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CENTS

## Play Ball!

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### PROFESSIONAL BASEBALL COMES TO VERMONT

By Bill Davis

Things happened fast, the way they do in a crisp double play.

Minor league baseball came to Vermont, officially, on Thursday September 8, ending two years of hard work by Burlington Mayor Bernard Sanders and the Friends of Baseball. From that day on, Vermonters have shown that the Friends really had their finger on the state's pulse — the response, according to franchise owner Mike Agganis, "has been better than we ever expected."

At the same time, Vermont got its first taste of the peculiar business of baseball. The state's only professional sports franchise was caught up in a chain of events that touched several Eastern League franchises and major league organizations. Yet those events were never fully reported throughout the state, and the Burlington media — which at one point tried to scare the team away — only wrote part of the story.

The shadowy and constantly changing world of the minor leagues lies outside the media spotlight. The minors, to a newcomer, are filled with disappearing cities, mixed motives, squelched dreams and uneasy compromises. Almost anything can happen. Vermont fans found out that a team can be the Vermont Pirates one week and the Vermont Reds two weeks later. The confusion that greeted the Pirates pull-out only subsided when a contract was signed by the franchise owner and the Cincinnati Reds. The general reaction was: Pirates, Reds, what's the difference?

On the surface, there seem to be differences. Instead of a second-place AA team this past season, a team that finished next-to-last. Instead of a healthy front office, one that's in the middle of a top-to-bottom overhaul. Instead of the most productive farm system in the game, a system that's only now starting to recover from being gutted in recent years. Instead of a team that sought out Vermont entirely on its own, a team that just weeks earlier had been dumped by another franchise owner.

All those local jokes about Bernie's Reds missed the deeper irony: a very

innovative and enthusiastic group of Vermonters finds the story of the state's new team intertwined with the story of the game's most conservative organization. And that conservatism has led to serious problems for the Cincinnati Reds, problems which only now are being tackled head on.

None of which makes any difference to the people here who want a team — people like the woman who walked into Tom Racine's Burlington store and made out a check to help with the renovation of the field. She then went to the Ver-

mont Reds office and bought two season box seats.

To understand that kind of response, you have to understand how and why we came to have a team at all. To do that, you have to go back to the beginning of the Friends of Baseball, because without them, there would be no team.

"The idea of a baseball team for Vermont was in my mind for some time," says Sanders. "But the real kick came shortly after I became mayor, when I was approached by three very knowledgeable baseball people — Herb Pearo,

Ron Goble and Linda Kittle. They introduced me to the Eastern League, and led me to Tom Kayser, whose Holyoke, Massachusetts franchise was for sale."

That was in the middle of 1981, and Sanders began assembling the Friends of Baseball to look into acquiring a franchise. In addition to Pearo, Goble and Kittle, the early Friends included several University of Vermont professors (Richard Sugarman, Huck Gutman and Tom Simone), Dick Smullen (a former scout who's been involved with the

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## WATERFRONT FUTURE:

JOHN OSGOOD HOLDS THE KEY/By John Dillon

John Osgood, the front man for the mysterious Alden Waterfront Corp., a visionary developer committed to public involvement in his waterfront project or is he an entrepreneur who made his mark by trading on inside connections and conflicts of interest?

And do Osgood's previous connections with the Vermont Federal Bank offer a clue to the financial backing behind the Alden Corp., a group of investors who have committed millions to buying Burlington waterfront land but have so far remained anonymous?

These are the questions posed by Osgood's past projects and charges outlined in a recent anti-trust suit filed by a competing Mad River Valley developer. (See *Vanguard Press*, October 23-30.)

For the people of Burlington, the questions are particularly pressing, as Osgood and Boston architect Ben Thompson are the few known commodities of the Alden Corp., which has bought or secured options for approximately 21 acres of lakefront.

Osgood has developed condominium

projects around the Sugarbush Valley ski area for years. The anti-trust lawsuit brought by developer David Disick claims these business interests conflict with Osgood's public role as a Warren selectman. Disick, who this week won a zoning case in Washington County Superior Court for his plans to construct a 150 unit hotel at the base of Sugarbush, claims Osgood and other town officials tried to scuttle the project because it would compete with their own businesses. Those interests included a hotel project Osgood himself had planned, Disick said. (Despite his zoning victory, Disick will not say whether he will drop the anti-trust case.)

