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Big-City Sports v. the Arts:

A Matter of Balance

in sports and the arts, American cities have their priorities all mixed up.

Equating city prestige with big-time sports teams, the cities have poured millions of dollars into gigantic, money-losing sports stadiums. The winners are wealthy owners of teams with national followings and fat television contracts who habitually whipsaw hard-pressed city governments into ever-more-favorable lease terms.

Sports fans find their favorite team often feels like to skip town whenever a more lucrative deal appears elsewhere. And the biggest losers, as usual, are the taxpayers.

By contrast, most cities have forced the arts—opera, symphonies, neighborhood-based cultural programs—to subsist on thin fiscal gruel. Only the widely spread grants of the National Endowment for the Arts (now \$115 million annually) plus state arts councils and a few well-budgeted community arts agencies have helped right the balance at all.

Arts don't lag as far behind sports as many people think. In eight of the nation's largest cities, according to an NEA survey, attendance paid for cultural events and museums actually tops professional football in 10 cities and hockey in 15 cities. In Houston and New York, more people even go to the opera than football or hockey games.

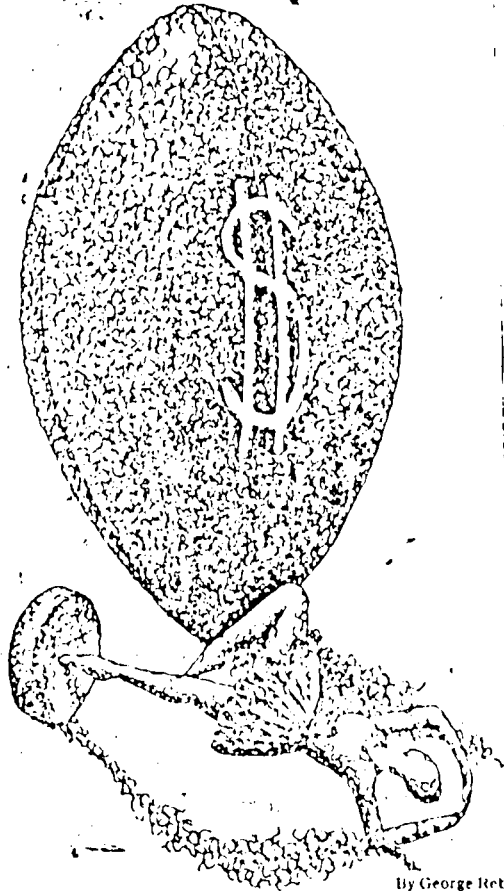
No one can question the public interest in professional sports. The teams—at least as long as they're winning—are a source of civic pride, and they often generate new jobs.

But the 53 new or enlarged stadiums and arenas built in recent years, according to a *Pulse* magazine survey, have "committed unsuspecting taxpayers to spend more than \$6 billion plus \$1 billion for roads, ramps and sewers." And that public subsidy lines the pockets of the affluent team owners, who pay sky-high wages to top players and steadfastly refuse to make their profits public.

The required bonds stretch a city's or county's borrowing authority, can lower its bond rating and thus raise its interest costs for more pressing needs.

In city after city, the stadium supersell repeats itself. To soften taxpayer resistance, actual costs are vastly underestimated. Citizens are rarely told that the construction bonds will saddle the city with large fixed costs for decades, often doubling the cost. Suspiciously large consultant fees are handed out. Occasionally there's outright graft.

New Orleans's Superdome was to cost \$35 million; final construction price was \$175 million; interest could raise the cost to \$300 million. Renovation of New York's Yankee Stadium was advertised at \$24 million; in the end, the work cost over \$100 million, and interest costs will push the final figure to \$240 million.



By George Rebn

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lion annually from a neighboring racetrack—money that would otherwise go into the state treasury.

A fraction of the public money channeled to big-league teams could provide a major boost for amateur athletic programs. Publicly subsidized professional sports, Foschio warns, have "made

Mr. Peirce, who writes on city and state issues, is now syndicated by The Washington Post Writers Group.

us a nation of spectators rather than participant." The results: less physical fitness, less participation, less fun for everyone.

Professional arts activities also require massive subsidies to cover the gap between box-office receipts and actual expenses. But there's a vital difference: Unlike pro sports, they make no pretense of being self-supporting.

Even more than sports, arts interest and attendance have boomed in recent years—and mostly with private contributions rather than government subsidies. Between 1965 and 1975, the number of professional orchestras rose from 58 to 110. Professional opera companies were up from 27 to 45, dance companies from 37 to 157,

Studies show the arts do contribute importantly to city and state economies (\$3 billion in New York City alone, according to one study). More important, the arts have come off their elitist kick of yesteryear and are being extended through hundreds of programs into rural areas, schools, hospitals—even prisons, to help in inmate rehabilitation.

While professional sports raise ticket prices beyond the reach of many ordinary folk, the arts are reaching out into communities where people live and becoming more and more participatory. Using federal manpower funds, for instance, San Francisco has generated a broad neighborhood arts program employing jugglers, dancers, mimes, sculptors, photographers and craftsmen.

"The arts reveal us to ourselves," says Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson. "They show us who we are and where we are going, whether as a neighborhood, a city or a nation. The arts are an expression of community identity in its highest form."

A 1975 survey showed that 58 per cent of Americans polled would be willing to pay \$5 more a year in taxes to support arts and culture; 41 per cent would agree to pay an amazing \$25.

With full citizen participation and "open book" planning, a city's arts and sports enthusiasts can cooperate. Dallas is now proving the point with commonly agreed on plans to build a new library, an auditorium for basketball, hockey and popular music events, and separate new fine art museum, theater and symphony buildings.

There was real danger, says City Manager George Schrader, that suspicions among all the projects' backers could have frustrated any building. So the city brought together representatives of each group to share information and commission a master plan for the facilities.

The city insisted that the library's backers raise \$10 million of the building's \$40 million before the remainder was financed through bonds. Seat options sold to Dallas citizens will finance \$6 million of the \$22.5 million for sports facility. To control costs, the contractor will have to guarantee total cost by bond.

Finally, for the new arts facilities, backers must raise 40 per cent of the \$50.55 million cost privately before the city finances the remaining cost. To avoid the sterile effect of New York's Lincoln Center or Washington's Kennedy Center, the arts facilities will be spotted around a downtown area with space for compatible uses—restaurants, studios, galleries—between them.

Forcing citizens with different tastes and interests to cooperate, obliging them to commit their own energy and money, is the best way to make a city work for all its residents, Schrader says.

That's a far cry from the slippery financial shenanigans by which many professional sports stadiums have been foisted on taxpayers.