

# Column: California's football losers

By Joe Mathews

No one can know for sure whether any of California's four National Football League teams—the 49ers, Raiders, Rams, and Chargers—will emerge as big winners in the new season.

But we already know who the losers will be: California cities foolish enough to host NFL teams.



Joe Mathews

In the rest of America, major cities try to attract the NFL because they see football franchises as providing a publicity and economic boost. But in California, where the economy is nation-sized and our big cities already are globally famous, the dynamic is the opposite. Our big cities have been shedding their pro football teams, and avoiding the headaches of devoting valuable California real estate to stadiums within their jurisdictions.

In this contest, the biggest winner is San Francisco, which got free of its NFL headache by “losing” the 49ers to Santa Clara. Across the Bay, Oakland, which resisted building a new stadium for the Raiders, will get its reward in three years, with the team's departure for Las Vegas.

San Diego registered its civic triumph when—after its voters

defeated the last of 15 years' worth of proposals for lavish new Chargers stadiums—the team left town this summer for a temporary home in the city of Carson. In 2020, the Chargers, along with the Rams—who relocated to Southern California in 2016, after two decades in St. Louis—will move into a new, shared stadium in the small city of Inglewood.

The destinations of these teams are telling. The only places in California willing to risk permanently hosting an NFL team are smaller, poorer, obscure cities that sit in the shadow of global municipalities. Desperate for high-profile development, they are willing to devote land and resources to teams that won't even use their new cities in their names. The teams are called the San Francisco 49ers, and Los Angeles Rams, not the Santa Clara 49ers or Inglewood Rams.

And that represents the least of the indignities of being an NFL city. Economic studies show that sports teams deliver few economic benefits—they merely siphon dollars from other entertainment-oriented businesses. And then there's the costs of civic conflict that greedy NFL teams can engender.

Three years after the 49ers relocated to Santa Clara, city and team are engaged in a bitter fight. The Santa Clara-49ers conflict has involved the team's use of kids' soccer fields for parking, the amount the 49ers pay in rent, massive traffic jams on games days, and a city audit of stadium spending.

"We learned we cannot trust the 49ers," Santa Clara's mayor, Lisa Gillmor, told the *San Francisco Chronicle* this spring.

Things aren't that bad in Inglewood yet. The opening of that stadium—part of a larger entertainment development—is still three years away. Construction is already a year behind schedule, and community opposition is growing. There's also the whiff of bait-and-switch.

The stadium was sold as a private project that would cost the city next to nothing. But it turns out that the city could end

up giving the project an estimated \$100 million in tax breaks.

None of this should surprise. Most NFL teams are wildly profitable, so those teams that must relocate all carry the stink of failure. It's no coincidence that their owners show up on media lists of the worst owners in all sports.

These include the Rams' owner, Stan Kroenke, who got super-rich by marrying a Walmart heiress, and who has produced teams with miserable attendance and losing records for more than a decade. The Spanos family, which owns the Chargers, alienated most of San Diego with poor management, and farcical plans for new stadiums. Raiders owner Mark Davis, perhaps the NFL's poorest owner, inherited the team from his late father, Al Davis, a litigious scoundrel who moved the team from Oakland to L.A. and back.

And the 49ers? *USA Today* this year said owner Jed York had turned the team into "the NFL's biggest joke."

No wonder cities have let these owners leave. And life after NFL football looks pretty good.

San Francisco, sans the 49ers, is more prosperous than ever, and is using the land at Candlestick Park, its former home, for developments more valuable than the stadium was. San Diego is still wrestling with the costs of the Chargers' old stadium. But it is also starting to imagine the happier possibilities of what could replace it.

And Oakland should find that the departure of the Raiders from O.co Coliseum, as well as the exit of basketball's Golden State Warriors from the arena next door to the Coliseum, opens up transformational opportunities for land that sits next to a transit center.

But enough about the winners. NFL football in California is for losers. Pity the home teams.

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