Osgood's attorney Peter Sidel emphatically denied the allegations of conflict and noted, as did others interviewed, that Osgood had worked long and hard to reach a settlement with Disick. That settlement collapsed after public sentiment turned against the project, Osgood recalled.

But the suit provides a glimpse into Osgood's previous business deals, although it is difficult to judge whether

the transactions revealed in the court papers constitute improper practices or are merely business as usual in the rough and tumble condominium market.

For example, the court filings seem to imply a special relationship between Osgood, his partner Carl Creedon and the Vermont Federal Bank, a Burlington savings and loan institution which was a joint venturer in several Creedon-Osgood condominium projects.

Claiming that the Vermont Federal bank had committed between \$10 to \$15 million to Creedon-Osgood projects, the court papers filed by Disick state that "defendants' monopoly appears to have been furthered through their connection with the funding bank." Disick says this connection is "evidenced" by, among other things, a series of real estate deals involving Elizabeth Cody, the bank president's wife.

Carl Creedon, Osgood's partner, bought a vacation home in Fayston, transferred the deed to Cody, but remains liable for the \$48,395 mortgage, court documents state.

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semi-pro Northern League), and several business people, like Dave Pearl and Tom Racine. Together they worked on solving two big problems: capital to finance a team and a place for a team to play.

"There were critics of this effort," explains Sanders, "who felt the city should not put any money directly into the team. I didn't necessarily agree, but I respected that view. My job, sitting in the middle, became a matter of getting people together, seeing what other kinds of arrangements could be made." For a while, they pursued a plan developed by Huck Gutman for selling shares to individuals in the area. But eventually they turned to more customary sources of capital and, as Sanders says, "That's where Tom Racine came in—he was our link to the business people."

The Friends' choice of a playing field was natural and unanimous: the University of Vermont's Centennial Field. It is, in the words of baseball writer Roger Angell, "an ancient dark-green beauty, the outfield terminating in a grove of handsome old trees." The field would need work, but more importantly UVM's approval of its use had to be secured—so in September of '81 Sanders wrote to President Lattie Coor.

"I've had strong differences in the past with the university about their role in the community," says Sanders, "but right from the start this time, Dr. Coor and the other people we worked with—Keith Meiser and Denny Lambert—were very helpful." UVM was willing to donate the field rent-free if they could be assured of certain particulars. No interference with UVM schedules. No costs related to upgrading the field. No threat to their tax-exempt status. All were reasonable and workable requests, and the Friends found they had something going. Loans were pledged by Burlington banks.

The Holyoke deal fell through, though, when Kayser found a buyer willing to keep the team there, but the Friends had already generated some momentum. Linda Kittle wrote to her fellow committee members about the importance of "keeping cool and close-mouthed about this—we want a team to want to come here." Another opportunity came up just months later, when the Lynn, Massachusetts franchise was put up for sale, but Mike Agganis bought the team, determined to make a go of it in his hometown.

Failure bothered some of the Friends, but Sanders tried to stay upbeat about the future. "Instead of having to start from scratch next time," he wrote to them, "we've laid the groundwork and on the next occasion will be able to move rapidly." The next year only rumors surfaced. Burlington native Stephen Butler, in a handwritten note to Sanders from his Glens Falls, New York home, alerted the Friends that that city's team was reported available. But nothing came of it, and the Friends had to sit tight, hoping that their contacts—and what they'd already learned about the minors—would eventually lead them to success.

Like so much of what is taken for granted in modern baseball management, the "farm system" was first developed and perfected by Branch Rickey. As general manager of the St. Louis Cardinals in 1925, Rickey designed an alternative to buying the contracts of minor league players. He set up a string of teams that were directly controlled by the Cardinals, either through outright ownership or contractual agreements that are the forerunners of the modern Player Development Contract (PDC).

These teams played a supporting role in the organization: training young prospects and maintaining a reserve of talent the major league club could tap. In 1949—by which time Rickey had set up another system for Brooklyn and begun signing black and Latin players—it was estimated that three of every eight major



Pre-season show: Mayor Sanders playing pepper.

leaguers were produced by one of Rickey's systems. He then went to Pittsburgh, and even today the most productive systems in the game are the three he designed.

