

THE MODERN GAME AND THE TROUBLE WITH BASEBALL

From Golden Age to Modern Game

the last days of the old game; 1956 is the last subway series, New York will no longer be - after a 100 year reign - the capital of baseball; end of geographic constriction, beginning of expansion in number of teams; end of segregation; end of Landis-era; end of heyday of minor leagues; end of leaving gloves on the field, natural grass, flannel uniforms: see When it Was a Game for an evocative depiction of the old game.

the impact of World War II; the Star-Spangled banner for each and every game (since 1918 but only for special games); shortage of rubber, substitutes Blatta at core of ball, brings down offense; game spreads internationally especially to postwar Japan (wartime Japanese propaganda had included the cry “F--k Babe Ruth”); brief appearance of professional women’s league

the role of the “sports page” and of radio: since the 1890s, the sports page had served the dual role of promoting the big metropolitan daily newspapers and the game of baseball; baseball was lucky to have had a group of talented and myth-making set of writers (Ring Lardner, Red Smith, Heywood Broun, Damon Runyon, Westbrook Pegler), a self-selected group of writers for whom baseball was noble and important; the sports page was largely responsible for baseball as a “culture,” a matter of everyday life; radio added to this, at least after the owners got over their fear that it would steal their audience (it actually built up a regional fan base); again baseball blessed with talented journalists (Russ Hodges, Red Barber, Harry Carey, Ronald Reagan’s recreated games)

the game of the ‘40s and ‘50s; a more one-dimensional power game; the era of Kiner and Kluszewski, Sauer and Wertz; doubles and triples as well as stolen bases and the hit and run decline; but best players, like Musial and Williams, remain multi-dimensional; Williams’s career is especially outstanding - difficult to believe he did what he did while losing five years to two wars

the Yankee juggernaut; era of Yankees’ greatest dominance and of closest correlation between size of city and success on the field (see Rader, 164-5); Yankees have great farm system, which GM George Weiss used deftly to add key veterans for stretch run toward pennant (Mize, Slaughter, Duren, Sain, Shantz - the sort of thing Toronto did over the last ten years - ed. probably more than twenty or twenty-five years ago); really only Dodgers challenge Yankee supremacy, and that largely due to Brooklyn’s early tapping of black talent.

the era of the pitcher, 1963-1968: due to night baseball, specialized relief pitchers, batters going for homers all the time; new parks with more foul ground; better gloves and fielding; introduction of the slider - but perhaps key change was in strike zone - in 1963 umpires instructed to call strikes to the bottom of the knees - then in 1969 umpires told to call strikes only

between the knees and the belt; mound also lowered from 15 to 10 inches, many parks shortened outfield fences, and AL goes to designated hitter for the pitcher (in 1973).

Baseball in Trouble: The Modern Game and its Discontents

“the O’Malley” (in Brooklynese, this means “the Devil”) and the Los Angeles Dodgers; average attendance at Ebbets down to 14,000 per game; O’Malley opens new era of demanding public assistance for a new park, asks for city’s help in acquiring site, while Dodgers will pay for construction; powerful city planner Robert Moses blocks use of Atlantic Avenue Railroad terminal site (Moses imagines a future for baseball played at remote sites beamed to waiting audience via closed circuit TV); LA offers Chavez Ravine site - had been earmarked for unpopular public housing project - to O’Malley; typical of urban renewal projects of ‘50s, upscale developments over attacking social problems or preserving middle-income neighborhoods; O’Malley opens era of franchise shifts, the move to west coast, greater reliance on TV (LA telethon wins LA voters over to referendum on Dodgers).

problems underlying shifting franchises, labor turmoil, and dependence on TV; postwar disposable income, night baseball, and tight pennant races led to peak of popularity in 1949; but soon players begin to challenge reserve clause, Congress expressed concern that “territorial rights” of the baseball monopoly leaving too many big cities out of the sport (seven sets of hearings, 1951-1960); then shift of middle class out of cities and into suburbs; old ballparks left in increasingly run-down, and predominantly black inner cities; leisure orientation from public and downtown institutions to family - home entertainment center and little league; baseball parks seen as dark and forbidding, part of urban blight (my brother suffered a serious head injury leaving Connie Mack Stadium in the late 1960s).

