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Pirates' Attendance: Promises Not Kept

A recent newspaper story examined attendance at Pirates' games and season ticket sales thus far in the 2007 campaign. The results are not good. Average home attendance is down 20 percent from last year, the same percentage as the decline in season ticket sales. Front office officials attribute the decline to the normal effect across the league following the year when a city hosts the All-Star game.

Through the first twelve home games of the season, average attendance was just above 17,000. At the same time last year, average attendance was over 22,000. If attendance continues its year to date pace, attendance for the 2007 season would stand at a meager 1.3 million, the lowest in many years for the Pirates. To reach the 1.6 million level set at PNC Park in 2003 and 2004, the lowest so far in the new ballpark, attendance will have to average 20,000 per game for the remainder of the season.

Let's look at total attendance at PNC Park at where the stadium's performance ranks in comparison with Three Rivers Stadium and Major League Baseball as a whole.

The Attendance Picture in Pittsburgh and MLB, 1990-2006

Year	90-93 Average	97-00 Average	01	02	03	04	05	06
Three Rivers (in millions)	1.9	1.6						
PNC Park (in millions)			2.5	1.8	1.6	1.6	1.8	1.9
MLB (in millions)	59.3	69.1	72.5	67.9	67.6	72.9	74.3	73.8
Pittsburgh Attendance as % of MLB	3.2	2.3	3.4	2.7	2.4	2.2	2.4	2.6

Here's the really startling finding. Except for the 2001 debut year attendance, there is not much difference at PNC Park and attendance in the late 1990s at Three Rivers. During the last four years at Three Rivers following the strike affected years of 1994, 1995 and 1996 average annual attendance was 1.64 million. In the 2002 through 2006 period at PNC Park, after the big splash of the 2001 opening, average annual attendance was 1.74 million. That's a mere 100,000 more fans per year in the new ballpark and the improvement would have almost certainly been less had it not been for the All-Star Game.

Thus, it is reasonable to argue that attendance figures in 2003 and 2004 are probably representative of the "non-special event driven" attendance that PNC Park can be expected to generate. The sharp drop in attendance this year, following the more robust All-Star Game related numbers in 2005 and 2006, makes the argument more powerful.

It is interesting to compare Major League Baseball attendance with PNC Park attendance. Since 2002, league attendance grew 9 percent, while PNC attendance, with the bump from the All Star Game, grew 6 percent. In terms of ranking the league's 30 teams, the 2001 opening year pushed Pittsburgh to 17th, but attendance in the last couple of years have placed PNC Park at 3rd and 4th from the bottom.

That's a sad commentary given the lengths to which public and civic officials lobbied for a sales tax increase and then assembled Plan B to get the stadium built. We were promised more than a one-year boost in attendance. The Pirates claimed attendance would be 2 million or more and produce sufficient revenue needed to afford a competitive team. Neither of those two claims have been met in the years since Plan B was foisted on the public.

The Pirates' player payroll remains near the bottom of the 30 major league teams. We pointed out strenuously and repeatedly that without a player salary cap and little in the way of local TV revenues, the new ballpark would not solve Pittsburgh's small and shrinking market problem. Conversely, with revenue sharing and a salary cap, Three Rivers would have been adequate. The unavoidable reality is that Pittsburgh is not a baseball town the way St. Louis and Cincinnati are. St. Louis, almost the same size as Pittsburgh, draws three million or so every year and did so in the old Busch Stadium—a Three Rivers look alike.

Taxpayers deserved better than to see \$220 million of their money spent on a baseball park based on faulty premises and against their express wishes.

Finally, note that fans are in a Catch-22 situation. If they keep going in the numbers posted in the years at PNC Park, the team will have no urgent need to expand payroll by the \$30 million or so needed to field a contending club since it would likely be a money loser for the team. An additional 500,000 in attendance would bring in maybe \$15 million more cash. At the same time, if they quit going and in droves, the team would have less money to spend on players. Thus, the situation would just get worse.

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