How important are the minors today? Different people give different answers. Other means of acquiring talent are now available—especially player free-agents—but no one method of building a team is essential. "The key is not a farm system," writes baseball analyst Bill James, "but using good judgment about what that system produces. The key is not trading, but knowing who to trade for. The key is not free agents, but knowing which ones to sign." Different teams, therefore, put very different amounts of emphasis on their minor league affiliates.

From the point of view of minor league owners, though, problems can crop up no matter how well an organization treats its farm system. Why? Because the major league team cares about only one thing: producing major league players. Minor league pennants—or attendance records—don't matter nearly as much. The job of the franchise owner is to promote the team successfully, despite the natural movement of players on their way up to the big leagues—or back down.

But player movement was the least of Mike Agganis' problems in Lynn. Agganis took a lot of criticism for his tight purse-strings, but when attendance averaged below 500, that's not really stingy, it's smart. Lynn, only 15 miles from Fenway Park, was perhaps the most ill-advised location in the minors. The city never really responded, and the Lynn newspaper's coverage was half-hearted. This past year, for example, it failed to report an appearance by Willie Stargell in time to alert fans.

But no one who was at Lynn Community Night this year would ever doubt Mike Agganis' love for the game—or his desire to make the Lynn team work. The Pirates that night had their biggest crowd of the year—2,195—and in the exuberance of the moment, Agganis grabbed the PA microphone and offered to let everyone back in for free the next night. Only 93 took him up on the offer.

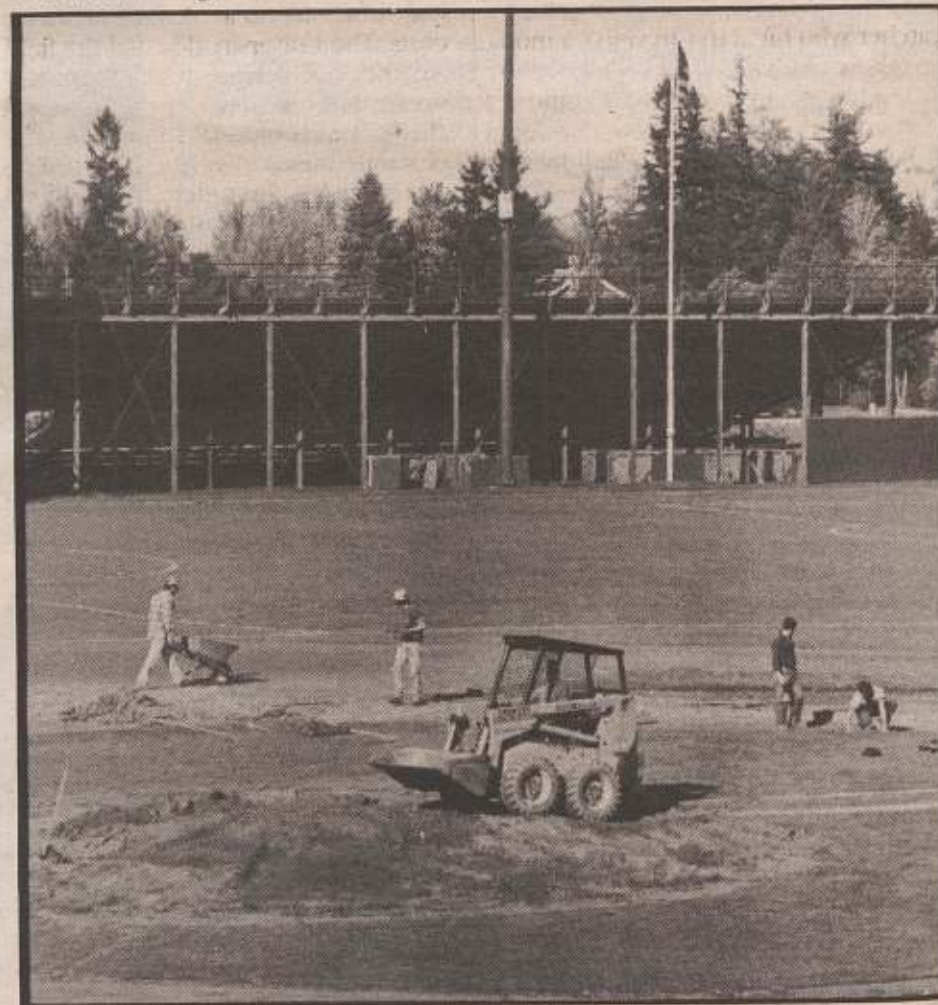
League president Charles Eshbach points out how many of Agganis' problems there "were inherited from the previous owners"—something a recent *Free Press* profile downplayed for some reason. Lynn had been in the league just a year when Agganis bought the franchise from Bob Zeig and Lloyd Kern, who had taken the carnival-barker approach to promoting the team: lots of

