**Friday, May 24, 2024 / How to steal a team**

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SCORING IN <Pack It Up - APM>

NOAM HASSENFELD (fill-in host, *Today, Explained*): There’s a war going on in Oakland.

On one side, a bumbling multi-billionaire.

On the other side, thousands and thousands of furious baseball fans.

And this past March, on Opening Day, those fans did something unprecedented.

SCORING DROPS DOWN, SFX IN OF NOISE

DAN MOORE (sportswriter): They threw a tailgate political fundraiser rager in the parking lot.

SFX IN OF MEXICAN STREET BANDS

DAN: Food trucks, two separate Mexican street bands, carnival games, and of course…

SFX IN OF CHANTING “SELL THE TEAM”

DAN: …throughout the lot, thunderous, car-rattling chants of “sell the team!” and exhortations for John Fisher, the A's owner, to keep the A's in Oakland.

SFX IN OF CHANTING “LET’S GO OAKLAND”

NOAM: But the stadium itself was pretty much empty. A’s fans were boycotting their own team.

DAN: At times it was louder out in the parking lot than it was inside.

NOAM: And it’s not just A’s fans. Sports fans all over the country are doing everything they can to stop billionaires from stealing their teams. That’s ahead on *Today, Explained*.

**[THEME]**

NOAM: It’s *Today, Explained*. I’m Noam Hassenfeld, filling in today, and I’m joined by Dan Moore.

DAN: Contributor for The Ringer, The Atlantic. Baseball Prospectus.

NOAM: And…

DAN: East Bay resident, lifelong A's fan.

SCORING IN <Drumcorps Core - BMC>

DAN: The A's are a historic franchise in sports. This is the home of Reggie Jackson…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7tSRXgc5YcM)*> Broken bat up the middle, base hit Reggie Jackson…*

DAN: …and Catfish Hunter…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZZgqztTBnQ)*> The Catfish working with a three-run lead…*

DAN: …and the Bash Brothers…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CL6GNcrVtvE)*> Marc McGwire: Everybody will remember our team because of the bash and how big we are, probably the biggest baseball team in the history of baseball.*

DAN: …and the Moneyball A's of the early 2000s.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nP29Ig9nPNs)*> The Oakland A’s have set a new American League record with their 20th consecutive win. And this is a game nobody here will ever forget.*

DAN: They are important and central to the kind of epic story that Major League Baseball tells the world about itself. The A's represented something essential about the East Bay's countercultural funk. They wore white cleats, they have mustaches, their jerseys are Technicolor green and yellow. They're like misfits of Major League baseball who are also responsible for some of baseball's most memorable dynasties.

SCORING OUT

NOAM: How do we get from that to more fans outside than inside, throwing a middle finger to the owner?

DAN: Reverse back to the late 1980s.

DAN: The A's are one of the most, not only dominant, but also successful organizations in sports. They go to three straight World Series, from 1988 to 1990.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sOl4vwrTBxs)*> The A’s the world champs, and the deserved world champs.*

DAN: They have some of the most memorable and iconic characters in sports in Mark McGuire, Jose Canseco.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=68LBPvFhMx0)*> They call me Joseeeeeeeeee. And I’m Mark.*

DAN: They also top the American League in attendance. They host the All Star Game.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JM0YA1V2tc)*> [Music] NBC Sports presents the 1987 All-Star Game…*

DAN: They have the highest payroll in the major leagues. They are everything that down the line they would not be.

DAN: And they start that degeneration when the owner who is responsible for that 1980s dynasty sells the team to a comparatively, much cheaper ownership group that will not invest in the team, that won't sign free agents, that won't re-sign homegrown stars. By the mid 2000s, this is starting to have a sort of cancerous effect on the organization. Fans are frustrated that they keep watching their favorite players walk out the door anytime their rookie contract is up. Enter John Fisher, who is the A's current owner.

