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Bengals reap benefits of Shane's wild ways

UFFALO STATE COACH Dick Bihr didn't know quite what to make of the kid at first. Shane Johnson had special basketball gifts, that much was certain. But he was a wildly unpredictable talent, the sort of player who puts a smile on your face one min-

ute and a gray hair on your head the next. The two had their clashes. People at Buffalo State tell of the time when Johnson, knowing he was about to be lifted from a game, pulled

Bengals battle Potsdam and history / B5

up short on a two-on-one break and heaved a three-point shot clear over the top of the backboard. They say the ball came down at about the same time Bihr did.

"As a young player," Bihr said, "Shane would try at times to be strong-willed."

Then one day, it finally dawned on Bihr. In Johnson, the coach had met his match. The kid was as crazy as he was. Could that be so bad? Maybe Bihr could put all this energy and personality to better use. So he decided to let Johnson be himself, and to let him play through his more erratic moments.

This year, Bihr even made him a co-captain, and it's no coincidence that Johnson and the team have grown up in front of his eyes. They are 17-0, the unbeaten and top-ranked Division III team in the country heading into tonight's big home game with perennial rival Potsdam State.

Johnson, a 6-foot-4 junior forward out of Buffalo's Bennett High, is the leader and emotional conscience of a team without any single star. Nate Gainey, a transfer from Division I Hartford, is the best player and leading scorer at 13.2 points a game. Four other players average between nine and 11 points. No one is averaging more than six rebounds. The leading playmakers average roughly two assists.

It is, above all, a team, one that can beat you in any number of ways. But it is Johnson, a deft, audacious passer and streaky outside shooter, who sets the tone, striking the appropriate balance between business and fun.

"Shane has an interesting attitude toward the game and toward his teammates," Bihr said. "He, more than anybody, exhibits how this group enjoys playing the game. We're serious, but my basic message to this team is that the world isn't going to end if we lose a game. I think the other guys feed off him. When they see him having a good time, they have a good time, too."

And boy, does Johnson have a good time out there. At times, you have the urge to unplug the guy. He wears black high-top sneakers with ankle socks, a la Mike Tyson. His teammates jokingly refer to him as 'Magic,' after his smiling NBA namesake, but he makes Magic seem like a funeral director by comparison.

After setting up the Bengals' opening basket in Tuesday's rout over Brockport, he was sliding around the court shaking and pumping his fist. When he nails a three-point shot, he often raises his arms over his head to signal the '3.' Later, with the issue no longer in doubt, he made a look-away pass in traffic that had the home fans falling out of their seats in apprecia-

"Coach looks to me to pump up the guys," Johnson said. "I've been here three years and I know his concept, and how he wants the game plan to go. He had to beat it into me. I'm basically outgoing and I say what I feel. Coach says it's surprising to see how I take control now, that I became the one who talks to players and tell them to slow things down.

"We have fun out there," he said. "That's what the game is all about, especially at this level. None of us are trying to turn pro."

There was a time, however, when some of them thought that way. The core of the team grew up playing the game together and dreaming. Their origins reach back several years, to the Buffalo playgrounds and high schools. Many of the moves and plays are second nature by now. You can tell. They seem to have

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Smerlas is at top of Bills unprotected list

Veteran nose tackle open to offers after exclusion from team's 37-man roster

By VIC CARUCCI News Sports Reporter

Fred Smerlas would like to finish his National Football League career in a Buffalo Bills uniform.

"It all started for me there," the veteran nose tackle said Thursday from his off-season home in Waltham, Mass. "That's where I grew from a little nose to a big nose."

But Smerlas isn't certain whose colors he'll be wearing come April 1. Between now and then, another NFL team could sign him without owing the Bills so much as a roll of athletic tape.

As expected, the Bills gave that clearance to the rest of the league Thursday, when they included the 32year-old Smerlas on their list of 21 unprotected players under the Plan B free-agency system. The NFL is controlling the release of all 28 teams' lists of players eligible for Plan B free agency, and will make them public today.

Besides Smerlas, the Bills' list is also known to include defensive end Art Still and offensive guard Joe Devlin.

Other likely unprotected candidates

from the Bills are: offensive linemen Tim Vogler, Adam Lingner and Mitch Frerotte; defensive backs Derrick Burroughs and Carl Mims; linebackers Matt Monger, Tom Doctor and Richard Harvey; nose tackle Bruce Mesner; wide receivers James Lofton, Flip Johnson, John Kolesar and Darryl Franklin; running backs Robb Riddick and Ronnie Harmon; kick return/coverage specialist Steve Tasker; punter John Kidd; and quarterback Gale Gil-

The Bills have been unsuccessful in attempting to trade Harmon, and might just allow him to sign with another team without receiving draft-pick compensation.

