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Professional
Sports History
of
Santa Clara County

An Essay
Presented to
the California Pioneers
of Santa Clara County

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Introduction

With a population of over 1,000,000 people, and a near perfect climate, the Santa Clara County is an ideal place to sustain sports teams. People want to be entertained and see sports as a way to relax. Of the five sports facilities that accommodate local professional sports teams, the capacity for them ranges from 4,000-18,000, and are usually occupied to the fullest extent with passionate sports fans.

Originally, only the San Jose Giants was attracted to this valley whose temperate climate is conducive to year-round athletics. However, now teams draw thousands of people to their events on a year-round basis. The attendance at these games has helped the local economy augment. Such events as: the regular season and playoff games, Superbowl XIX, the NHL All-Star Game, and World Cup soccer in 1994. These events bring people from out-of-town to the valley where they help generate millions of dollars and acknowledge Santa Clara as a distinguished sports city.

Local Facilities for Professional Sports

One of the most popular sports facilities is the San Jose Arena. The construction of the San Jose Arena started in 1988 and was set to open in 1993. Since then, three respectable franchises have been established: the Sharks, Sabercats, and Rhinos. The Sharks have developed into a contender for the Stanley Cup, ever since they've been inducted into the National Hockey League in the 1991-92 season. When the Arena Football League opened its doors for expansion in 1995, San Jose was given a team. The Sabercats have proven to be a respectable team and leave the fans cheering for more explosive and heart pounding 50-yard football. The Rhinos of Roller Hockey International are the only professional franchise in San Jose to win a Championship.

In addition to the arena, Spartan Stadium, the San Jose Event Center, and Municipal Stadium, are homes to other franchises in San Jose. Major League Soccer has brought the Clash and many soccer fans a chance to experience soccer in this area since the 1994 World Cup held in Stanford Stadium and the demise of the Earthquakes and Grizzlies. Also, the Lasers had a short encounter with the American Basketball League, which closed its doors two games into the third season. Even baseball continues to sizzle with the Giants of the minor leagues who just came off of a championship year last year.

It is these teams that have enhanced the Santa Clara County and transformed it to a respectable sports city. These franchises have welcomed sports fans as well as people who want to

be entertained into an exhilarating atmosphere and have placed the Santa Clara County in the history books.

San Jose Sharks

The plans to bring an ice hockey expansion team to San Jose started in 1988, when George and Gordon Gund couldn't keep their NHL operation viable much longer in Minnesota. The vote in 1988 for a downtown arena in San Jose was so close as to not passing. San Jose needed a nickname so an international contest was devised. Popular submissions were Fog, Gold, Icebreakers, Redwoods. Nevertheless, the Sharks won the most votes, and is fitting for a franchise that has frequently struck without warning and has shattered Stanley Cup ambitions for others. San Jose was awarded their first professional franchise to be introduced in the 1991-92 season. The Sharks played their home games at the Cow Palace in Oakland for the first two seasons while the arena was being constructed.

The Sharks' first two seasons at the Cow Palace were ominous, with a 17-58-5 record in their inaugural season and 11-71-2 the succeeding year.¹ But when the Sharks played their first regular-season game at San Jose Arena on October 14, 1993, the future boded positively. That year the Sharks made history by improving to a 33-35-16 record and a playoff birth.² Shark fans were exhilarated by the team's progress in two years. The Sharks embarked on an unforgettable playoff when they knocked off the favorites, the Detroit Red Wings in seven games. Next, they nearly pulled off another miracle against Toronto, but failed to continue when losing the seventh game of the series. The 1993-94 season brought fans together to witness a talented hockey team

with an abundance of potential.

The 1994-95 season was once again triumphant for the Sharks when they finished 19-25-4, and went to the playoffs for the second consecutive year.³ Once more the Sharks made a run for the Stanley Cup, by eliminating the Calgary Flames in the first round. In the second round, the Sharks were no match for the Detroit Red Wings who swept them in four games and brought their season to an end.

