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Standing on the Shoulders of Giants: Big Blue's Economic and Cultural Impact

Alexandra Gall

As legendary Giants coach Bill Parcells famously said, “You are what your record says you are.”¹ After considering the monumental impact that the New York Giants have had on New York, New Jersey, and the National Football League (NFL), while also winning four Super Bowls in the process, it is safe to say that their “record” of accomplishments is more than solid. The New York Giants are one of the NFL’s most historic franchises and are known for their success on and off the field, as they have made major contributions to the sport of football, and their home states. Not only are the Giants an accomplished sports franchise, but they are also a strong cultural connector for fans across the entire New York Metropolitan Area. Since their inception in 1925, the New York Giants have made many significant contributions to New York City, New Jersey, and the NFL as a whole, both economically and culturally.

The National Football League struggled in its infancy, partially due to its inability to capture a nationwide audience. The league, at the time known as the American Professional Football Association, was founded in 1920.² Initially, the NFL was by no means a nation-wide league sweeping the country, in part due to the lack of teams in major East or West coast cities. The league was first made up of 14 teams, most of which were located in the Midwest, in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio. Two teams did reside in New York, the Rochester Jeffersons and the Buffalo All-Americans, however neither experienced tremendous success, terminating in 1925

¹ Mike Freeman, “NFL’s Greatest Franchise Rankings: Success,” Bleacher Report, September 29, 2016, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/2662347-nfls-greatest-franchise-rankings-success>.

² Richard C. Crepeau, *NFL Football: A History of America's New National Pastime* (University of Illinois Press, 2014), 3, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt6wr6w6>.

and 1929, respectively.³ Since media coverage at the time was not nearly as advanced as it is today and due to many places not having a home-town team to root for, it is likely that the league missed out on many fans early on. Instead of packed stadiums, each game attracted between a few hundred and a few thousand fans.⁴ However, likely coinciding with the increase of popularity in cities themselves, the NFL expanded and relocated over time into many major cities, including New York when the New York Giants were established. Today, the league has become the most popular sports league in the country, allowing cities across the country to reap major benefits.⁵

In 1925, five years into the NFL's existence, Tim Mara, a businessman born on the Lower East Side of New York City, put \$500 dollars into what many would have regarded as a risky business decision: purchasing and establishing the New York Football Giants. Mara, however, felt that it was well worth the investment, noting, "A New York franchise to operate anything ought to be worth \$500."⁶ Initially, doubters may have been proven correct, as the franchise experienced limited success and major financial struggles early on. In addition to the purchasing cost, Mara spent \$25,000 to help the franchise get its feet off the ground. Despite encouragement from many to sell the team, including former New York Governor Al Smith, Mara held on due to his sons, Wellington and Jack, and their emerging love of the game.⁷ The future of the franchise became much more concrete when the Giants played a home game against

³ "NFL 100: Original Towns," NFL.com, 2019, <https://www.nfl.com/100/original-towns/>.

⁴ Lawrence Pervin, *Football's New York Giants: A History* (United States: McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2009), 5.

⁵ Soven Bery, "NFL: Is the Most Popular Sports League in the USA Really Too Big to Fail?," Bleacher Report, July 17, 2013, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1707663-nfl-is-the-most-popular-sports-league-in-the-usa-really-too-big-to-fail>.

⁶ "Tim Mara | Pro Football Hall of Fame Official Site," Pro Football Hall of Fame, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.profootballhof.com/players/tim-mara>.

⁷ Paul Schwartz, *Tales From the New York Giants Sideline* (Sports Publishing, 2017), 72.

the Chicago Bears in 1925. The Bears, with star Red Grange, beat the Giants, however due to Grange's publicity, the stadium was sold-out, and Mara made \$143,000, making up for the initial "risky" investment.⁸ The creation of the Giants was not only beneficial for the Mara family, but for the entire league due to its location. The team arose in part due to an emerging need for a team in a major East Coast city. Former league President Joe Carr got exactly what he was looking for in the Giants, and the franchise remains to this day a major reason for the continuation and success of the NFL.⁹

Professional sports teams have the potential to contribute a lot to a city, both economically and culturally. Economically, having a professional sports team and stadium in a city allows for the creation of jobs and the benefits of sports tourism. Although some economists now question whether stadiums add substantial value to a city and are worth the investment, the bottom line is that it adds stimuli to the area. According to author Michael Danielson, "Sports teams, along with arenas and stadiums, are substantial enterprises with sizable payrolls. Games attract people to the place where the home team plays, generating customers for all kinds of businesses."¹⁰ This is especially true for a city as iconic as New York, which has lots to explore for tourists. As a result, many may look to extend their stay beyond the game, and check out local attractions, therefore spending more money on hotels and food. These benefits are doubled in the case of New York because the New York Giants and the New York Jets both attract fans to the city. Danielson also notes in his book, *Home Team*, that "Most money spent on professional sports would be spent on some other form of entertainment or leisure activity if there was no team in town; only expenditures by visiting teams and out-of-town customers

⁸ "Tim Mara | Pro Football Hall of Fame Official Site."