the impact of television; some dispute about whether impact is negative or positive; Boston Braves believe sale of TV rights in 1952 (for a mere \$40,000) killed attendance; but poor team may explain that and after move to Milwaukee TV doesn’t hurt attendance; owners try to figure balance; how much exposure makes TV a drag rather than a boon to attendance; Sports Broadcasting Act of 1961 solves problem of teams from bigger cities grabbing all the national money (Act allows baseball to act as cartel in negotiating with networks for broadcast rights) but local TV contracts still give big city team huge edge over small city teams; until mid-80s, though, TV revenues relatively small; games are time-fillers, not huge draws, and game itself translates poorly to the screen (see George Will’s Men at Work, especially the chapter on Cal Ripkin, for some sense of what TV misses); then in 1983 and again in 1990 TV revenues soar in context of network competition for major sporting events (regular season packaged with All-Star, playoffs, World Series).

expansion and franchise shuffling, 1960s and ‘70s; prompted by both declining attendance (poorer drawing team in two-team cities allowed to move; Browns, Braves, A’s) and by Congressional pressure; mixed results; brief Milwaukee boom, but perhaps only Dodgers clear

winners; still does bring about metropolitan competition for franchises and consequent building of metro. stadiums (they have their detractors, but none blocked (ed. again this is as of 2003).

The Empowerment of the Players

postwar beginnings of empowerment; Chandler replaces Landis, the cartel enforcer: Chandler to owners: “You don’t own the game...the game belongs to the American people.” Chandler starts players pension plan, with \$1 million from All-Star and World Series broadcast revenues; in 1949 Robert Murphy of the CIO tries to organize an American Baseball Guild; “murphy money” (\$25 per week during spring training), pension plan, and \$5,000 minimum salary, and player representatives on owners’ council are all owners’ efforts to block Murphy; but then pension plan becomes reoccurring point of contention; in 1953 new commissioner Frick blocks full accounting on pension plan; in response players hire J. Norman Lewis as their legal representative (while promising no union is in works); but owners bar Lewis from talks and in 1954 players form Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA); Lewis continues to press for more pension contributions, but in 1959 players fire Lewis to mollify angry owners; Judge Robert Cannon, really the owners man, they even offer to pay him, becomes players’ legal advisor; offered positions of MLBPA administrator but Cannon refuses, reconsiders, adds conditions, winds up angering players; but desire for full-time administrator reveals discontent while Drysdale-Koufax holdout reveals potential of collective action

enter Marvin Miller and the Basic Agreement of 1968: in 1966 Miller become executive director of MLBPA; tough union man from steelworkers’ union, Miller’s greatest contribution is to listen; players don’t want a union that negotiates contracts for players, but they do have concerns about pension, minimum salary, and playing conditions; owners play into Miller’s hand, their firm opposition to him convinces players he is their man; owners’ create Player Relations Committee, hire professional negotiator John Gaherin; Miller threatens appeal to National Labor Relations Board (agency created by New Deal’s 1935 Wagner Labor Relations Act); owners sign unprecedented Basic Agreement in January 1968 (first in any sport); allows players to use agents, and to file grievances with commissioner

the 1969 boycott and Bowie Kuhn; owners’ refusal to link TV money to pension plan brings about boycott of spring training; NBC refuses to pay major league prices for minor league ball; with commissioners’ office empty, PRC calls in Bowie Kuhn who negotiates settlement, increase in pension but not tied to TV money; Kuhn becomes commissioner in summer 1969

the spring 1972 strike; a mismatch and 1973 agreement; owners divided, Busch and others want to break union, but several of old boys not wanting to anger players; players solid behind Miller; again revolves around pension, but in background is Flood challenge and basic agreement; in 1973 Basic Agreement will include arbitration after two years of service; players win 50%, but many other salaries raised to avoid arbitration

Flood, Hunter, Messersmith, 1969-1976; with MLBPA backing, Flood sued for free agency in

wake of his 1969 trade to Phillies; Supreme Court, citing 1922 exemption, rules against Flood's claim of conspiracy in restraint of trade; but players' resolved now to assault reserve clause in Basic Agreement negotiations; in 1974 federal arbitrator ruled that Charlie Finley failed to live up to Catfish Hunter's contract and made Hunter a free agent; owners conspire to hold firm but within two weeks Steinbrenner breaks ranks and offers Hunter five-year, \$3.75 million contract; owners shocked and worried; Messersmith (and McNally who subsequently retires) refuse to sign contracts in 1975, play out season, then declares himself free agent (and Seitz ratifies); with this ploy as club, Miller demands revision in Basic Agreement in 1976 negotiations.

