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# Payne believes small-market teams can thrive

By Joe Starkey
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He quit his job as a managing partner in Wisconsin's largest law firm in order to run the sad-sack Milwaukee Brewers. Why, then, was Ulice Payne Jr. offering business tips to the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania on Tuesday?

Because he's a proven winner.

A 1973 graduate of Ringgold High School, where he was a basketball teammate of future NFL star Joe Montana, Payne played on Marquette University's national championship basketball team under the late Al McGuire and went on to a highly successful career in law and business.

Earlier this month, Sports Illustrated named Payne the 14th-most influential minority in sports. He was listed one spot behind basketball star Shaquille O'Neal and one spot ahead of boxing promoter Don King.

Payne, 47, didn't gain that sort of acclaim — didn't become the first black man to be put in charge of a major-league baseball team — by making bad decisions. And he believes the Brewers will reverse their fortunes.

"If I had no hope of winning, I wouldn't have taken this job," said Payne, who was named Brewers president at the end of last season. "I didn't need this. I could just buy a ticket and watch baseball."

When he got the job, Payne pledged to pump attendance at Miller Park in Milwaukee. He has quickly discovered that there is only one way to draw fans to the ballpark: win.

Like the Pirates, the Brewers have posted 10 consecutive losing seasons. The similarities don't end there. Both teams saw their attendance shoot up in their first year in a new ballpark three years ago, then drop precipitously. Milwaukee drew 2.8 million fans in 2001 and 1.9 million in 2002. Payne expects the team to draw about 1.6 million this year.

Aimee Obidzinski/Tribune-Review

Pirates owner Kevin McClatchy (left) and Ulice Payne, president and CEO of the Milwaukee Brewers, chat with Doris Carson Williams, president of the African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania. For a story on the Chamber's annual meeting luncheon, see D1.

The Brewers are well below .500 and fighting the Pirates to stay out of last place in the NL's Central Division.

"People won't come until they see you win," said Payne, who addressed a gathering at the Renaissance Hotel, Downtown. "That's pretty clear to us. We have all kinds of promotions and everything else, but there's nothing like winning. When we beat Houston three out of four games at home, well, the next time we come home, advance sales are up and day-of-game sales are up.

"A lot of people were mistaken, at least in Milwaukee — and part of it may have been our club's fault — thinking that if we had a new ballpark, we'd win. That doesn't do it."

Pirates CEO and managing general partner Kevin McClatchy introduced Payne yesterday and mentioned that the two had been comparing notes. Both maintain that their teams have long-term hopes of winning a championship despite the wide disparity in payrolls in MLB. The New York Yankees have the league's largest payroll at $153 million. They are one of five teams with a payroll over $100 million. The Tampa Bay Devil Rays have the lowest payroll at $19.6 million. The Brewers have the third-lowest at $40.6 million. The Pirates are 12th from the bottom at $54.8 million.

"The only saving grace, I think, is the change in the environment via the labor agreement," Payne said. "We'll get a revenue sharing check in excess of $15 million this year. Before, we wouldn't have gotten that. We'll be a net payee on revenue sharing for the next two or three years."

As part of the agreement owners and players ironed out last season, all teams have to share 34 percent of their locally generated money, up from 20 percent. In addition, a "competitive balance tax" is levied on high-payroll teams in order to try to curb the increase in player salaries.

As per the agreement, teams will pay a tax ranging from 17.5 percent to 40 percent of total player salaries above $117 million this season (only the Yankees and the New York Mets fit that category), $120.5 million in 2004, $128 million in 2005 and $136.5 million in 2006.

Many are skeptical as to how much of a difference this will make in terms of allowing more mid- to small-market teams a chance to compete. Payne is optimistic.

"Not only will (the highest-payroll teams) have to pay their talent, they'll have to pay us to compete with them," he said. "Pretty soon, just like the NBA, that will change their behavior. Maybe not the Yankees, I don't know, but with other teams, you'll have owners who say, 'Wait a minute, why are we paying up and paying our competition?'

"I think the NFL's economic model is the best, but it's unique because there are only 16 games. The NBA (which, unlike baseball, has a salary cap) is more akin to us, and look at them. All of a sudden, you don't know who's going to win it all, and that's because they have the luxury tax, and that's like our competitive balance tax. It has prohibited teams from just going out and spending a lot of money on payroll."