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Walkthrough: Paying the Bills

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The Mega Bills

There are big league cities, like New York and Chicago, and there are minor league cities like Scranton and Sheboygan. Other cities lie somewhere in between: They have large populations but no major pro sports presence (Birmingham, Oklahoma City), or they are smaller burbs that happen to host one or two teams, like Green Bay or Salt Lake City.

Buffalo has long been one of those in-between cities: small by international standards, but large enough to host the Bills and the NHL Sabres. Now, Buffalo is close to losing some of its big-league luster. The Bills will play three preseason and five regular season games in Toronto, starting this year and ending in 2012. The so-called Toronto Series is a likely precursor to a permanent move to Canada. The Wilson family plans to sell the team after patriarch Ralph Wilson passes away, and the deep-pocketed conglomerate led by telecommunications mogul Ted Rogers is the most likely bidder.

A Bills move to Toronto could cripple Buffalo, a city already on the economic ropes. But ironically, it would make the whole Buffalo region stronger.

Things are tough all over, but the economy of Western New York has been stagnant for years. "The economic expansion of the mid- to late 1990s passed Buffalo by," according to *Buffalo News* business columnist Dave Robinson. Robinson painted a grim picture of a city that was unable to replace old-line manufacturing businesses with high-tech, high-growth industries. The only major corporation now headquartered in Buffalo is M&T Bank, which spent its stadium-naming money down in Baltimore. While cities like Baltimore and Pittsburgh, historic industrial towns like Buffalo, rebuilt their downtowns into cultural centers in the last 20 years, Buffalo lacked the resources to do the same. "They're working like the Dickens to get something going downtown," Robinson said. "But the city lost its critical mass 20 years ago." There's no rush hour in downtown Buffalo anymore; a motorist can cruise through the metro area in a matter of minutes.

But while the city of Buffalo is dying, the nearby region is flourishing. This region spans two nations: the Buffalo-Rochester area in western New York, and the Toronto metro area in southern Canada. Toronto is the financial capital of Canada, and if you yoke its economy onto Buffalo-Rochester's, you get a powerhouse mega-region.

Richard Florida, economist and author of *Who's Your City?*, explains the mega-region concept. "Mega-regions are the driving forces of the world economy. A mega-region is an area that hosts business and economic activity on a large scale, generating a lion's share of the world's economic activity and an even larger share of the world's innovation and technological discoveries." Toronto-Buffalo-Rochester (TBR) is one of just 40 significant mega-regions in the world. According to Florida, it's responsible for \$530 billion in economic output. It also ranks highly among world mega-regions in worldwide innovation patents and what Florida calls "star scientists," two indicators that TBR is positioned to compete against other regions as a high-tech research and industrial center.

Strapping U.S. and Canadian cities together seems a little disingenuous at first, but Florida explains that it's vital to everyone's financial interests to think outside the borders of states and nations. "Much of our public policy ignores the rise of mega-regions and, sometimes, works against them. If we want to bolster economic competitiveness, policy leaders across country borders and state lines must pursue policies that take mega-regions into account."



Buffalo and Toronto are just a few hours apart; Maple Leafs fans often travel to Buffalo when their teams play the Sabres, and Buffalo baseball fans often take day trips to watch the Blue Jays. By moving across the border and closer to the center of the TBR mega-region, the Bills can acquire a much-needed influx of corporate-caliber cash. "The Bills are like your parents who bought their house 50 years ago," Robinson explained. "Their mortgage is paid off, so they don't need a lot of income to get by." The Wilson family can turn a tidy profit on television revenues, but the next owners will cough up as much as \$800 million. They'll need luxury box revenue and other income sources to offset their initial debts. "We don't have a deep stable of companies," Robinson said. "The Bills couldn't dream of selling a PSL." Ideally, Toronto would provide the companies, with Buffalo providing the loyal fan base.

It's one thing to embrace macroeconomics, but quite another to root for a team that sings a different national anthem before games. While Bills fans are among the most loyal in the NFL, Robinson is not sure how many would follow the team to Canada, not when the Steelers, Browns, Jets, Giants, and Patriots offer attractive regional rooting interests. "Over time, it would settle into the relationship locals have with the Blue Jays," Robinson said. "The Bills would be a nearby team to go to."