*<*[*SFX*](https://open.spotify.com/track/2SM3VBFNLohf2SrJRePCnF)*> Matthew Kaminski - Imperial March on stadium organ*

DAN: Initially, John Fisher was actually sort of a source of hope in Oakland. One important thing to know about him, probably the most important thing to know about him, is that he's very rich. His parents started Gap. So he's the heir to a retail fortune. Forbes puts his net worth at between 2.5 and $3 billion today. The A's had not had an owner like that before. And there was hope around these parts that, by way of his immense wealth, restore to Oakland A's baseball and by extension, Oakland as a sports town, a level of investment befitting this organization's history and former glory. The opposite happens. John Fisher takes a sledgehammer to the team's payroll. For the entirety of his tenure, the A's payroll has ranked near the bottom of the league. His self-professed singular focus since purchasing the team, has been moving it out of Oakland. He tries to move the team to San Jose. He tries to move the team to Fremont. All these efforts fail, generally because they're clumsily handled. All the while, he's continuing this process of letting players go out the door, of not investing any money in the team. By the mid-2010s the Raiders and the Warriors leave town. So he sees the market opportunity that's available in being the only show in town. And he also, not incorrectly, perceives the political leverage that's available to him. He embarks at that time on an effort to extract from Oakland roughly $855 million in public funding for a lavish, privately owned, likely very privately valuable stadium anchored real estate development on the West Oakland waterfront.

NOAM: Yeah, he's basically, like, threatening them with a move.

DAN: Yeah.

NOAM: Like, either give me lots of public funds or I'm stealing the team.

DAN: That's exactly right. Here is where things start to get bad. When the city council did not consent to Fisher's terms and requests as rapidly or as enthusiastically as Fisher would have wanted, John Fisher switched tacks again and said, okay, well, I'm going to move the team somewhere else. And then he engages in what I think can probably be described as the most openly cynical and ultimately painful relocation campaign in recent sports memory.

SCORING IN <An Egg-Shaped Room For Your Thoughts - BMC>

DAN: Basically, he seeks to prove that Oakland sports is broken by breaking it himself. It makes the blissful before times seem like ancient history.

DAN: So we're in 2021, after the end of the 2021 season. The deal in Oakland is proceeding slower than he wants. He announces that he's setting his eyes towards Las Vegas. He wants to build a stadium there. He lets go of every one of the A’s good or recognizable players. The A's payroll goes to the last in the major leagues by an order of magnitude. The Oakland Coliseum, which was already recognized universally as probably the worst stadium in sports and which Fisher owns half of, he allows to degenerate into even worse straits. Possums infest the visitors’ announcing booth. Sewage leaks into the locker rooms. The lights don't work. He then raises ticket prices. The idea is to systematically alienate A's fans, drive them away from the ballpark, and manufacture a political and economic pretext for relocating. Have you ever seen the movie Major League?

NOAM: Of course. Yeah.

DAN: It's basically the plot of Major League.

NOAM: <laughs>

DAN: That's the only precedent for this that is available. It's in fiction.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfcmrwPNn7A)*> Here’s to the thrill of defeat, Charlie.*

DAN: And in Fisher's case, it almost works. In the spring of 2023, he announces that he has entered into a binding agreement to build a stadium on Las Vegas Boulevard. A few months after that, he secures $380 million in public funding in Nevada to contribute to the stadium construction. And then a few months after that, he garners approval from Major League Baseball's 29 other owners for the relocation. And so, you know, he has acquired much of what he needs from the powers that be to leave Oakland. There's only one problem, though. A’s fans are not inclined to let him leave so easily.

SCORING OUT

DAN: This is the birth of what I think is one of the more impressive fan activism movements in American sports history. It starts small. There are two main fan groups here. One called Last Dive Bar, one called the Oakland 68s. Together they start organizing sort of smaller scale demonstrations. One at the Coliseum, they call it the Tomato Tailgate.

*<*[*SFX*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJY1TXoOUgM)*> Tomato Tailgate party - sounds of people throwing tomatoes*

DAN: They created effigies of John Fisher and MLB commissioner Rob Manfred, and they invited fans to come to the parking lot and huck tomatoes at them.

