



Love it or loathe it, this week's unveiling of Akron's new professional baseball identity has already succeeded in all the ways its crafty devisors intended. The end of the Aeros and rise of the RubberDucks—while admittedly April Foolsy at first glance—has put the Indians' Double-A affiliate in more headlines and hashtags than any of its Eastern League Championships ever did. It's not a silly marketing mistake, nor a heartfelt nod to Akron's industrial past—as some would have you believe. It's straight up business, Son. And in #QuAkron, it was pretty much inevitable.

Back in 2011-- a full year before ambitious young owner Ken Babby bought the club—the Akron Aeros held a somewhat unexpected “[re-branding contest](#),” in which fans were asked to vote online for one of five potential names for the team. Showing a surprising lack of marketing savvy back then, one of these five options was to keep the name “Aeros”—which had served the club admirably for 15 years with basically zero complaints from anyone ever. Obviously, any good bloodsucking marketer knows that there's no money to be made from a shirt you already sold, so including “leave well enough alone” on the ballot was a mistake from the get-go.

The four alternative team names, meanwhile, were selected from fan suggestions and conspicuous in their quirkiness—fitting the mold of recent Minor League notables like the Albuquerque Isotopes, Montgomery Biscuits, and Lansing Lugnuts. Unfortunately, all Akronites seemed united in their disdain for these newly proposed monikers, as “Aeros” was easily re-elected over “Vulcans,” “Gum Dippers,” “Tire Jacks,” and... “RubberDucks.”

Yes, believe it or not, the threat of this impressively ridiculous re-brand has been hanging over the Rubber City for two years, initially introduced by a well-meaning Copley man named Raymond Romito—who went as far as citing “the ducks that swim in the nearby canal” as representative of “the methods Akron businesses used for transporting goods.” And even after the natives gathered together to raise their collective voices in opposition to this fowl switcheroo, the wheels were already in motion. The ducks, so to speak, were in a row. There was no going back.

A year later, also known as last October, longtime Aeros owner Mike Agganis sold the team to a 32 year-old Ken Babby—former chief revenue officer and general manager of digital operations at the Washington Post. In other words, a marketing guy. With Babby came sweeping changes-- more promotions, more emphasis on kids stuff, and by no coincidence, the highest Canal Park attendance numbers in six years (despite the Aeros stumbling to a 68-73 finish).



In the press release circulated with the announcement of the RubberDuck re-brand, Babby—whose father is the President of Basketball Operations for the Phoenix Suns—laid hard on the idea of family and community, both in terms of appeasing the fan base and honoring local history.

"Coming into Akron my goal was to listen more than talk, so this wasn't something we rushed into," he explained, suggesting perhaps that certain re-branding contests of the past weren't truly indicative of the city's current feelings. "We wanted to do something that was fun and entertaining while honoring the heritage of this great community."

And thus, Babby is finally paying homage to Akron and its 100 years of blue-collar industrial spirit as the tire-producing capital of the world... by naming its baseball club after a child's

bathtub toy.

Or, from a more realistic perspective, Babby is a smart enough marketing man to know that a silly name and a spruced up logo with gaudy Miami Marlins colors will generate a level of revenue for his club that another year of drab '90s purple and "Orbit"-- the astronaut cat mascot-- simply couldn't. A winning culture just doesn't matter as much as fashion in the casual, developmental world of the Minor Leagues, and whether people buy Akron RubberDucks merchandise for the love or for the novelty, the profits will look just the same.

So now, just a week after some [citizens of Pittsburgh were petitioning to keep a giant 100-foot rubber duck in their harbor](#), some baseball fans in Akron are already [petitioning to prevent the RubberDuck re-brand](#) from taking over Canal Park. These are complicated times for Ernie and Bert. But for their part, at least, the anti-Duck contingent does have a wee bit of a precedent on their side.



Once upon a time, a negative fan reaction actually *did* influence this very same Akron club to abandon a re-brand before it even got off the ground. It was 1997—the team's first year downtown after leaving Canton's Thurman Munson Stadium. Somehow, in a true example of a mind boggling marketing misfire, the club--formerly known as the Canton-Akron Indians-- was rechristened the "Akron Blast"—a misguided effort to honor the city's history in flight and space exploration, specifically the exploits of astronaut and Akron native Judy Resnik. Unfortunately, they seemed to overlook the fact that Resnik had been killed in one of the most famous "blasts" in American history—the Challenger disaster. And so, in short order, a rabid negative reaction

to the name forced Agganis and Co. to hold a vote for a new identity. “Aeros” won in a landslide.

That Aeros jersey would go on to be worn by everyone from Jaret Wright and CC Sabathia to Grady Sizemore and Jason Kipnis. And while it’s now been relegated to history--unceremoniously cast aside in the name of a goofy money-grabbing logo swap—we still highly recommend stocking up on Aeros gear before it disappears forever. The RubberDucks encourage it, too. It’s all part of the plan.