Burroughs spent most of last season on the Bills' injured reserve list with a spinal condition that surfaced after a blow to the back of his neck against Houston Sept. 24. The Bills will not give him medical clearance to play for them again, but another team might.

Smerlas, who has been with the Bills since they made him a second-round draft pick from Boston College in 1979, started every non-strike game his team

played in the 1980s and was selected to five Pro Bowls. He has logged 162 regular-season appearances at nose tackle, more than any player in NFL history. Until the 1989 season, former Denver Bronco Rubin Carter held that distinction with 152 appearances.

The Bills placed Smerlas on their unprotected list last year, but removed him at the last minute after discovering several teams were in the market for an experienced nose tackle who had just appeared in his fifth Pro Bowl.

He wound up sharing time with second-year man Jeff Wright, although by the end of the year Wright's stock had fallen among the team's decision-mak-

"I'd be a fool not to listen if another team made me an offer," Smerlas said.

"I don't know how many (unprotected) nose tackles are out there, but I'd like to think I'm one of the better ones. Maybe there's a team that would look at me and say, 'This guy can help us.'

"And if I did hear from another team, I'd have a very tough decision to make, because I always saw myself as a

RON MOSCATI/Buffalo News

Buffalo Bill for life," he said. "I love playing in Buffalo. I think we've got the kind of team that could go all the way, and it's disappointing to think that I might not be around to see it."

If an unprotected player doesn't sign with another club by April 1, his rights revert to his original team.

Bills head coach Marv Levy has told Devlin and Still they would not be re-signed, but the door has been left open for Smerlas and most of the oth-

"I'll just have to wait and see what happens," Smerlas said. "Mary called me and said he wanted to start playing younger guys and that they'll be looking for some defensive linemen in the draft. But younger doesn't always mean

"I know I can still contribute. My back's been against the wall before and I've always come out fighting. I love the game, and I still see myself as one of the top nose tackles in the league," Smerlas said. "I hope I still have another chance to show it Buffalo, but if not, I'll show it somewhere else."

Holy Cross fends off Niagara

By MILT NORTHROP News Sports Reporter

Dwight Pernell snapped out of a scoring slump with a season-high 37 points for Holy Cross Thursday night and helped the Crusaders to a surprisingly tough 92-82 victory over Niagara.

Judging by the records of the two teams in the first game of the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference doubleheader in Memorial Auditorium, a blowout might have been expected. Coach George Blaney's Holy Cross team came in with a 15-3 mark, 6-1 in the MAAC. Niagara, now 4-16 overall, fell to 3-7 in its first season in the conference.

Even though coach Jack Armstrong's Purple Eagles were down to 10 players, only seven of them scholarship athletes, they wouldn't let the visitors walk over them.

"There were times when they could have extended the lead and our kids wouldn't let them," Armstrong said.

In fact, Niagara kept hustling and closed a 16-point gap to seven on a Sean Schiano basket with 8:10 left, and there was a glimmer — just a glimmer - of a possible come-from-behind upset. That's when Pernell stepped to the

