wisdom. Many cannot forgive the Marlins' owners and management for dismantling championship teams and seeming ambivalent about them or the game. In a situation this dire, heavy-duty transformation strategies are necessary. Each idea presented here is intended to stimulate new approaches to solving one of the most complex problems in professional sports.

First, instead of making the fans go to the Marlins, bring the Marlins to the fans. Why not have the Marlins play a select number of home games in smaller, baseball-only facilities such as the University of Miami's Mark Light Stadium or Fort Lauderdale

Stadium? This proposal would address the long-held complaints of watching the Marlins in Dolphin Stadium, which, after its transition from a fine football field to a makeshift baseball diamond, becomes a cavernous ghost town. Most would agree that a sold-out smaller venue of 8,000, for example, is more exciting for fans and television viewers than the same crowd in a 75,000-seat football stadium. In a community that has been inundated with political battles over a new stadium, this would be an overdue gesture of goodwill, demonstrating that while the team has not secured stadium funding, management understands how fans feel about the current facility.

Second, Marlins owner Jeffrey Loria should transform his public persona from a distant, enigmatic owner to an accessible, devoted fan. Fans may not be surprised if Loria prioritizes profit over team performance, moves the team to another city, or fires manager Joe Girardi, a leading candidate for National League Manager of the Year. After all, past Marlins owners have displayed similar tendencies.

But what if Loria becomes the team's No. 1 fan? The model for this owner-as-fan strategy is the Dallas Mavericks' Mark Cuban. Despite his occasionally questionable behavior, Cuban has proven that an owner who is openly committed to the team as its top salesperson can fill the stands. Loria could sit in the stands for a few innings and have a hot dog, call sports talk shows, or maintain a blog to share his thoughts on the team. In many ways, management behavior, not on-field performance, has caused the Marlins' attendance woes. If Loria steps onto the public stage and shows he is a diehard fan, he could begin to reestablish credibility for a Marlins front office that has historically alienated and eroded its fan base.

Finally, the Marlins should redefine fan involvement. The popularity of interactive entertainment like American Idol, YouTube, and video games is evidence that fans expect to actively participate in their entertainment experiences. To reinvigorate attendance, the Marlins should capitalize on these emerging trends. For example, the Marlins could develop a spring training reality show during which fans choose the final member of the team, hold an "Opening Day Election" that will have fans decide who the starting pitcher will be,

or offer in-stadium text-messaging polls that determine the batting order for the night's game.

The sports industry has been slow to adopt these fan participation strategies, mostly because the concept potentially threatens the competitive spirit of sports. But as fans increasingly become the decision makers of their entertainment content, sports will have to adapt. The Marlins should take this risk not only to reconnect with their fan base but also to reintroduce a Marlins team that has endured so much player turnover.

Marlins fans are criticized throughout the country for being shallow frontrunners that take their team for granted. As we South Floridians know, this perception strongly misrepresents reality. While a promising market for professional baseball exists in South Florida, the very presence of a team is no longer enough to encourage fans to spend their time and money. Whether or not the Marlins consider these proposed solutions, the organization must recognize the cause of fan frustration and develop strategies that seek to mend damaged relationships. It is the responsibility of the team, not the fans, to increase attendance.

Ben Shields, a Fort Lauderdale native and graduate of Nova High School, is a coauthor of "The Elusive Fan: Reinventing Sports in a Crowded Marketplace."

[Illustration]

PHOTO 2; Caption: Staff photo illustration/Omar Vega and Kristian Rodriguez CHOICE OF SEATS: Jim Garcea, of Hollywood, watches the Florida Marlins play the San Diego Padres from Section 107 of Dolphin Stadium. Staff photo/Michael Laughlin