The Sharks's dreams of returning to the NHL playoffs have been shattered until this year. On February 2, the Sharks embarked on a ten game, eighteen day road trip, the longest in NHL history and finished 4-5-1, a positive result.⁴ Eighteen-thousand Shark fans have inhabited the arena for every home game, proving to be the hottest ticket in town. With the fans's support and some key changes on the roster, the Sharks are playing some of their best hockey since the 1993-94 and 1994-95 seasons as they finished the 1998-99 season 31-33-18 earning a playoff spot.⁵

San Jose Rhinos

In 1994, one year after Roller Hockey International opened, the Rhinos were one of the new teams to compete for the Murphy Cup. In their inaugural season, the Rhinos were a success, attracting nearly 18,000 fans to see this new electrifying sport to strike the San Jose Arena . That year they finished fifth out of twenty-four teams.⁶

Although the Rhinos finished a frustrating 13-11, they were determined to make a statement in the playoffs. In the first round, they edged out two victories against the Phoenix Cobras and next were to play the Vancouver VooDoo. Again the Rhinos proved to be the better team and won in two games.

San Jose now faced the number one ranked Anaheim Bullfrogs. In game one the Rhinos won easily 11-4, but game two would be much more diverse. The Bullfrogs won 9-4, to send the game into a tie-breaker, a twelve minute mini-game. In the tie-breaker the Rhinos did the impossible, by defeating the Bullfrogs 2-1.⁷ The Rhinos were headed to the Murphy Cup finals in only their second year against the Montreal Roadrunners. For the second consecutive series, the Rhinos were forced to go to a twelve minute mini-game. At the end of the tie-breaker, the score was tied at 1-1, so now they had to play a five-minute sudden death. Just 1:51 into the overtime the Rhinos scored and were crowned RHI Champions. The Rhinos's wild ride got the attention of many people and they were rather encouraging the whole season.

Following their championship season, the Rhinos played

all their home games on a state-of-the-art Sport Court surface distinctively designed for professional roller hockey. The Sport Court contains a blue coloring to make following the puck easier. In addition, it may accommodate players to perform at maximum speeds, with assistance from wheel manufacturers. Following every home game, fans are encouraged to skate on the Sport Court.

The 1998 season was postponed due to the reconstruction of the league. This made many Rhino fans disappointed. The Rhinos are scheduled to return this year and compete for the Murphy Cup once again. Spectators enjoy RHI and the Rhinos because the players are living from paycheck to paycheck. Also, because no one player earns more money than any of his teammates. Roller hockey has gradually gained recognition from people because they are thrilled to cheer on a successful franchise and witness hockey when the Sharks are not in season.

San Jose Sabercats

The Arena Football League has gradually transformed itself into a popular sport in San Jose. Arena football was created on February 11, 1981, by James P. Foster, an enthusiastic sports fan. He was attending an indoor soccer game when he drew an outline of a mini- football field over a hockey rink and wrote notes on the game.

In June of 1987, Foster's game came to life. The league opened with only four teams. The 50-yard fields, eight players to each side, drop kicks, and rebound nets has expanded itself from four teams to fifteen, and San Jose was granted a team.⁸

The Sabercats made their debut in the 1995 season and finished an impressive 8-4, won the Western Division, and made the playoffs. Although they lost to Orlando in the first round, they finished fourth overall and showed promise in the future with star quarterback Tony Kimbrough and all-around player Titis Dixon.⁹

Football fans occupied the San Jose arena during the 1996 and 1997 seasons wanting more of the non-stop action of arena football. The next two years the Sabercats were a disappointment with 6-8 finishes and no post-season play.¹⁰

The Sabercats are set to start the 1999 season on May 1, 1999, versus Tampa Bay. This revolutionary game has caught the attention of many people. People can watch an arena football game at low prices and witness atrocious hits, big plays, and a fast-paced game the National Football League doesn't have enough of.