⁹ Pervin, *Football's New York Giants: A History*, 5.

¹⁰ Michael N. Danielson, *Home Team Professional Sports and the American Metropolis*, Revised edition. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 105, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691231129>.

constitute a net addition to the local economy.”¹¹ Therefore, despite the debate surrounding the benefits and costs, by adding stimuli for local and out-of-town residents, it is clear that stadiums can have many positives for a city.

If the economic reasons are not enough, the cultural and social reasons win the debate. Sports have the ability to captivate and inspire. In his book, Danielson explains the importance of “civic pride,” and praises professional sports on their ability to unite all members of a city, and give people a connection, regardless of economic status, race, or any other factor. He describes how “Successful home teams enhance civic pride [as] fans who chant ‘we’re number one’ are trumpeting the superiority of both their team and their town.”¹² This feeling is undoubtedly prevalent in New York and provides one more way for a diverse group of people to come together. All it could take is someone wearing a New York Giants hat and another in a Giants t-shirt to connect. Giants bars, championship parades, and the excitement felt throughout the city on game days are just a few examples of the vibrancy that is added to a city through being able to share its home with a professional sports team.

Furthermore, professional sports teams often contribute to their city by creating or helping local charities. The Giants, for example, look to help the community in many ways, evident through their creation of “The Giants Foundation.” This nonprofit foundation was created in 1993, with the goal of helping other local organizations that were formed to help meet the needs of the particular community.¹³ The Giants also give back through their “Inspire Change” initiative, in which the team and members of the organization are divided into groups,

¹¹ Danielson, *Home Team Professional Sports and the American Metropolis*, 106.

¹² Danielson, *Home Team Professional Sports and the American Metropolis*, 9.

¹³ “The Giants Foundation,” Giants, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.giants.com/community/giantsfoundation>.

with each group choosing a local foundation to donate \$20,000 to.¹⁴ These contributions could help change the lives of many in the area and are a way to further unite the team to the city.

In the case of the Giants, although their home stadium has changed, their impact has not. From the Giants' first season in 1925 until the 1954 season, they played their home games at the Polo Grounds, a stadium in Manhattan, New York.¹⁵ For the 1956 season, the Giants relocated to the Bronx, New York, where they would share Yankee Stadium with the New York Yankees of Major League Baseball. The stadium was built in 1923, with baseball in mind. Also, by the time the Giants moved in, the stadium was no longer seen as the "...grandest stadium in the country...", like it was back in the 1920s.¹⁶ When the Yankees decided to renovate their stadium, the Giants decided it was time to move on, and finally build what their owners, fans, and players had been dreaming of for years: a stadium they could call their own.

The Giants made that dream official on August 27, 1971, by third Giants president Wellington Mara (son of Tim Mara) signing a lease agreement for 30 years.¹⁷ To the Giants organization, this was a very smart move. However, while the fans were excited to have a true "Giants Stadium", they were upset by one key aspect of that new stadium: it would be in New Jersey. Many fans saw this as an abandonment of their city, however as Wellington Mara's son, John, put it "My father didn't want to leave New York...But it would have been foolish beyond

¹⁴ "2021 Community Relations Recap," June 3, 2022, <https://www.giants.com/news/2021-new-york-giants-community-relations-recap>.

¹⁵ "Polo Grounds," BALLPARKS, accessed December 20, 2022, <http://football.ballparks.com/NFL/NewYorkGiants/veryoldindex.htm>.

¹⁶ "Yankee Stadium - History, Photos & More of the Former NFL Stadium of the New York Giants," Stadiums of Pro Football, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.stadiumsofprofootball.com/stadiums/yankee-stadium/>.