giveaways, lots of non-baseball entertainment. It didn't work.

Agganis tried the opposite: a low-key, understated approach that let the high quality baseball speak for itself. That didn't work either. But he never lost faith—he knew he had a PDC with a top-notch organization, and when, in early 1983, he began looking around for a new location, he was pretty sure other places would be interested. Several were, among them Vermont.

petitive sports, that means losing. Still, it's difficult to appreciate the sudden and inevitable force of the collapse without looking briefly at the grisly details.

When Robert Howsam left the presidency of the club to his protégé Dick Wagner in 1978, he handed over a thriving organization and a dominant team. The Big Red Machine had won divisional titles six of the previous eight years. The Reds won the best World Series of



Renovations at Centennial Field have already started.

A different kind of salvage project was getting underway at the same time out in Cincinnati. Just seven years ago, the Reds fielded what many believe was one of the best teams ever. Even in the strike-ruptured 1981 season, they'd had the best record in the majors. But in 1982, they had the worst record in the National League and in the team's long history: 61 wins and 101 losses. It was the most dramatic collapse since that of the Boston Braves in 1935.

What happened? A failure to adapt to changing rules and circumstances. Refusing to change is really a decision to compete at a disadvantage, and in com-

our time in 1975 and the next year rolled over the Yankees in four straight. It was a team built with farm products (Johnny Bench, Dave Concepcion, Dan Driessen, Ken Griffey) and some key trade acquisitions (Joe Morgan and George Foster).

But that year the rules of the game's business changed drastically, and what had been a conservative streak became hard-headed stubbornness. As players were able to sell their services as free agents, the Reds showed no interest whatsoever. A 19th-century view of the game's business prevailed, and neither the Players Association nor the business agents then entering the game were



considered legitimate authorities. The Reds' attitude seemed to be: who needs these money-grabbers? We can keep building winners the way Rickey did, the old-fashioned way.

Doing that, however, demands good judgment, something Dick Wagner's term of office wasn't well known for. As the Reds held their ground, sincerely believing in their philosophy, they at the same time began a series of incredibly poor decisions about players. The direction that emerged in management was clear: rather than adapt, the Big Red Machine was being stripped down and sold off as parts.

Fan disenchantment with the team began after the 1978 season, when Wagner let Tony Perez and Cincinnati native Pete Rose walk away as free agents. Rose had offered to sign an unguaranteed lifetime contract for \$450,000 a year. The Reds stood on principle and declined. Wagner also fired popular manager Sparky Anderson the same winter. It was, in retrospect, only a pale harbinger of what was to come. By the beginning of 1983, the team had changed dramatically.

Wagner traded George Foster to the Mets for Alex Trevino, Jim Kern and Greg Harris. He gave Joe Morgan his release after the 1980 season. He traded Ken Griffey to the Yankees for Brian Ryder and Freddie Tolliver. He let Dave Collins go as a free agent. He traded Ray Knight to the Astros for Cesar Cedeno. He traded prospect Bill Dawley (an '83 All-Star, it turned out) to Houston for Alan Knicely. Finally, he traded Tom Seaver back to the Mets for Charlie Puleo, Lloyd McClendon and Jason Felice.

Now there are names in that paragraph above that can stymie some serious baseball buffs. Let's just stick to players who were major-leaguers in '83: the Reds got rid of Rose, Perez, Foster, Knight, Seaver, Morgan, Collins, Griffey and Dawley. In return they got a back-up catcher who hit .216 (Trevino), a mop-up reliever with a 4.89 ERA (Puleo) and a .232 hitter they would like to unload (Cedeno).

