

Growth period now in decline

# Sports expansion boom busting out all over

NEW YORK (AP) — People used to say the sports expansion boom would end when it ran out of cities. But a funny thing is happening on the way to Europe, the Orient and Smallville, USA: The boom is going bust.

For the most part, the incredible days of pro sports expansion appear over. Some teams may even disappear in the near future, victims of the deteriorating economy, dilution and overexposure.

In the days before Wall St. replaced Flatbush Ave. as the capital of the sports world, there were fewer leagues, fewer teams and fewer problems. Ownership and profit margins were as constant as the New York Yankees winning the World Series.

But times have changed. The Yankees haven't won a World Series since 1962 and teams that were just starting or didn't exist then now own "world" titles. The Mets won the World Series in 1969, Milwaukee won the National Basketball Association title in 1971 and Philadelphia of the National Hockey League won a Stanley Cup in 1974.

Leagues that didn't exist in 1962 — the American Basketball Association, World Hockey Association and World Football League to name only a few — have been crowning champions and losing money.

Since 1961 pro football has increased from 14 to 38 teams, hockey from 6 to 32, basketball from 9 to 28 and baseball from 16 to 24. And team sports have sprung up in tennis, soccer, track, lacrosse, boxing and volleyball, reflecting the interest in making a fast buck.

But what is becoming undeniably clear is that there is only so much gold in them thar hills. And the inflationary rush of new teams and leagues combined with a recession has left some of these teams and leagues steeped in debt.

Teams have folded in the ABA, the WHA, and in World Team Tennis. One league, the WFL, almost folded after losing \$20 million in its first season. World Team Boxing, which said it would have 48 teams, began with four and has not been heard from since its first week when it suspended three of its four teams for non-payment of bills.

Consolidation may also be the case in the ABA, another league that has been bathing in red ink since its inception. League president John Y. Brown advocates trimming the fat from the 10-team league by axing its weak sisters, Memphis and San Diego.

"We're in the entertainment business," Brown says. "And people just won't pay to see inferior products. Money is tight and you can't expect people to pay and see us beat Memphis by 50 points."

In the boom of the '60s the key word was expansion. But with the threatened bust of the '70s

the password may be contraction as teams and leagues grapple for a profitable share of a very competitive — and shrinking — sports dollar.

"I think you will see teams disappearing in the near future," says baseball Commissioner Bowie Kuhn. "There has been too great

overexpansion of sports."

Kuhn believes baseball is less affected by economic down-turns because its tickets are cheaper than other major sports. He says, "There could be expansion in the future, but the general economic picture has prompted our people to take a more careful look."

Baseball hasn't expanded since adding four teams in 1969. The National Hockey League may add two more teams in the next two years, but there is a good chance those teams may simply be transferred from other cities. The NBA has postponed a planned expansion into Canada in 1975. There is

talk of contraction in the World Hockey Association.

One of the 1969 expansion teams in baseball included the cost of buying player contracts from other teams, the development of a scouting organization from scratch, leasing a stadium and building spring training facilities.

"It cost us at least another million in start-up costs that first year," says Peter Bavasi, vice president and general manager of the Padres. "The second year was better because we didn't have to buy the typewriters and office furniture again."

"By then we were operating on a budget similar to the established clubs, except we were burdened by interest payments and the declining balance on the \$10 million entrance fee. You can make an operating profit on a yearly basis, but what about that \$10 million interest?"

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