¹⁷ Ronald Sullivan, "Football Giants to Leave City For Jersey After 1974 Season," *The New York Times*, August 27, 1971, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/08/27/archives/football-giants-to-leave-city-for-jersey-after-1974-season-a.html>.

belief to not do what my father did. The future of this team was in New Jersey.”¹⁸ The new stadium, appropriately named “Giants Stadium” was being built on the New Jersey Hackensack Meadowlands. The New Jersey Governor called it “the most valuable piece of real estate in the world,” as it was a 750-acre piece of land that was going to house a \$200 million sports complex.¹⁹ Location wise, the move was minor. The new stadium, in East Rutherford, New Jersey, would be located only a mere six miles away from Manhattan.²⁰ In fact, the new stadium was closer to Times Square than either of the two previous stadiums they played in.²¹ Culturally, however, for fans it felt major. Some New York City fans were devastated and angry, whereas New Jersey fans were ecstatic and proud. This conflict is expertly explained through the NFL Films documentary titled ["Jersey Guys: Rooting for Big Blue from Manhattan to Moonachie"](#).²² To calm fans, Wellington Mara explained, “New York is not losing a team but gaining a sports complex,” and assured them that the team would not get rid of its tie to the city of New York, noting, “It was always the New York Giants and it always will be the New York Giants.”²³ Fans may have been upset at the moment, but they knew that nothing could stand in the way of their love for their team.

The Giants’ first game in the stadium was on October 10, 1976, and as a delighted Wellington Mara noted, “98 percent of the people who were ticket-holders at Yankee Stadium

¹⁸ Mike Vaccaro, “Fifty Years Later, Giants Move to New Jersey Has Paid Off,” *New York Post*, August 25, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/08/25/fifty-years-later-giants-move-to-new-jersey-has-paid-off/>.

¹⁹ Bill Doyle, “When the Giants Moved to New Jersey,” *New Jersey 101.5*, August 27, 2020, <https://nj1015.com/when-the-giants-moved-to-new-jersey/>.

²⁰ Neil Amdur, “Pride of New Jersey: Stadium Designed for Comfort of Fans,” *The New York Times*, October 10, 1976, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1976/10/10/archives/pride-of-new-jersey-stadium-designed-for-comfort-of-fans-giants.html>.

²¹ Vaccaro, “Fifty Years Later, Giants Move to New Jersey Has Paid Off.”

²² *Jersey Guys: Rooting for Big Blue from Manhattan to Moonachie | The Timeline*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oa0S9J35D28>.

²³ Sullivan, “Football Giants to Leave City For Jersey After 1974 Season.”

renewed for this game.”²⁴ The New York Jets began to share “Giants Stadium” with the Giants in 1984. In 2010, the Giants and the Jets built a new Meadowlands home, “MetLife Stadium,” where they have played to this day.²⁵ Economically, as the Maras explained, this was a smart move for the team. The reality for many NFL teams is that their cities are simply unable to accommodate their needs, due to the lack of space.²⁶ As of the start of the 2022 NFL season, twelve of the 32 teams play in a suburb rather than the city they are named after, like the Giants’ rival Dallas Cowboys who play in Arlington, or the Los Angeles Rams and Los Angeles Chargers who share a stadium in Inglewood.²⁷ Cities are unable to provide the amount of space needed for the stadiums and accompanying necessities, such as parking lots, therefore looking to suburbs is the most economical solution.

Having a sports complex in a suburb can be extremely beneficial for the area. For example, MetLife Stadium and the rest of the Meadowlands Sports Complex has generated major benefits for New Jersey. Before that piece of land became the Meadowlands Sports Complex, it was simply a swamp. In addition to MetLife stadium, the complex also is comprised of the Quest Diagnostics Training Center, the Meadowlands Racetrack, and the second largest mall in America, the American Dream retail and entertainment complex.²⁸ In addition, MetLife Stadium has been the home to many profitable events over the years. In 2014, the stadium was the home of Super Bowl XLVIII. As perfectly explained by Woody Johnson, owner of the New

²⁴ Amdur, “Pride of New Jersey.”

²⁵ Doyle, “When the Giants Moved to New Jersey.”

²⁶ Dan Malouff, “NFL Stadiums Belong in the Suburbs,” Greater Greater Washington, February 26, 2014, <https://gwwash.org/view/33898/nfl-stadiums-belong-in-the-suburbs>.

²⁷ “10 of 30 NFL Teams Play in the Suburbs of the City Whose Name They Hold,” *Legally Sociable* (blog), August 5, 2022, <https://legallysociable.com/2022/08/05/10-of-32-nfl-teams-play-in-the-suburbs-of-the-city-whose-name-they-hold/>.