However, the Toronto Series, with its multi-venue format, could help fans acclimate to the idea of a regional team. The Toronto Series allows the Rogers group to use the novelty and rarity of NFL football to charge super-premium prices to Toronto fans. At the same time, the Wilson family gets a \$78 million payday from the Rogers group, and can also charge slightly more for games at Rich Stadium because of decreased supply. Over a period of a few seasons, the Wilsons and the Rogers conglomerate could tweak the 7-to-1 Buffalo-Toronto game arrangement. The Bills could end up playing four games in each venue, just as the Packers split time between Green Bay and Milwaukee in the 1970s and 80s.

Some fans may abandon the Bills if they become Canadians or vagabonds, but Florida sees a big difference between a move within the TBR region and a move to, say, Los Angeles. "Economic development, more than ever before, is about talent attraction and retention. Creative types are concentrating in communities that are open, diverse, and thick with an array of amenities. Major league sports help to create an authentic community, one that is appealing and engaging for people of all walks of life." The designation "major league city" still means something in the world of high finance. Toronto will use pro football to enhance its international profile; the official Toronto Series website (www.billsintoronto.com) touts the city as "international, sophisticated, ethnically diverse, fascinating and passionate about sports." That designation could apply to the whole TBR region, which could in turn use the Bills as a drawing card. "Authenticity is important to creative workers," Florida said. "Professional sports teams, similar to a region's arts community and its unique neighborhoods, help make a region unique."

The Bills are one of the few things lending "authenticity" to Buffalo; without them (and the Sabres), Buffalo has little to offer that can't be found in Elmira or Erie, Pennsylvania. "The Bills are our last lingering vestige of being a major league city," Robinson said. "People take a lot of pride in them." Re-imagine Buffalo as a small part of a thriving mega-region, and the fans of western New York can keep their allegiance to the Bills. A clever name change might help. Fans from Charlotte to Charleston can claim the Carolina Panthers, so a well-chosen name can help broaden a team's identity. That national border is tricky, but that's why there are public relations firms. The Lake Ontario Bills? Not great, but they laughed at "Tampa Bay," too.

The Bills need a big, thriving region. According to Florida, big, thriving regions need teams like the Bills. The eventual move to Toronto could be a win-win situation for the team and for area fans. Buffalo's loss may be the TBR's gain.

Lions in your Inbox

This from the Consumerist blog (www.consumerist.com): When Lions season ticket holder Kevin Furlong emailed the team to correct a problem with his ticket package, he got a surprising response. The e-mail read: "Lance...he is not talking about you here. Mark was asked to speak to these people and he said no. F... 'em until next year."

Lance and Mark, of course, are Lions employees. Mark is Mark Graham, ticket director. "Reply All" is further proof that God has a sense of humor.

When a Detroit reporter suggested to Lions COO Tom Lewand that the e-mail incident was an example of the franchise's general lack of quality, Lewand provided a typically mature, rational Lions response. "If you write that, it will be factually incorrect and bordering on slander. And I will come after you." Lewand later clarified that he wasn't actually threatening the reporter. I know I've communicated my point well when I have to later explain that I wasn't, in fact, threatening the listener.

"Reply All" incidents have been common in Detroit since Matt Millen personally installed the new mail server. For example, Rod Marinelli sent a Reply All e-mail to some of his ex-Buccaneers players with a SigningBonus.txt attachment, and a few weeks later the Lions had signed Brian Kelly, Chuck Darby, Corey Smith and Calvin Pearman. Millen himself is in delicate negotiations with the son of a foreign prince; if he can just get the money that's currently

frozen in that Swiss bank account, he'll be able to afford Gosder Cherilus' signing bonuses. As a user-friendly feature, the Lions e-mail server comes with the following options:

- 1) Reply
- 2) Reply All
- 3) Reply Obscenely (for season ticket holders)
- 4) Reply Defensively (for media criticism)
- 5) Reply Threateningly (for local reporters or Mike Martz)
- 6) Reply Enthusiastically (for agents of overrated first round picks)

It's foolproof. But then again, it has to be. Matt Millen is a guy who never used the CC button in his life because he thought it sent his e-mail to Charley Casserley.