NOAM: <laughs>

*<*[*SFX*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJY1TXoOUgM)*> Tomato Tailgate party: “I got him!” “Nice.”*

DAN: I went, and it was quite fun. But then things really increase in scale. A few months later, they organized the reverse boycott. On a random Tuesday night, they pack the Colosseum. They sell it out full of A's fans. And they actually orchestrated something special specific to the fifth inning.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgaSJAKyWQo)*> Fans give the A’s the silent treatment*

DAN: There's a moment of silence that A’s fans have managed to spread among everybody assembled. And as soon as that ends, we're going to erupt en masse in a “Sell the team” chant…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6bBR5RDldVo)*> Fans chanting “sell the team”*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb6psaZDo7o)*> “You heard the crowd go silent and now getting very loud at the Coliseum…”*

DAN: …calling for John Fisher to sell the team to someone local who actually gives a damn about it and about Oakland. And, the chants were thunderous.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb6psaZDo7o)*> Crowd chanting, fade out*

DAN: The point being to refute the lie that Fisher had been telling about them, and that was central to his justification for relocating, which is that Oakland doesn't care about A’s baseball. Oakland doesn't want to and probably can't support major league sports. They came out in force to say without, you know, any shadow of a doubt that, no, the problem is not us. It is the ownership group that has corroded support for this organization over the years.

DAN: Slowly, more and more players are speaking out. One is Trevor May, who was a relief pitcher for the A's in 2023.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seDzSDYfFac)*> Trevor May: To the A's organization and every single person part of it, I love all of you. Every single one of you. Except for one guy. We all know who that guy is. Sell the team, dude.*

DAN: And that has become kind of a rallying cry for, for A's fans.

NOAM: What is kind of the status of the A's at the moment? Like it seems like they've made their point. Is Fisher still moving them?

DAN: A's fans have made their point. It was broadly ignored by Fisher. Last February, Fisher revealed that he would actually be moving the team much sooner than expected. The stadium that he wants to build in Las Vegas would not, under the best of circumstances, actually be ready until 2028. And so a lot of folks around here had assumed that the A's would play in Oakland until that time. But in February, John Fisher announced that he was actually relocating the team to Sacramento at the end of the 2024 season.

NOAM: Sacramento?!

DAN: They're going to play in the Giants Triple-A affiliate park, which houses about 14,000 seats. The latest details I've seen stipulate that the A's will be able to play in that stadium without paying rent for the next three years.

NOAM: Cool. Taking just this amazing historic franchise, moving it to Sacramento for three years as a waiting period, paying nothing, and then taking it down to Vegas. That's the plan.

DAN: That's the plan.

NOAM: Man! What do you think Oakland's going to be like without the A's?

DAN: Well, it will be emptier. In losing a sports team, you never just lose the team. You lose the community spaces that that team supported. You lose the shared languages that bond fans together. You lose the cultural engine of that team, right? And so Oakland will miss all of that.

SCORING IN <Enduring Stadium Drums - APM>

DAN: However, fans here and citizens here are right now in the process of building what's going to come next. And fans are rallying around certain new independent professional teams that are setting up shop in the city. There's a soccer team, the Roots, that many A's fans have adopted and now love and dedicate their energy to. Oakland is also, if nothing else, a very resilient place. And so it will bounce back. But for now, it hurts.

SCORING BUMP

NOAM: Oakland’s not the only city that’s had an owner threaten to steal its team. Coming up, how fans in other cities have fought back.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

<<TEX BASEBALL BUMPER>>

NOAM: We're back with Dan Moore, writer for The Ringer and The Atlantic. Before the break, you were telling us how Oakland fans are just really trying to get their team to stay, even if it's not possible. But I'm just curious if there are examples of fans ever successfully stopping the move of a team or getting a team back?

DAN: Yes.

SCORING IN – <Bubbling Over (tension building, repetitive bass, strings, chimes, reverb, spooky, minimal house kick)>

DAN: You saw it in Cleveland, where there was a citywide uprising in the mid 1990s when then Browns owner Art Modell decided to relocate the Browns to Baltimore,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbOeJhNXQnY)*> CNN: Money talks and nothing is sacred, such is the state of pro sports in the 90s. The Browns are indeed moving to Baltimore … KEEP RUNNING*

DAN: where he's been offered, a, brand new, totally publicly funded football stadium, along with free rent,

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbOeJhNXQnY)*> CNN: And what amounts to a 50 million dollar signing bonus to Modell for moving. CNN Mark’s Moore has more…. FADES*

DAN: Fans, all of Cleveland, it seems like, rises up in resistance against this move.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbOeJhNXQnY)*> CNN: The city of Cleveland is not giving up without a fight*

DAN: There are protests across the city.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9wv3cYjHN8)*> ESPN: On sunday in the parking lot they will hang Art Modell in effigy.*