San Jose Clash

When the San Jose Earthquakes of the North American Soccer League and San Jose Grizzlies of the National Professional Indoor Soccer League were terminated, the Santa Clara County was without soccer. Soccer is slowly catching on to people and for many it is their love. On June 15, 1994, Major League Soccer selected the first six cities who will take part in the inaugural season. The San Jose Clash was one of the six and was rewarded the inaugural game to be played at Spartan Stadium. Over 31,000 people attended the game and witnessed Eric Wynalda of the San Jose Clash score the first ever goal, in which San Jose won 1-0 against Washington D.C. United.¹¹

That year the Clash finished fourth with a 15-17 record to make the playoffs. In the first round of the playoffs, the Clash faced off against the first place winners, the Los Angeles Galaxy. San Jose couldn't pull off the upset, but they had an excellent first year. On the average 17,232 fans poured into Spartan Stadium for each home game to cheer on the team.¹²

The following year San Jose was given the season opener once again because of their fans's moral support. Again the Clash won, but this time in a shoot-out. The Clash finished a dismal 12-20 and failed to make the playoffs. Even the attendance was reduced to 13,597 per game.¹³ Although the Clash had a disappointing season, El Salvadorian star Ronald Cerritos made his mark on the league. He scored twelve goals and had ten assists in twenty-two games.¹⁴ In addition, he broke D.C. United's forward

Raul Diaz Arce's ten game point scoring streak by one more game. In 1998, the Clash once again failed to make the playoffs, but Cerritos continued to open the eyes of fans and the league, with thirteen goals and twelve assists.¹⁵

This year (1999) the Clash will be privately operated by Kraft Group Sports, which already owns New England Revolution of Major League Soccer and the New England Patriots of the NFL. Also, the Clash acquired forward Raul Diaz Arce, who is expected to add an offensive threat alongside Cerritos. The Clash seem to have a chance for the post season.

The atmosphere at Spartan Stadium is exhilarating because of the many different cultures that come to cheer on their home team. The players are very considerate and are willing to sign autographs for the children. Also, San Jose accepts soccer because of the high youth participation. In addition, many immigrants follow soccer and spectators can live the feeling of the most popular sport on earth.

World Cup 1994

On July 4, 1988, the 1994 World Cup was awarded to the United States. In the six years since then, thousands of people have worked hard to allure soccer fans to the most popular game on the earth. On January 9, 1990, a process began to distinguish the host cities. Out of thirty-two cities, only nine were chosen on March 23, 1992. One of the nine was Stanford Stadium in Palo Alto.

This was the same stadium that held the Olympic quarter-final game between Brazil and Italy in 1984, and the U.S. and Costa Rica game. In addition, Stanford Stadium was the site of Super Bowl XIX on January 20, 1985, in which the San Francisco 49ers defeated the Miami Dolphins in 38-16. This game took place in front of 84,059 people. However, Stanford Stadium had to undergo changes to correspond to the demands of World Cup '94. Stanford Stadium revitalized their stadium by spending \$5 million.¹⁶ The playing field was widened and reseeded, the wooden spectator benches were replaced with aluminum ones, the press box and locker rooms were rejuvenated, and the track and field facilities were covered up.

Stanford Stadium was rewarded with four first round games, a second round game, and a quarter-final game. The attendance for these games ranged from 76,000-86,000. Brazil played three of their games at Stanford Stadium, and won the respect of being the home-town favorites. One of the most memorable games was on July 4, when Brazil played the United

States in the second round game, which Brazil won 1-0.¹⁷ Despite the United States's loss, fans from both sides gathered with each other to celebrate over the game in front of the stadium and at Villa Felice in Los Gatos where Brazil domiciled. This game as well as the others, brought friendship and respect to other countries's cultures.

San Jose Lasers

When the Lasers, a professional women's basketball team, entered the league they knew there was going to be a competition with the American Basketball League and the high and mighty Women's National Basketball Association. There was some apprehension for the ABL.