School Daze

If this week's Walkthrough sounds a little scattered, it's because I am trying to juggle *Pro Football Prospectus* responsibilities with end-of-year teaching activities. There's a danger that halfway through any sentence I could lapse into PreCalculus final exam question mode. That could confuse readers who expect traditional football when the graph three periods of the function $y = 3 - 4 \cos(\pi/6 x)$ and label all maximum and minimum values. Oops. See what I mean?

It's nice to know I am not alone in my juggling act. Rob Rang of [NFL Draft Scout](#) is not just one of the top draft evaluators in the business, but also a high school teacher and — shudder — yearbook advisor. I asked Rob to sit for Five Questions so I could commiserate with someone as crazy as I am and celebrate the near end of the school year.

What's it like to be both a high school teacher and a sportswriter? 'Cuz, honestly, I can't imagine it.

It can be difficult, at times. However, I've found sleep deprivation to be a surprisingly effective tool in grading — whether it be term papers or quarterback progressions.

Ever get stuck in a Catch-22, like having a dance to chaperone on April 26th?

Thankfully, few general managers elect to actually dance at Prom anymore, making it a rare occurrence when more than a few teachers are needed to chaperone. It just isn't the cool thing to do anymore.

Early July. No school. No football. Heaven, or are you clawing your eyes out and hoping for something to do?

For the past five years, July has meant the beginning of summer school. Rather than teach that again this year, however, I may take this summer off. There are a few steelhead and Chinook salmon I hope to make the acquaintance of in the coming months.

Between you, me, and the Internet, did you ever give your students a study hall and, say, crank out a mock draft or some scouting reports? Because I am far, far too ethical to do anything like that.

Are you kidding? Their final exam requires breaking down the specific attributes needing to project a 4-3 defensive end to the 3-4 rush linebacker position. Extra credit is available for students who correctly cite Bill Parcells, Dick LeBeau, and/or Dom Capers.

If a student says he/she wants to pursue a career in football journalism, what advice do you offer?

Try for something with better benefits — like fast food service.

By the way, Rob is kidding about the exam. Please don't fire him. Or me.

Attack of the Clones

The news came across the crawl on NFL Network while I was watching Top Ten, which is one hell of a program (you never know who you'll see as a talking head). The Falcons just signed Jamal Lewis and Tony Gonzalez.

Say what?

Was this a misprint? A hallucination? One of those "test the crawl" dummy news stories that accidentally goes live when someone pushes the wrong button? Or was Arthur Blank spending big bucks to recreate my 2002 fantasy team?

If Blank somehow managed to acquire two high-profile veterans in late May, it would cause a *Pro Football Prospectus 2008*

nightmare. It would be worse than the Super Bowl winning quarterback flipping his motorcycle and having a near-death experience three days before deadline, like in 2006. I broke into a sweat. Gonzalez and Lewis to the Falcons? That would screw up three team comments and whole pages of player comments! Plus, if I missed news like that during my book myopia (much time is spent studying Ruvell Martin's third down DVOA at the expense of all else), what else have I missed? Did Brett Favre become a super-delegate? Did the Lions curse out a season ticket holder?

Thankfully, it only took a little digging to learn that the Tony Gonzalez in question is a former Boston College receiver who spent 2006 out of football. He played with Matt Ryan, so at least he has a high-placed friend in Falcons camp. He also attended Framingham High School, which means he grew up in Aaron's backyard. This Jamal Lewis is a safety who finished third on Georgia Tech last year with 75 tackles.

OK, so they are street free agents. So what's with the famous names? Are the Falcons just trying to confuse people? Take last year's top pick: Jamaal Anderson, just like the famous "Dirty Bird" running back, but with an extra "a" in his first name. This is an organization that once had two star receivers named Alfred Jenkins and Alfred Jackson. Their head coach shares his name with a close colleague, a well-known ESPN reporter, and a Ravens linebacker. C'mon Blank, your organization is too bad to be this confusing. All future free agent signings should have names as distinctive as Ovie Mughelli.

OK, I am done whining. Time to get back to *PFP 2008*, specifically the special teams comments. I see the Falcons signed Jason Elam in the offseason.

Wait, that is THE Jason Elam, right?

In two weeks: I warm up the diagramming software and talk with a kindred diagramming spirit: a woman who calls herself "the evil queen of the obscure."

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