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If he wants to help 49ers, York should sell them

By Skip Bayless
Mercury News Staff Columnist

Call this a ``Dear John'' letter.

I do not dislike 49ers owner John York personally. But I'm shocked and saddened by what he has done professionally to a once-proud franchise.

York has allowed the San Francisco 49ers to turn into what the Arizona Cardinals were before they pulled off a new stadium deal and hired Dennis Green to lead them out of the NFC West desert. The Cardinals had kept last place warm for York's Once Prouds, who inconceivably have tripped and fallen back down the basement steps into salary-cap hell.

I hesitate to write this, because it will only strengthen York's dangerously stubborn and misguided resolve. But there's only one way he'll ever be the Bay Area hero his brother-in-law Eddie DeBartolo was when he ran the 49ers. Only one, John: Sell the 49ers.

No shame in that. Just concede that running an NFL team isn't your strength and sell the 49ers for a staggering profit to, say, the group headed by former 49ers Steve Young and Brent Jones. Leave 49ers fans ecstatic and buy your way back into the horse-racing industry, a business you know and love and have conquered before.

Do it for the thousands in the stands and living rooms who have invested lifetimes of emotions and entertainment dollars in a team they own in so many more ways than you do, John.

Many 49ers fans have called or written me questioning York's motives. ``Dr. Dork,'' many call him. Why has he turned the team into the cost-cutting 49 Cent-ers, as I call them? York continues to tell me he has no plans to sell -- yet no urgent plans to pursue a new revenue-rocketing stadium.

This doesn't quite add up. Might York one day lose his quick temper over the onslaught of criticism and decide, that's it, he's moving the team to another market? Or is it that he lacks the Carmen Policy-style salesmanship flair to persuade city officials to help him subsidize a new stadium?

Whatever, I see an increasingly frightened man whose pride is trapped in a game he can't win. He's hell-bent on showing his wife's brother that he too can turn this

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team around, as Eddie did in the late 1970s. If only York had Eddie's original resources and football vision.

Does life get much stranger than John York winding up owning and operating a cornerstone NFL franchise in Northern California?

He was born in Muskogee, Okla., and raised in Little Rock, Ark. His father, a dentist, died when he was 13. Though York was big enough to play offensive tackle, he was a much better student than athlete. At Notre Dame, where he graduated magna cum laude, he had to work odd jobs to help pay for school.

In South Bend he met "Neesee," eventual wife Denise DeBartolo. After medical school, York persuaded her empire-running father to back a venture he believed in -- medical labs. Two years later, York had nearly run through his father-in-law's \$2 million investment when the business turned around. York eventually sold DeYor Laboratories for a reportedly enormous profit.

Same for the three racetracks his father-in-law asked him to run -- Louisiana Downs, Thistledown and Remington Park. Thistledown and Remington were financial disasters, but York soon whipped them into shape and eventually sold all three for a reported profit.

York is extremely proud of those achievements, and he should be. But neither has anything to do with turning around an NFL team. That requires hiring the right general manager and coach and spending when it's time to spend. York has made one bad, backpedaling choice after another, resulting in a second "Five-Year Plan."

Season-ticket holders are furious, and they should be. It's bad enough that they're being asked to swallow a 10 percent price increase. But in the age of quick-turnaround parity, you cannot smile and tell your customers that next year might be a lost cause, but just wait till '09! The best game the 49ers have played for the last year has been fan-duping, media-deceiving public relations.

In late 2002, I bought into York wanting to replace Steve Mariucci with a Big Guy -- a Parcells or a Holmgren. York proved to be too cheap and insecure for that.

I bought into changing direction at quarterback by letting Jeff Garcia change scenery. But I was thinking much bigger than going with Tim Rattay. I was thinking Mark Brunell -- but Washington, the biggest spender last off-season, was able to land Brunell, Clinton Portis and a Big Guy, Joe Gibbs. I was thinking Drew Henson or Eli Manning or . . .

What was I thinking? Not once has a move made by General Manager Terry Donahue made me say, "Wow."

York's operation has no bold, creative, Billy Beane-style plan. These 49ers don't make things happen; things happen to them. It's as if they woke up one day and realized they couldn't afford Garcia or Terrell Owens even if they wanted to.

Recently the 49ers announced they're following a new "Philadelphia Model" by locking up young draftees before they approach free agency. Wednesday, Philadelphia locked up the best player on the free-agent market, Jevon Kearse, to a record deal for a defensive lineman -- eight years, \$66 million. Yes, the Eagles had cleared the cap room, but could York have written that \$16 million bonus

check?

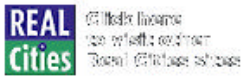
By next week, York might be following the Sabercats Model.

Wednesday, an ESPN.com ranking of the top 30 free agents listed three possible new homes for each. Not once were the Once Prouds mentioned as a possibility.

Sell, John. Please.

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