When you jettison that much talent that quickly, you have to have something to fall back on, and what you fall back on is the farm system. But given the Reds' much-publicized scouting problems — no top amateur pick has become a major league regular since Don Gullett, selected in 1969 — their sudden dependence on the minors wreaked havoc with the orderly development of talent.

The Reds' 1983 roster had less than five players back from the '81 roster, and anyone with the necessary skills advanced through the farm system at an accelerated pace. Pitcher Bill Scherrer, for example, spent portions of 1982 with four teams: Tampa (at the A-level), Waterbury (AA), Indianapolis (AAA) and Cincinnati. The Reds approached 1983 determined to rebuild from their farm system, but that system was fast overheating from the parent club's increased demand for players.

**A**fter learning in early 1983 that Lynn owner Mike Agganis wanted to move, Eastern League (AA) president Charles Eshbach called Bernie Sanders. The Vermont group *had* been interested in owning a team — would they be interested in a franchise owner moving his operation there? They were, and the Friends went into high gear. As Tom Racine concentrated on talking it up to business people, negotiations among Agganis, the city of Burlington and the University of Vermont began in earnest.

Those talks depended more and more on the man in the middle, Sanders, who has received consistently high praise for his efforts. "Bernie was especially good with Agganis," says Huck Gutman. "He made the time to answer all of Mike's questions and to deal with all his concerns, down to the smallest detail." Racine found Bernie "a pleasure to work

with," too, and together they tried to nail down a deal.

"On one of Mike's visits here," says Racine, "I took him around to meet people in all kinds of businesses in the area he'd end up dealing with if he came here — soda, beer, restaurants, hotels, motels, larger corporations. I wanted to convince him the support was really here, and at the same time I think I was convincing myself. But everywhere we went, people were excited. I was really impressed — and I think Mike was too."

He was. "I'd never seen anything like it," he says now. At one point the minor league newspaper *Baseball America* pinpointed Harrisburg, Pennsylvania and Binghamton, New York as the leading contenders for the Lynn Pirates' new location. But by the end of July the odds had shifted: "Baseball may have made front-page news in Harrisburg," wrote Tom Shea, "but the struggling Pirates may opt next year for Burlington, Vermont — a city hot for baseball."

By mid-August, contract talks got serious. "City Attorney Joe MacNeil worked long and hard with Mike and his people," says Sanders. "A three-party contract takes a long time — but we had an excellent working understanding to go from. There was a lot of wrangling, but if you look at what other cities are doing, we got a real good contract."

Tom Kayser (now with the Pirate front office) and Branch Rickey III (the team's director of minor league clubs) both visited Vermont that month. And while they had questions — especially about Centennial Field — they liked much of what they saw happening here. Kayser, who'd first met the Friends two years earlier, was especially impressed. "Their offer in 1981 was a little rough around the edges, but this time everything was all wrapped up and ready to go."

A private fund-raising effort would finance the work needed to bring Centennial up to Eastern League standards and contribute to annual maintenance costs. The University donated the field. Agganis could leave if the team did poorly, but can't leave if the team succeeds — a very unusual stipulation. The city was to guarantee the fund-raising effort. Only a few details remained before the handshakes and signatures.

**J**ust as everything was falling into place for the Pirates in Vermont, things began to fall apart in Cincinnati. The Reds were in last place again, and attendance — which in '82 had been only half of what it was in '76 — slipped further. Owners James and William Williams decided something had to be done — and heads started to roll, beginning at the top.

Dick Wagner was fired in mid-July, and Bob Howsam came out of semi-retirement to reclaim the club's top executive office. By the time Wagner was fired, he'd been the scourge of every sports talk show in the city and been hung in effigy outside Riverfront Stadium. Howsam waited until the end of the season to clean house, but he tried immediately to attract fans back to the park.

The results were mixed. The usually staid Reds resorted to chickens and gorillas to promote games, the traditional ploys of losers and bush-leaguers. And they embarrassed themselves enormously by picking September 17 as the day they'd honor retiring Johnny Bench, a sure Hall-of-Famer. When someone took a closer look at the calendar, they discovered the day was also Yom Kippur — so none of the team's Jewish fans could attend, including Bench's friend and agent Reuven Katz.

