

So, what's in a (coliseum) name?

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Many will think it a small matter to be upset about. But there is talk of changing the name of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. For money, of course.

This nearly century-old edifice, twice the scene of Olympic Games and for the past quarter-century bearing the imprimatur of a National Historic Landmark, is in need of improvement. A joint commission representing local and state governments plus the coliseum's principal sports tenant, the University of Southern California, reckons that some hustling entrepreneur will be happy to kick in maybe \$5 million a year to have its name on the place.

Five million dollars - that's inflation for you. The standard fee for dealings like this once stood at 30 pieces of silver.

Truly appalling was a lead editorial appearing last week in the Los Angeles Times, giving its stamp of approval to the announced agreement on coliseum repairs. What caught me was the line, "Much of the money for all this will come from naming rights - an inevitability of the modern sports world and a good solution for pumping funding into public assets without tapping the taxpayers."

Naming rights an inevitability? Not so fast there, Mr. Editor. Not everything is for sale. The owner who brought your Los Angeles Dodgers west from Brooklyn not only broke baseball's color barrier with Jackie Robinson - his successors have resisted the easy cash of naming rights. A commercial logo would be worth plenty atop that ballpark in Chavez Ravine - but it's still Dodger Stadium.

There apparently are some things even the wheeler-dealer George Steinbrenner is too smart to do for money. Imagine how the spirits of Babe Ruth, Joe DiMaggio and Lou Gehrig might rebel if their hallowed Yankee Stadium were to find a new name from among corporate listings on the New York Stock Exchange.

Green Bay, Wis., the smallest of National Football League home cities, loved its Packers so much it underwrote the cost of a stadium for the team and named it not for the highest financial bidder, but for a well-loved coach, Curly Lambeau.

Alas, "naming rights" can have even less admirable results than that. I don't know what forward-looking Houstonians are to be credited for the superb venue their baseball Astros call home - but that originally was called Enron Field. However, the ball club didn't wait until process servers had nailed Kenneth Lay and countless other Enron miscreants before giving the place its less licentious present label, Minute Maid.

But back to the L.A. Coliseum. It was erected by the state of California (at an original cost just under \$1 million) as a memorial to Americans fallen in World War I. To rename it now for a chain bank or for one of the area's high-volume auto distributors might seem to dishonor the dead. How many U.S. stadiums are immediately recognizable for a touch so classical as the Coliseum's peristyle? Or for its series of columns topped by the Olympic Cauldron, the "eternal flame."

The coliseum's high moments over nearly a century relate to more than the sporting events that an entire world often was tuned to. It was here that John F. Kennedy, accepting his presidential nomination in 1960, first uttered the words "A New Frontier." Here that Pope John Paul II celebrated mass in 1987 before a congregation of unprecedented size. And yes, here that a Knute Rockne-coached Notre Dame football team won its last game before the great Rockne's death in a plane crash.

Rename the Memorial Coliseum? There's no telling how far such avarice might spread. I'm surprised that a lira-pinching Italian government of recent times has not already wondered ... Would it really demean those early Christian martyrs to rename the hallowed Roman Coliseum for, say, a delicious brand of Capri Canneloni?

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