

Naples serious player in wooing Cubs

Group in Florida bidding to be team's spring home

By Carrie Muskat / MLB.com

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NAPLES, Fla. -- Two Florida businessmen didn't think it was possible that the Cubs might relocate their Spring Training site from Arizona to here until they looked the team's new owners, the Ricketts family, in the eyes.

Now, Craig Bouchard and Gary Price have partnered with others in this southwest Florida coastal city in an effort to convince the Cubs to make Collier County their new home.

"I thought we were a long shot," Bouchard said in an interview in his Hinsdale, Ill., home last week. "But in my heart, as we sit here today, I believe we are the favorite, because it makes business sense in the long term."

If the Cubs did move to Florida, they would be reversing a trend. Since 2003, four teams have relocated their spring base from Florida to Arizona, and the Cincinnati Reds will become the fifth when they join the Cleveland Indians in Goodyear, Ariz., next year. The drawback to Florida is the long drives between sites. If the Blue Jays play the Cardinals in Jupiter, they have a 4-hour, 45-minute bus ride from Dunedin. The longest trip in Arizona? It's 2 hours, 55 minutes from Goodyear to Tucson.

The idea that the Cubs would leave Arizona, where they've trained since the 1950s, was initially considered a negotiating tactic. The Cubs' contract with Mesa, Ariz., and HoHoKam Stadium allows the team to buy out of its deal after 2012.

"As a businessman, the first conversation I had with [Cubs team president] Crane Kenney was, 'Hey Crane, we want to make a great offer, but we have to be more than a bargaining chip,'" said Bouchard, co-founder of Esmark, Inc., who splits time between the Chicago area and Naples.

"[Kenney] said, 'Craig, you're not a bargaining chip,'" Bouchard said. "[He said,] 'Make your best offer. We'll consider it.' That's fair, that's honest, I believe it, and that's how we began the conversation."

Why would the Cubs leave the Valley of the Sun for the Sunshine State? Check the stats.

"The best answer I can give you," said Price, a Naples city councilman, "is I got the feeling from the meeting we had with the Ricketts family and Crane was that they want to win a World Series. Sixteen out of the last 19 World Series winners train in Florida."

Think about that, Cubs fans.

"I'm a numbers guy," Price said Tuesday. "If 16 out of 19 are World Series winners that train in Florida, that's a compelling argument. There are a lot of esoteric reasons behind why they'd be in Arizona or Florida, but if I'm starting from the beginning -- and I look at it this way for the Cubs is that, 'We have a tremendous history in Arizona for 40 years. What does the next 40 years look like?'"

Which is what the Ricketts family is doing.

"We're going to be open-minded," Cubs chairman Tom Ricketts said on Oct. 30 when his family was introduced at Wrigley Field. "We're going to look at some options. We're going to look at what's the best solution for the team."

They're looking ahead and trying to decide what's best for the Cubs and their fans for the next 30, 40, 50 years.



"If you have a chance to push a reset button, whether that's to stay in Arizona or come to Florida, those statistics are not insignificant," Price said of the lopsided number of World Series champs who prep in Florida.

"I also believe that we have a significant advantage in the family experience and what's here besides baseball," he said. "One of the conversations, or jokes I make, and it's not disrespectful of Arizona, but when you look at what's available there, how are the beaches?"

Some would say Arizona is one big beach without an ocean.

"I think [Naples] is the best location in Florida," said Price, a family wealth adviser at Fifth Avenue Advisors. "The message I'd send out to Cubs fans is this is the most remarkable place in Florida to visit in terms of the beaches and everglades. We're a little over three hours to Disney [in Orlando]. It's amazing what you could do if you came for a week besides baseball, which is why we want them here. We're in a unique place and a very special place."

"Arizona needs to be respected here. They've done a fantastic thing for the Cubs for 50 years. They're going to try their best and if they make the best offer, they should win."