But more serious problems arose in the farm system, and again those problems had their roots in the Reds' peculiar brand of conservatism. In this case, it involved the designated hitter rule, used in the majors only by American League clubs. The Reds abhor the DH, but rather than just vote against it (like the majority of NL clubs), they'd always gone a step further.

Cincinnati insisted that none of its farm teams use the DH, so that (in theory) pitchers would gain the necessary batting experience. On the surface, a logical policy. But every minor league in the game uses the DH, so Reds teams have competed at a distinct disadvantage. Other NL teams (like the Phillies, who also oppose the DH) figure they can still use it to give other hitters at-bats. Few pitchers ever hit well anyway, the argument goes.

Minor league owners and fans have been even less pleased. Nashville of the Southern League (AA) and Greensboro of the South Atlantic League (A) both dropped their Reds franchises after the 1979 season. Both gave the DH restriction as their reason. Pitchers who hit for Nashville were often greeted with hometown boos, as was a pre-game announcement explaining the Cincinnati policy. The Reds placed their AA team in Waterbury of the Eastern League, their A team in Cedar Rapids of the Midwest League.

But the Reds' system took its most serious blow just this past summer, within weeks of Howsam's return. On July 28, the Indianapolis Indians of the American Association (AAA) announced it would not renew its PDC with the Reds, thus ending 16 years as their top farm club. Again, the DH policy was blamed. Howsam tried to be conciliatory — allowing a limited use of the DH — but Indianapolis shut the door.

In an extremely unusual move, they signed a new PDC for next year in the middle of the season — with the Montreal Expos. To this day, the Reds do not have a AAA affiliate lined up for 1984. Although only one location is currently available — Wichita — that team's general manager refuses to say if they're even negotiating with the Reds, preferring to wait and see if other clubs become available.

Then the Reds lost their AA affiliate a few weeks later, in late August. Here the complaint was another dimension of the Reds' recent plight. "Unfortunately," said Waterbury franchise owner Tony DeVito, "the Reds have not provided the competitive club the fans deserve." His brother Mike, the team's general manager, said fan interest was difficult to maintain because "every week one of our players got moved up or down. We understand some movement has to take place, but we need a consistent team to promote." A quick look at the league's final statistics illustrates their point. More players put in time at Waterbury than any other franchise.

**B**ack in Vermont, the Friends of Baseball encountered one last unexpected obstacle — in their own backyard. Contract details were being nailed down and all was going smoothly. ("I was especially impressed," remembers Huck Gutman, "when UVM dropped things others might consider more important to take part in the baseball talks.") But confidence and calm evaporated when they saw *The Burlington Free Press* on Saturday morning, August 20.

"NO CITY MONEY TO ATTRACT MINOR LEAGUE TEAM," read the headline on an editorial — yet few readers knew how inaccurate the information was that supported the paper's opinions. "If the franchise is moved to the city," read the piece, "the financial risks must be assumed by the Pirates... The city should not subsidize the team in any way..." Now of course *no* major league organization takes those risks — the franchise owner and host city do. Nor was any "subsidy" involved, and the city's guarantee of the private funds even had clear dollar limits established.

History was distorted, too, in an argument that suggested the venture would fail. The demise of Burlington's 1955 entry in the Provincial League was cited as an example of previous failure — the team did not return the next year — but two significant facts were left unstated. First, the entire minors shrank in the fifties, from 59 leagues in 1949 to just

21 a decade later. There was nothing peculiar about Vermont's experience. And there was a reason the team folded after a year: the whole league did, too.

Another example of failure was cited, as well: the "old Northern League," composed of teams from Vermont, New York and New Hampshire. The *Free Press* pointed out that it failed despite stars like Robin Roberts and Whitey Ford. Then, in a very indirect acknowledgment of the limits of this example's applicability, the paper noted that the league "offered a brand of baseball that was akin to other minor leagues." The key word here is "akin." The league never held membership in the National Association of Baseball Clubs — it was a semi-pro league, with a few big-name ringers thrown in to attract crowds.