DAN: Fans organize caravan protests. Uh, where they protest outside of Monday Night Football games

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSWZlQxhY2M)*> EIGHT NEWS: CROWD ROAR  
<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcSoq-zSeFo)*> ESPN: It makes me sick, I was just telling them it makes me sick to my stomach*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSWZlQxhY2M)*> EIGHT NEWS: It hurts. The guy’s ripped my heart out*

DAN: The mayor gets involved. Comedian Drew Carey gets involved and leads rallies.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbOeJhNXQnY)*> CNN: \*Crowd boos\**

DAN: Ultimately, the, their voices are so loud and resonant

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbOeJhNXQnY)*> CNN: \*Crowd boos\** (SAME CLIP BUT VERBED AND DELAYED)

DAN: that the commissioner of of the NFL persuades model to agree to leaving the Browns’ likeness, their history, the team name, their colors and logos ~~in Cleveland~~

Modell would still be able to move his personnel and his team to Baltimore, where they would become the Ravens, but Cleveland did keep the Browns.

SCORING OUT

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaM8BmsOsbY)*> CLEVELAND BROWNS: DREW CAREY: Ladies and gentlemen, it’s my pleasure to introduce to you … the 1999 Cleveland Browns.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yaM8BmsOsbY)*> CLEVELAND BROWNS: DREW CAREY: This is exciting it’s like everything is back in place. Everything’s as it should be again.*

NOAM: If I were to just put that in context, it sort of feels like the A's fans came out in a show of force. They showed everyone who they are. Maybe they've lost this iteration of the team, probably. Does Vegas at least want them?

DAN: No.

NOAM: Okay.

DAN: There there seems to be very little enthusiasm for bringing the A's, to Vegas in VEGAS

SCORING IN – Shiny Pennies (slow build, really gets going around 104) 5/9

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tBjyFzVuMzA)*> FOX 5: a public schools advocacy group has filed a constitutional challenge all against the nevada bill that paved the way for the A’s ballpark stadium*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf005hzzaFE)*> KTNV: This has to be done in a way that actually benefits the people who live here*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sf005hzzaFE)*> KTNV: 380 million dollars to a billionaire is not the priorities that are needed for our children and for education*

DAN: Schools Over Stadiums, which represents teachers in Nevada. They see the allocation of nearly $400 million in public funding for a stadium for the A's of all organizations as a gross misuse of public funds. The governor there, Joe Lombardo, in the same legislative session when he gave this massive hand up to John Fisher, vetoed a bill that would have extended a free school lunch program for students.

NOAM: Wow. So let's give $400 million to billionaires and no free lunch to kids.

SCORING OUT

DAN: You can see why there might be some people who are upset about that.

NOAM: But the arguments that the owners usually make is that these stadiums are going to be economic boons for the cities. Right.

DAN: That's right.

NOAM: And how does that stack up with reality?

DAN: It does not. For 30, 40 years now, economists have been looking at these massive stadium projects and the overwhelming amount of evidence is that they do not spur economic development or increased tax revenues that come anywhere close to justifying the kind of public investment that is right now being dedicated to these stadiums. The jobs that they create are seasonal and low wage. The economic activity that they do encourage is just, substituted economic activity that would have been happening at a different place somewhere else in the city. It is categorically a bad investment for taxpayers and for cities. About this, economists are unequivocal.

NOAM: I mean, if, if economists are so unequivocal about this, are cities learning the lesson at all? Or are other stadiums being built?

DAN: These deals are still happening, and they're in fact, getting worse.

SCORING IN – CEZ\_MAG\_6017\_00501\_Dodekaeder\_APM-09

DAN: Over the last few years in Buffalo, the Buffalo Bills were given a public subsidy to replace their stadium. That's going to cost the public more than $1 billion when it's all said and done. Nashville last year approved a $1.26 billion subsidy, for a stadium, for a new stadium for the Tennessee Titans.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-Jwjy6bVtY)*> WKRN: Anywhere from 1600 workers in a day will be working on this project except on Sundays of course*

DAN: So these things are still happening, and we are on the precipice, actually, of many more happening.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P-Jwjy6bVtY)*> NEWS 5: Browns have made their thoughts known on what they’re looking for when their stadium lease expires at the end of 2028*.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-oS-hP7ta24)*> DEPRESSED GINGER: Alright guys so today we’re going to be talking about the Carolina Panthers current stadium situation.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Y_jxCumMzE)*> LOCKED ON BENGALS: The Cincinnati bengals have announced a major investment in the Paycorp Stadium.*

DAN: Across the country, owners are right now asking cities, taxpayers for hundreds of millions of dollars in public funding for these new projects. And in many cases, politicians are amenable to it at the very least. In spite of the overwhelming evidence suggesting that these are bad deals.