-- Craig Bouchard, partner with Gary Price in the Naples' bid

The list of possible sites for the Cubs in Florida has been trimmed to three locations in Collier County. All are near Interstate 75. None are in Naples proper; the city is only 12 square miles. The proposal requires about 120 contiguous acres to build a 15,000-seat stadium, six practice fields, an upgraded training facility and parking. There would be room for hotels and restaurants. It would be a Wrigley Village with beach access close by.

"The Ricketts family is a true family in the best sense of the word, and they're thinking about 'What does our fan base want?' and the fan base is families," Bouchard said. "They want the family to come down and have a comfortable vacation, watch the Cubs and have fun in all the other things that you do."

The Cubs set a Cactus League home attendance record this spring, drawing more than 195,000 to HoHoKam. They held the old mark, set in 2005. The team also has the longest stretch without winning a World Series, last doing so in 1908. Despite that, Cubs fans are passionate and loyal, and those are the folks Bouchard and Price hope to lure to Florida with the team.

"Tom Ricketts, if I were him, and I think he's like this, thinks of his brand and his franchise as No. 1 in the game," Bouchard said. "The Cubs are the kings of the hill, and that's the way they should think about it."

The other top teams in baseball? According to Bouchard, it's the New York Yankees and Boston Red Sox. And where do they train? Just up I-75 from Naples in Tampa and Fort Myers, respectively.

Bouchard said the Ricketts family should want to build on the Cubs' brand, strengthen the fan base created by generations who grew up watching on WGN-TV, and, ideally, win more games and reach the playoffs on a consistent basis. If you want to be the best, you should compete against the best.

"What do you do then in the spring if that's the overall objective?" Bouchard said. "You plant yourself somewhere near the highway that connects the Yankees, Red Sox and Cubs. You hang with the other top guys. You don't play the White Sox in the spring -- and nothing against the White Sox. You play the Yankees and Red Sox."

The Cubs are worth fighting for. A recent survey by Arizona officials showed they bring \$52 million to the state each year.

Price said they are looking at funding the project privately, and not relying on municipal support. Those details are still being finalized, and they are the opposite of what is being proposed in Arizona, which is counting on municipal backing in tough economic times.

The Cubs aren't looking for someplace to set up camp for six to eight weeks for Spring Training and then bolt. They want to build a year-round operation that will provide state-of-the-art facilities for the Minor League system in hopes of improving player development.

Bouchard and Price were competitive athletes. Bouchard, 55, played baseball at Illinois State. Price, 44, played baseball and football in high school and competed in fencing at Ohio State. Both are competitive businessmen, both want to win, but both are quick to say they will not get into a bidding war over the Cubs.

"Arizona needs to be respected here," Bouchard said. "They've done a fantastic thing for the Cubs for 50 years. They're going to try their best and if they make the best offer, they should win. This is all honorable and fair. We're all Cubs fans, so it's a good place to start."

There is a black-and-white vintage photo of Wrigley Field, circa late 1930s, in the conference room of Price's offices on tony Fifth Avenue in downtown Naples. The Florida group says the numbers will show there are more Chicagoans -- and Cubs fans -- in the Naples area than there are in Mesa. They come for the golf, weather, restaurants, art, the philharmonic and, of course, the beaches.

"The demographic right now for the person visiting [Naples] is 29 to 54," Price said. "We're not all 70 years old -- and there's nothing wrong with that."

"You talk about having a Major League team come into an area, and you wonder if you'd have a base to support your team -- this is a terrific base," he said. "Not only is there a bias in favor of Chicago, from what I've seen, but you have a very active group of people who have money to spend, and they're very inviting of tourists."

The Naples group has created a Web site, floridacubs.com, to garner feedback. The response has been fast and supportive. Price admits that when he first met Bouchard to talk about the possibility of bringing the Cubs to Collier County, it seemed like a "dream." Neither had even considered such a thing.

And now?

"It's turned into something very real, very exciting," Price said.

Carrie Muskat is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.