The one legitimate issue raised — the use of city funds — was something the Friends had taken into account from the beginning. "It was an arrangement the Board of Aldermen had to have faith in," says Tom Racine matter-of-factly. "We had people who said they'd raise the necessary money. The Board had to believe they would." Once the testimony of those involved was heard — something the *Free Press* apparently neglected — approval was forthcoming.

But where sensitive, multi-party negotiations were concerned, some damage had been done by the ill-informed editorial — and Mayor Sanders was furious. "It was a stupid, vicious, vindictive editorial. Their increasingly irrational hatred of me and my administration got carried away, and they ended up trying to destroy something that could be so important to the whole state."

"Of course," says Sanders, "they soon found out the business community wanted it, too, so they reversed their stand. They really ought to try to control themselves." Indeed, the next editorial on the subject — on September 7 — welcomed the team and noted blithely that the editorial board was "excited by the idea."

"What they did in late August, though," says Sanders, "is say to Mike Agganis and the Pirates, 'Hey, you're not welcome here. It won't work and here's why.' Now that's a hell of a thing to say when we're working hard to bring in a new business. They don't say this to a department store. They don't say 'Stay away, look at what happened to Abernethy's.' And when you look at it from the point of view of Mike or the Pirates, the last thing they want to do is walk into a battle between the state's largest newspaper and the mayor."

Others in the local media were both more sympathetic and more accurate — Huck Gutman cites Tony Adams of WCAX-TV in particular for his fine reporting — and when the September 8 announcement was finally made, it was one of the more festive press conferences held recently in Vermont. Wearing the familiar ringed cap of the Pittsburgh organization — "a mistake," said Bernie later, "and it was my fault" — the birth of the Vermont Pirates was announced.

But the ink was barely dry on the contract when things went haywire — and again the local media complicated matters. Back on September 2, Tom Kayser of the Pirates had a phone call from the Nashua, New Hampshire franchise, explaining that they wouldn't be renewing their PDC with the California Angels. Would the Pirates be interested in shifting to Nashua? "A *very* quick agreement was reached," said Kayser, and Vermonters first heard the news from WDOT's Peter Freyne on Wednesday September 14: Nashua would host the Pirates in 1984.

Fueled by the irrational charges of "fraud" and "rip-off" made later that morning by talk-show host Jack Barry, public reaction turned to confusion and anger. Barry apparently mistook the loss of a major league affiliate for the loss of a franchise, and all day long City Hall and Tom Racine's office were besieged with phone calls. To make matters worse,

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both Sanders and Racine happened to be out of town.

Why did the Pirates pass up Vermont? To this day, many people in Vermont feel the *Free Press* editorial was a factor. Mike Agganis says simply, "If you were in their position wouldn't it affect you? I already knew a lot of people here, so I was pretty confident, and it didn't change my mind. But that ran while Rickey was in town. I didn't even see it. He called me, told me about it, and read it to me over the phone. I felt like I'd just had a knife put in my back."

Ask the Pirates why they went to Nashua, and you get a very diplomatic answer: Nashua was a proven quantity, Vermont still an unknown. Yet Nashua had only been in the league a year, and the Pirates "had no doubts a team would do well in Vermont." Rickey apparently had doubts about the three-party agreement all along and a discouraging editorial, according to Agganis, "definitely affected him."

So for many potential fans in Vermont, order wasn't really restored until Agganis signed a new PDC with Cincinnati the third week of September. The Angels and Reds had both sent representatives to Vermont, and the head of their farm system, Chief Bender, was quoted here as saying the club "wasn't happy with the operation in Waterbury, so we're looking around for a new site."

The Reds may have had legitimate gripes about Waterbury, but it was also the case that the franchise owner there had thrown them out for not providing a competitive team just weeks before. If it was at all possible, they would seek a new PDC elsewhere. As one major league executive put it, "Securing an affiliation can be like a game of musical chairs. Someone always gets left standing."

Now at first glance it may seem that the new Vermont franchise was left

standing, but the Reds were out in the cold, too. Apparently the shock of losing both their top affiliates led the Reds to take pains to demonstrate their commitment to rebuilding through the farm system. Vermont's new team is the first to benefit from this determination, as they will enjoy one of the best PDCs in the game. The Reds are picking up a very substantial proportion of salaries, travel and equipment costs and the like.

