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Chicago Bulls

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Chicago Bulls

When one thinks of the Chicago Bulls and sports marketing, the name that epitomizes each is Michael Jordan. From 1984 until he left the Bulls for good in 1998, Jordan's time with the Bulls coincided with six National Basketball Association (NBA) championships, the beginning of an attendance sellout streak that eventually reached 610 straight games over 14 years, and the building of a new arena (United Center) with three levels of luxury suites, various fan and athlete amenities, and a seating capacity of 20,917. Not only was Jordan, a Hall of Fame inductee in 2009, synonymous with the Chicago Bulls, but also with the marketing revolution of the NBA and the Nike brand of athletic merchandise.

The Chicago Bulls franchise began in much more humble circumstances in 1966. As with any new sports franchise, the team struggled both on the floor and in attendance. Playing at the International Amphitheater for one year, then moving to spacious Chicago Stadium, the team averaged about 4,000 fans per game. Although they won their inaugural game and their coach, Johnny "Red" Kerr, who played high school basketball in Chicago and college hoops at the University of Illinois, won coach of the year honors, the team finished 34–48.

The 1970s resulted in a gradual turnaround for the team, both on the court and in the stands. Average attendance per game jumped above 10,000 for most of the decade. This growth in popularity can be attributed both to an improved team and the arrival of Pat Williams as general manager. Williams was a protégé of Bill Veeck, the ultimate showman of professional baseball. Williams brought many of the zany promotions and entertainment from Veeck into Bulls games. He introduced a mascot, Benny the Bull, to interact with the crowd and toss gifts to the children, and provided halftime entertainment, including world-famous Victor the wrestling bear. A 2010 *Forbes* magazine poll found Benny to be one of America's favorite mascots.

Marketing of the Bulls in the 1960s and '70s was handled by a staff of no more than four, whose primary task was to handle ticket orders. Little effort was made to sell tickets to individuals or groups. That changed in 1985, when Jerry Reinsdorf, a suc-

cess in real estate, led an ownership group to buy the team. Season ticket holders went from 4,800 at that time to 10,800 by 1987. The marketing staff continued to grow as well, reaching a size of over 50 people today.

Enter Jordan

The 1980s marked the arrival of Jordan, who was drafted in 1984. Attendance almost doubled from the previous year, as Chicago and the rest of the NBA experienced what was arguably the best player in basketball history. By 1987, the Bulls began to experience sellout crowds that would last an astounding 610 consecutive games, finally ending in 2001. However, it took Jordan and the Bulls until 1991 to put it all together and win their first championship. Once started, this championship machine couldn't be stopped, winning championships again the following two years to produce a threepeat before record crowds, and sponsorship dollars to go with it. In the summer of 1993, Jordan shocked the world by announcing his retirement, citing grief over the murder of his father and eventually pursuing his dream to play professional baseball. His pro baseball career was short-lived; he returned to the Bulls in March 1995.

The United Center, named after the Chicago-based airline and opened in 1994, was half-owned by the Bulls ownership group and shared with the ownership of the other primary tenant, the Chicago Blackhawks, a National Hockey League franchise. Concession and parking revenues unavailable to this ownership duo in the previous building were now a part of the two teams' revenue streams. And with the Bulls concluding the second of a three-year string of world championships in 1998, attendance and sponsorship dollars were at astronomical levels. However, Jordan and coach Phil Jackson retired, other star players like Scottie Pippen and Dennis Rodman signed elsewhere, and team performance declined. Nonetheless the sellout streak continued for another three years; both fans and sponsors continued to value the entertainment at a Bulls game.

This entertainment currently includes frequent game appearances by the Luvabulls cheerleading squad, alternate spirit squads of various shapes and sizes, Benny the Bull, and others. The Bulls outreach

to the community is also strong, with the Charita-Bulls, a program started in 1987 with the mission to enhance the lives of youths by supporting education, recreation, and social programs around the Chicago area. Each year over \$1 million is funneled into these programs.

It is not surprising then, that *Forbes* magazine's estimate of the franchise's value is over \$500 million. Not bad for an initial investment of \$1.6 million, in 1966.

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See Also: Brand Personality; Franchise; Licensed Goods; National Basketball Association; Sport Celebrities.

Further Readings

Nichols, John. *The History of the Chicago Bulls*. Mankato, MN: Creative Education, 2002.
Sachare, Alex. *Chicago Bulls Encyclopedia*. Lincolnwood, IL: Contemporary Books, 1999.

Although the Ricketts family's purchase of the team occurred in October 2009, the family wasted no time in making management and marketing changes throughout the organization. In late October, the family announced that it would begin renovating areas of Wrigley Field, the Cubs ballpark since 1916 and the second-oldest MLB ballpark behind Fenway Park, home of the Boston Red Sox. Renovations will include improving restrooms, making the concourses wider, adding seats to the stadium, improving the ballpark food, and adding a restaurant and gift shop. Additionally, in November 2009, the Cubs installed billboards in the back of the left-field bleachers, blocking a famous rooftop advertisement on a house across the street from the stadium. Because the advertisement was prominently seen by most fans during games, as well as clearly visible on television broadcasts, Ricketts chose to block the rooftop in order to showcase sponsors of the Cubs.

Another change instituted by the Ricketts family has been the addition of Wally Hayward as the chief sales and marketing officer for the Cubs. The position is newly created, and Hayward was hired with the intent of enhancing the game experience for Cubs fans, as well as improving corporate partnerships.

Chicago Cubs

The Chicago Cubs, a Major League Baseball (MLB) team in the National League (NL), underwent a major management change in 2009, when Tom Ricketts's family became the eighth owners of the team, purchasing it from the Tribune Company for \$845 million. The team has a storied history, beginning in 1876 when it was referred to as the White Stockings. Other nicknames of the team included the Orphans and the Colts, and by 1907 the team was officially named the Cubs.

Prior to Ricketts's ownership of the Cubs, the team was owned by the Tribune Company from 1981 to 2009, the William Wrigley family from 1919 to 1981, and a host of other owners prior to 1919, such as William A. Hulbert, Albert Spalding, Charles Murphy, Charles Taft, and Charles Weeghman.



The Cubs ranked third in the MLB in attendance in 2009, filling their ballpark to 96.20 percent capacity on average.