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Shell Wages Legal Fight Over Web Domain Name

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Later this summer, oil giant **Royal Dutch/Shell Group** is expected to merge its two parent companies, creating a new corporate entity: Royal Dutch Shell PLC.

But go to www.royaldutchshellplc.com and you will find a crude Web site in garish colors where Alfred Donovan, an 88-year-old British army veteran, posts dozens of media reports and commentary, most of it negative, about Shell and the accounting scandal that plagued it last year. Just after Shell unveiled the name of the new entity last October, Mr. Donovan -- who has had frequent legal battles with Shell -- snapped up the rights to the Web site.

Cyber-squatting, in which people register domain names associated with a company's brands or identity, has become a bane of the corporate world in the age of the Internet. Squatters search out permutations of well-known names, often angling for a quick payout in exchange for selling the site to the company or using the site to draw hits to unrelated Web destinations. Often, critics try to grab similar domain names to draw attention to causes associated with a particular company or product.



Alfred Donovan

But landing the exact domain name for a corporation as big and as well known as Shell is a rare coup these days.


Shell paid \$115 million in fees to bankers, attorneys and accountants to hammer out the details of the plan, announced last October, to streamline its ownership structure by merging its two parent companies, **Royal Dutch Petroleum Co.** of The Hague, Netherlands, and **Shell Transport & Trading Co.**, based in London. After the merger, the new company will be headquartered in The Hague and have just one stock listing, in London, with an estimated market capitalization of more than \$200 billion. For years the company has been listed in London and Amsterdam.

Shell executives realized shortly after the merger announcement last fall that the new corporate name had been snapped up. Last month, Shell attorneys filed a complaint with the World Intellectual Property Organization, a Geneva-based arbiter of domain disputes, requesting Mr. Donovan be stripped of rights to the site, along with two others.

Shell's main corporate Web site will continue to be www.shell.com.

John Donovan, Mr. Donovan's son, said his father isn't seeking money from Shell but wants to draw as many people as possible to his Web site's postings about the company. "It's the good,

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the bad and the ugly," the younger Mr. Donovan said in a phone interview with his father, who is hard of hearing. "And it's not his fault the news has been so bad for Shell lately."

The two Donovans are well-known to Shell. They have waged a long-running anti-Shell campaign dating to the 1990s revolving around disputes over the rights to Shell gasoline-station promotions.

Over the years, the two sides have settled four lawsuits. But Mr. Donovan has continued his crusade. He has periodically picketed the company's headquarters and annual meetings.

In their complaint with the World Intellectual Property Organization, Shell attorneys argued that although there is no litigation outstanding between the two sides, the company believes the elder Mr. Donovan acquired the Web site "as a means of increasing his capability to disparage Shell at some time in the future."

A Shell spokeswoman declined to comment on the dispute, citing the pending arbitration.

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