SCORING OUT

NOAM: This is the thing that gets me so… I would say riled up and confused because we have tons of evidence from economists saying that these new expensive stadiums don't give cities economic benefits. And then we see what happens when cities actually stand up for themselves. And you have, like the Oakland mayor not wanting to give John Fisher 800 whatever million dollars for a stadium, and then he steals the team.

DAN: Well, team owners and leagues are given license to operate as effective monopolies, right? The, they control the number of teams that are able to play in a league at any given time. They determine which cities get to, keep or adopt teams. Team owners extort cities for public funding, plunder and weaponize public sentiments and loyalties for their team. And ultimately, if need be. Rip their team out of their city to go to somewhere more fortuitous for them. If there's no availability.

NOAM: Yeah. So that seems bad.

DAN: <laughs>

NOAM: Is there anything we can do? How do we get past this tension here?

DAN: Recently, there's a bill, I believe, called the Moneyball Act

*<CLIP> MONEYBALL: How can you not be romantic about baseball*

DAN: that was put forth by Representative Barbara Lee, who represents Oakland.

*<CLIP> It would require the owners of any professional baseball team seeking to relocate more than 25 miles away to compensate the state and local authorities they move away from.*

NOAM: So If you take a team out of a city, you owe that city a bunch of money.

DAN: Effectively. Yeah.

NOAM: Okay.

SCORING IN –CEZ\_UBM\_2267\_02201\_Question\_Marks\_\_Alternate\_\_APM-02

DAN: Every team that plays in the three most popular, in the three most heavily subsidized major leagues, is worth more than $1 billion. Most of these owners are billionaires themselves. They don't exactly need this public funding. And when subsidized stadium projects are put before the public, say, by referendum or on a ballot initiative, they most of the time fail.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3-RRdxWJa4)*> WKBW: Plans to renovate Arrowhead stadium where the KC chiefs play, they have hit a wall there after the community voted against a tax to pay for it.*

DAN: That's what happened recently in Kansas City. That's what happened in Arizona.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3K6gtjP2tg)*> I cried like a baby I cried like a baby with such gratitude for tempe voters.*

DAN: And so one potential solution here is for fans, taxpayers to, make known to their representatives that they expect these kinds of decisions to be made by the public. And in the instance when taxpayers agree together, or a majority of taxpayers agree to give John Fisher $380 million, then so be it.

SCORING OUT

NOAM: But we're still in a world where we have a limited supply of sports teams. We have fans that desperately want their team to represent their city, the A's fans maybe they've shown MLB that they could one day get another team to come back to Oakland.

DAN: If major league sports do return to Oakland, it will be a product of nothing other than the efforts of these fans and the activism of these fans, which, yes, was designed to convince John Fisher and the people he needed approval from to stop what was happening. But it is also, as you suggested, proven that this is a major league sports town and that there are fans here who want a baseball team to, to root for and that this is a viable market. And so. Right. That should be counted as chief among A's fans, accomplishments in this effort.

NOAM: Next season when they're in Sacramento, are they, are they going to be the Sacramento A's? Is that the deal?

DAN: No. John Fisher has come out and said that they are going to just be the Athletics. No city.

NOAM: <laughs> Just the Athletics. Oh my God.

DAN: No city.

NOAM: That’s such a middle finger to Oakland!

DAN:. Yeah. I know

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=riOXP2lUCnU)*> Oakland athletics, oakland athletics, oakland athletics, Oakland A in the house y’all \*REVERB\**

NOAM: Sportswriter, Dan Moore.

This episode was produced by Avishay Artsy and Peter Balonon-Rosen, edited by Matt Collette, fact-checked by Laura Bullard and engineered by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir. I’m Noam Hassenfeld and this is *Today, Explained*.

**[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]**