²⁸ Joey Garrand, “Meadowlands, an Economic Powerhouse for New Jersey - Capital Analytics,” *Capital Analytics Associates* (blog), June 24, 2022, <https://www.capitalanalyticsassociates.com/meadowlands-an-economic-powerhouse-for-new-jersey/>.

York Jets, "It's a perfect home for the Super Bowl, and when you think of the size of the stadium and the media capital and all the things New York has to offer, the only thing in question was the weather."²⁹ In addition, some of MetLife's most successful events have come from beyond the world of football. For example, in 2019, WrestleMania took place at MetLife, and was the highest-grossing entertainment event the stadium had ever hosted. As a result, the areas surrounding the Meadowlands reaped major benefits related to sports tourism. Since over half of the people in attendance were from places other than the New York Metropolitan Area, accommodations were required, totaling \$23.9 million being spent. Overall, the area made "\$165.4 million in direct, indirect and induced impact derived from spending by visitors to the New York/New Jersey region."³⁰ Furthermore, MetLife Stadium has been chosen as one of the host cities for the 2026 World Cup and will be the site of the tournament's final game.³¹ This could bring new revenue to the area, as according to U.S. Soccer, a World Cup host city has the potential to generate a net of between \$90 and \$480 million.³² There have also been countless concerts for high profile stars such as Bruce Springsteen, Bon Jovi, Taylor Swift, One Direction, and the Rolling Stones held at Giants Stadium and MetLife over the years.³³ MetLife Stadium is an ideal location for these events, as it is much more easily accessible than any New York City stadium could be, while maximizing sports tourism opportunities due to its proximity to the city.

²⁹ Ted Sherman, "How MetLife Stadium Scored Super Bowl 2014, Bringing the Big Game to N.J.," NJ.com, January 19, 2014, https://www.nj.com/super-bowl/2014/01/how_metlife_stadium_scored_super_bowl_2014_bringing_the_big_game_to_nj.html.

³⁰ "WrestleMania® Generates \$165 Million for New York/New Jersey Region," WWE, November 11, 2019, <https://corporate.wwe.com/investors/news/press-releases/2019/11-11-2019-145935529>.

³¹ Mark Bickel, "World Cup 2026: Miami on U.S. Cities List to Host Soccer's Biggest Spectacle. What We Know," The News-Press, December 19, 2022, <https://www.news-press.com/story/sports/2022/12/19/world-cup-2026-miami-is-one-of-16-host-cities-for-soccer-spectacle-fifa-argentina-france-messi-mbapp/69726386007/>.

³² "Hosting the 2026 FIFA World Cup™ Could Create More Than \$5 Billion in Economic Activity for North America," U.S. Soccer, February 8, 2018, <https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2018/02/hosting-the-2026-fifa-world-cup-could-create-more-than-5-billion-in-economic-activity-for-north-amer>.

³³ Myles Ma, "The 20 Most-Attended Events in Meadowlands History," NJ.com, November 29, 2016, https://www.nj.com/bergen/2016/11/the_20_most-attended_events_in_meadowlands_history.html.

That is in part why Billboard Magazine ranked MetLife Stadium the “highest-grossing stadium in the world for non-NFL events” six times in the stadium’s first seven years.³⁴ In 2022, it was ranked the fourth-highest grossing stadium.³⁵

Overall, sports teams have the unique ability to add value to a city, both economically and culturally. The New York Giants represent this relationship due to their contributions to the NFL, New York, and New Jersey. Bringing a team to New York City had a major impact on the league, expanding its geographic bounds and popularity. The Giants also became a cultural phenomenon in New York, causing the city to burst with pride for the G-Men. Even with the move to New Jersey, many fans stayed loyal, and the team flourished. As a result of the move, the Giants were able to generate economic success for the New York Metropolitan Area, and as stated by “Jersey Guys” documentary narrator and famous musician Jon Bon Jovi, “...the move to New Jersey didn’t cost the Giants a state, it would help them build an empire.”³⁶ The New York Giants have contributed their success, identity, and legacy to the game of football and to their home states over time, and represent exactly what a sports franchise should be: an economic success, but also a catalyst for social good.

³⁴ “Fascinating Facts and Information About MetLife Stadium,” *NJ State Auto Used Cars Blog* (blog), March 29, 2022, <https://www.njstateauto.com/blog/metlife-stadium-interesting-facts/>.

³⁵ Duncan Phenix, “Allegiant Stadium Ranks as Top-Grossing in World,” 8 News Now, December 14, 2022, <https://www.8newsnow.com/news/local-news/allegiant-stadium-ranks-as-top-grossing-in-nation/.top>

³⁶ *Jersey Guys*.

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