On the major league level, it's unclear how new the new era in Cincinnati will really be. The field manager was fired, the scouting staff overhauled, and the dust hasn't yet settled in the front office. But new manager Vern Rapp is hardly a messenger of a new progressive attitude. Rapp, according to columnist Bill Conlin, "makes a stern disciplinarian like San Diego's Dick Williams look like Andy Warhol." His only previous managing experience, in St. Louis, ended with the players in near-mutiny, says Conlin.

But it's the feeling of Agganis and the Friends that they're getting in on the ground floor of a major rebuilding effort in the minors. Already the DH policy has been changed, and only particular pitchers will have to hit. The really good news, though, is that help is on the way. Cincinnati signed all 23 of its top amateur draft picks – a completely unprecedented phenomenon.

And those young ballplayers made their mark immediately. Billings, Montana of the Pioneer League (rookie level) roared to a championship this past summer, and *Baseball America's* list of that league's top 11 picks includes five Reds players. The one other winning team in the system – Cedar Rapids – is just below the level of the new Vermont team. Given the vacuum of talent at the upper levels of the Reds' system, Vermont may see some of those young prospects soon.

More importantly, the Vermont Reds are off to a very strong start locally and

will almost certainly succeed in the stands, regardless of how they do in the standings. The Friends (who have split into two legal entities to accommodate tax-exempt donations towards renovation costs) find that all their work has led to immediate dividends. "It's really struck a chord in people," says Sanders.

The day-to-day operation of the team has been put in the hands of a very capable and impressive young baseball man, Peter Sinagra. "He's the kind of guy people here will like," says Racine – and so far the feeling is mutual. "I just couldn't visualize the excitement here until Tom took me down Church Street here in Burlington. Everyone he introduced to me was excited." Agganis explains his choice of Vermont over other locales by simply saying, "I got a feeling here I never got elsewhere."

Just weeks have gone by since the Reds opened an office here, and already more than 200 season tickets have been sold. With some help from Vermont native Len Whitehouse – who pitches for the Minnesota Twins – ads are selling briskly too. Of 32 available outfield billboard ads, more than 20 are already snapped up. Several radio stations are vying for the rights to broadcast games.

It may take a while for Centennial Field to reach the state everyone involved would like, but work on the essentials has already begun. And that's brought another pleasant surprise, according to Tom Racine. "Bids are way below what we'd expected to pay for the work. People seem to be making the bids and a donation at the same time."

Perhaps nothing indicates the impact of the new team so much as the relationships it has created or enhanced. "It's done a lot of good already," says Racine. "It's a non-political thing, of course, and I'm not even a Burlington resident, but I can see some walls coming down between Bernie and business people because of this. And those walls are being

taken down from both sides." And Sanders had a pleasant surprise when he spoke recently at the Kennedy School in Boston. In the crowd was Mike Agganis, who'd come down from Lynn to introduce his wife to his new friend.

Ask Sanders why he spent so much time on the project and he cites both tangible and intangible reasons. "The tangible reasons," he says, "are economic. It will mean a boom here: new jobs and lots of new business. Also, the team will have the lowest prices in the league for children and senior citizens, and that's very consistent with other things this administration's tried to do in Burlington, things like free concerts and youth programs."

But the intangibles are closer to his heart. "I was a kid growing up in Brooklyn, and everyone there talked about the Dodgers. A baseball team draws all sorts of people together, and it's not a bad thing for kids to have heroes who are baseball players, especially when they'll get the chance to know them as human beings."

Mike Agganis is looking forward to his fresh start in Vermont too. "This is just the beginning, remember. Someday I'd like to say it's the best supported team per capita in the game. That's off in the future, but the future looks bright." Team estimates of attendance now run as high as 150,000, which would immediately put Vermont among the league leaders.

"I don't want to blow this out of proportion," says Sanders, "but this is a somewhat prestigious thing, to get this team, and I think it's going to be something the whole state can be proud of. In the final analysis, though, it doesn't mean any more than people sitting outside on a nice summer night enjoying themselves and watching top-notch baseball. It's just a hell of a nice way to go out with your family and friends and get together with your neighbors." ●