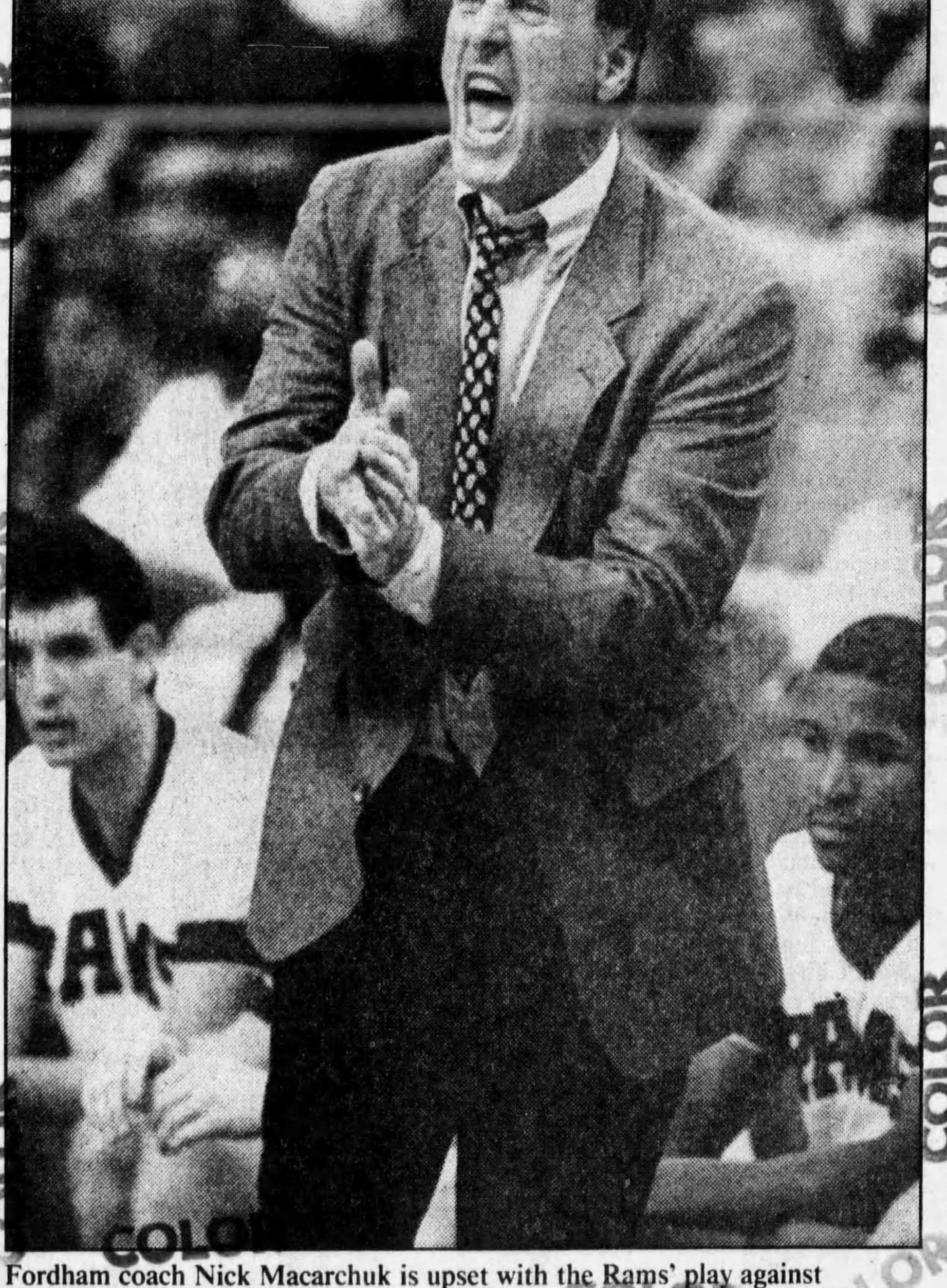
The 6-1 senior from Chesapeake, Va., knocked down a three-pointer from the foul circle to make it 79-69 and Niagara never got closer than eight thereafter as Pernell added seven more points down the stretch, shooting 5 of 5 from the foul line to put it away.

"They were creeping up," Pernell said. "I knew we needed a couple of baskets, and then we had to make a couple of stops."

Now the eighth-leading scorer in Holy Cross history after passing Ed Siudut (1966-69) Thursday night, Pernell had been in a slump because a swollen bursa sack in his right elbow restricted his shooting the last couple of weeks. Pernell, who now has 1,626 points, had scored only 34 points combined in his previous three games.

"I couldn't cock my arm and I couldn't get any extension in my shots," Pernell said. "I've been getting treatment twice a day and today it felt better."

So much better, in fact, that Pernell



Canisius at Memorial Auditorium.

wore out whoever Niagara put on him and fouled out Darrin Bossert, Niagara's best defensive guard.

"Dwight Pernell is a super player. We couldn't find an answer," Armstrong said.

Niagara stayed in the game mainly because it got a 29-point performance in the paint from forward Patrick

"I shook my head on some moves," Armstrong said.

The Eagles attacked Holy Cross' interior defense the entire game. Besides Jones' output, Niagara got

10 points each from Darren Brown,

Karl Haire and Schiano, netting nearly three-quarters of its points from the big

"I was surprised how hard it was to defend them," said Blaney. "They spread the floor and wouldn't let us get any traps. We're very good defensively on the perimeter."

Holy Cross depended more on the three-point shot than Niagara and shot 7 of 17 from that range, compared to Niagara's 1 of 4.

Niagara learned before the game that starting guard Tony Newsom would be lost for the rest of the season with a torn left knee ligament.

Griffs post mild upset over Rams

By MARK GAUGHAN News Sports Reporter

The Canisius Golden Griffins pulled a page out of the Frank Reich playbook Thursday night thanks to the help of little-used center Mike O'Sullivan.

The Griffs posted their second straight mild upset without injured center Ed Book, earning an emotional, 68-63 triumph over former Griff coach Nick Macarchuk and his Fordham Rams.