The inaugural season in 1996-97 was comprised of nine teams. The Lasers played their home games at the San Jose Event Center, which holds 4,590 people.¹⁸ That year San Jose finished 18-22 and made the playoffs, but lost two straight games to Columbus in the first round and were eliminated.¹⁹

The ensuing year, the Lasers went 21-23, and made the playoffs. Their they defeated New England in the first round in two straight games.²⁰ The Lasers were just two victories away from the finals, but lost to Columbus. 3,000-4,000 Laser fans continued to attend the games because they felt they had a successful team that would overcome their defeat and compete once again for the championship.

However, on December 22, 1998, two games into the season, the ABL closed their doors. Players and coaches were without jobs, while fans were devastated by the loss. A San Jose Laser volunteer Gay Katillius and a group of members chose to view the league's death as a beginning and staged a hoop salute when the league decided not to hold a farewell game. The hoop salute took place at De Anza College and provided the fans one last look at the Lasers. The hoop salute was such a success, other teams in

the league decided to hold similar events.

Even though the league folded, fans in San Jose wanted the memory of the ABL to live on. The patronage by fans was innumerable and Gay Katillius and her members comforted the ABL through the pain of vanquish.

San Jose Giants

The oldest professional sports team in San Jose is the San Jose Giants. In 1988, the San Jose Giants of the minor leagues, became the Class A affiliate of the San Francisco Giants of the major leagues.

In 1891, the San Jose Dukes/Gardeners of the California State League won the first ever title with a 90-57 record.²¹ Two years later the team would move to Stockton, but then returned to San Jose in 1914 as the Bears. The Bears finished 20-16 before the season was abandoned in June.

During World War II, the Municipal Stadium was built as one of the New Deal's WPA projects and has remained the same till this day. Located on the cross-streets of East Alma and Senter Road, the stadium opened in the Spring of 1942, and the San Jose Owls took the field. In the next twenty years, the Municipal stadium would be the home for the Missions, Jo-Sox, Red Sox, and Pirates.

From 1962 to 1985, the San Jose ball club was associated with the California Angels, Kansas City Royals, Montreal Expos, and Seattle Mariners of the major leagues. Through these four teams, Municipal produced 128 big leaguers.²²

Since the San Jose Giants were developed, they have been the best in the minors. Part of the Valley Division of the California League, they have produced fifty players that made "The Show". Some of whom have played or still play with the Giants include: Pitcher Shawn Estes who has compiled twenty-six wins in

the last two seasons with the Giants, pitcher Rod Beck one of the consistent closers for the Giants, now playing with the Cubs, and shortstop Royce Clayton. These players and many more have recognized San Jose as one of best minor league producing teams. In addition, the San Jose Giants have the best winning percentage out of all 116 full-season minor league teams.²³

Just \$8.00 for box seats, \$6.00 for adults, and \$4.00 for children and seniors, people gather into Municipal Stadium to support their team. One may ask why they are supportive; it is because many of the players that play with them today may end up being an important player in the majors someday. Also, fans can get to witness baseball without driving to San Francisco or Oakland and are guaranteed great seats. Furthermore, the San Jose Giants just came off of a 83-57 season and a championship to show for it.

Conclusion

While sports have long been important to the area, the acquisition of the San Jose Sharks was the foundation of building the reputation of the Santa Clara Valley into a successful sports locale. The Santa Clara Valley has earned respect from opposing cities and their teams. The Santa Clara Valley and sports are a perfect match because fans are willing to spend money to cheer their home team and be a part of the stimulating atmosphere. If our franchises continue their ambitious play and improve, San Jose will gradually earn the title, "Champions."

Endnotes

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3. Ibid., p. 210.
4. "Sharks Across America." (San Jose Mercury News, Feb. 20, 1999), p. 6D.
5. "NHL's Team by Team Season Record." (San Jose Mercury News, April 18, 1999), p. 14C.
6. "Rhino's Team History." (AOL, 1998).
7. Ibid. (AOL, 1998).
8. "Sabercat's Team History." (AOL, 1998).
9. Ibid. (AOL, 1998).
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