O'Sullivan, a 6-foot-10 junior averaging just one point and 1.2 rebounds a game, was the catalyst. He scored nine points and grabbed 10 rebounds in the best game of his career. It was critical, too, because the Griffs were at a distinct size and strength disadvantage against Fordham.

However, just as the Buffalo Bills pulled together under Reich when Jim Kelly went down this season, the victory was a collective effort for the Griffs.

Forward Jeff Priah scored 14 points and had 10 rebounds, guard Rod Brown had 13 points, and guard Chuck Giscombe added 11 points, including four clinching free throws and a steal in

the final 20 seconds. "It was a great team win," said Griff Loach Marty Marbach. "One of the top two or three since I've been here."

A double-header crowd of 2,509 at Memorial Auditorium saw the Griffs win for the fourth time in their last five games and move to 6-13 overall and 3-7 in the Metro Atlantic Athletic Con-

The loss was a damaging one for Fordham, which fell two games back of first-place Holy Cross (a first-game victor over Niagara) in the MAAC North. Fordham is 12-7 and 6-4.

The Griffs were aided by some good defense and some poor shooting by Fordham.

Rams 6-foot-11 center Dann O'Sullivan was held to eight points, four under his average, on 3-of-10 shooting. He played just 25 minutes due to foul trouble and fouled out in the final minute. Fordham's leading scorer, Andre McClendon had 10 points, nine under his average, on 4-of-12 shooting.

Giscombe, who guarded McClen-

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Writers tout Buffalo's prospects Panel agrees major league baseball will come here

By ROBERT J. SUMMERS News Sports Reporter

If the sports-writing experts are right, there will be major league baseball in Buffalo by the end of the century.

Hopes for a future big league team in Pilot Field were kindled brightly Thursday night by a University at Buffalo panel of nationally-prominent sports writers who specialize in baseball.

"No doubt about it," Hal Bodley of USA Today said. "There will be major league baseball in Buffalo by the year 2000."

Bodley's opinion was seconded by the Toronto Star's Neil Mac-Carl, who said he didn't think there was any basis for Buffalo fans to fear that the Toronto Blue Jays management would veto a new team in Buffalo.

"Last year, when the Blue Jays set an American League attendance record, Buffalo still drew more than a million fans to minor league baseball. I think they can coexist."

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more likely that Buffalo would get a National League club.

"Fans in the Niagara Peninsula and Toronto would come to Buffalo to see a National League team. . . . But an American League team could lead to a great rivalry between Toronto and Buffalo."

"Buffalo fans want a big league team and they don't care if it's the American League or National League," MacCarl said.

Bodley said that although other cities, such as St. Petersburg and Orlando, Fla., Denver, and Washington, D.C., are prominently mentioned as the top candidates for the first new teams, "I'm not so sure you can totally rule out Buffalo from the first wave."

"One of the first will be in Florida. But the second franchise could easily be Denver or Buffalo," he said.

However, Bodley cautioned that once the owners make their upcoming announcement, the expansion-candidate cities will have to renew their lobbying efforts.

MacCarl said he thought it "All the parading through the commissioner's office five years ago has been basically erased to a degree and we start all over again. think once the framework for expansion is announced within 90 days after the basic (labor) agreement (with the players) is settled, the cities that are wanting franchises will be asked to start all over again."

"I think Buffalo has one other thing going for them," added Mac-Carl. "That is in the stability of the ownership group."

"You only need look to compare Seattle and Toronto who entered the American League at the same time," MacCarl said. "At Toronto they've had the same ownership. They hired good baseball people to run it and they've had a contending team for the last five or six years. Seattle is now on Buffalo are ready for expansion. their third ownership, there's been a revolving door in their front office and the team has never played .500 in 13 years."

Bob Dicesare of The Buffalo News said only St. Petersburg and go," Dicesare said.



The Baseball Forum panel, from left: Neil MacCarl, Toronto Star; Ben Walker, Associated Press; Hal Bodley, USA TODAY; Pete Weber, WGR Radio; Paul Hagen, Philadelphia Daily News; Joe Gergen. Newsday; Bob Dicesare, Buffalo News, and Mike Tully, United Press International.

Even though Denver seems to get a lot of attention as an expansion candidate, the Colorado city "doesn't have a stadium ready to

Press cautioned Buffalo fans to remember that "Washington's a wild card" where "Congressional pressure" can try to influence baseball to put a team in the nation's capital.

Ben Walker of the Associated About 500 people attended the National Media Baseball Forum at the Katherine Cornell Theater, It was was conducted by UB in conjunction with WGR Radio and The News.

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