the 1976 lockout; owners briefly lock players out of spring training, but federal courts uphold Seitz on Messersmith decision and Kuhn orders camps reopened; in July 1976 agreement reached on free agency after six years, with teams getting only raw rookie compensation for lost players

the great strike of 1981; in 1980 negotiations, owners intent on getting cap on arbitration awards and increased compensation for lost free agents; get strike insurance and impose gag rule on all owner statements on labor situation; media blitz to discredit players; players resist, get their own strike fund; when owners unilaterally impose their plan in February 1981, players prepare for strike and strike in June (any player refusing to strike, George Brett said "is going to spend the rest of his career in the dirt, ducking pitches thrown at his head.") Although fans appear to side with owners, the owners give in as their strike insurance is running out; minor additional compensation for lost free agents (pick from 40 man roster with 26 protected)

subsequent skirmishes; drug use testing, brief 1985 strike (two days in August), the collusion cases in 1985 and 1987 and 1988 federal awards to players

the disaster of 1994-1995 (see handouts)

I strongly recommend Bill James' essay "Revolution," in The Bill James Baseball Abstract (New York, 1988), pp. 17-22 and the PBS documentary The Trouble in Baseball (1992).

Reflections on Bill James' "Revolution"

Why No Scabs in Baseball: Writing in 1987 in the midst of a football strike that featured replacement players, James asks why that sort of thing never happened in baseball. The answer was the minor leagues provided baseball players with "insulation." In football, the next best players below the highest league were completely out of the system with little or no hope for breaking in. In baseball thousands of sub-major league players were in the system, confident that given their talent and hard work, they could break into the system. So the next best baseball players would not cross the picket line, would not forfeit their chance. In football, that was exactly what was happening - and every week the replacement players got better and the striking players got fatter and more out of shape. It wouldn't be long before the replacement players became a credible product. If the owners reached down below the minor leagues for baseball

scabs, the players would be tempted to form their own league - easily wrestling credibility away from the owners' scabs. (In my terms, the aspiring baseball player believed in the fairness and openness of Organized Baseball - a model of how the economy should work, rewarding talent and hard work, providing opportunities. The more hierarchical - and seemingly corporate - football appeared more oppressive.)

The Sad History of the Minor Leagues: The outcome is that the existence of the minor leagues has forced the owners to share expanding incomes with the players. How did this come about, James asks. The minors were not created by the majors - in the "primordial soup" of early baseball, teams and leagues competed openly for players. The "organization" of the major and minor leagues originated in the owners "attempt to deprive the players of negotiating power." The best leagues (NL and AA) began buying the best players of the lower leagues and eventually the minor league owners would begin holding out for higher and higher prices. So the majors created regularized drafting procedures to hold down the prices and eliminate wild bidding on players. Still some minor league teams refused to cooperate, to tried to hold onto their best players, to win games, to draw fans, indeed to aspire to major league status. Then the major league owners proposed the AAA-AA-A-B-C-D drafting arrangement - giving each league on the hierarchy both an opportunity to take players from below and to profit from selling players to the next higher level. The argument, as James puts it, "If we don't do this, you see, then the teams that keep all their best players are going to get so strong that they'll walk all over the rest of the league." (Think collusion to insure competition; think Jack Dunn's Baltimore Orioles.) Eventually, since Dunn's Orioles did walk all over everyone else, the minor leagues forced each of their teams to agree to this procedure. The next step was to turn minor league teams into farm teams, growing players for the majors - eventually eliminating the free minor leagues. Eventually the minor league teams no longer had any interest in actually building teams and winning games, but only in accepting subsidies and draft payments from the majors. (The Earl Weaver story about the slow-footed first/third baseman.) "If you're selling a sport," James writes, "and the players don't care about winning, that's not a sport. That's fraud." The minor leagues, he concludes, have become "an abomination in the sight of the Lord," depriving most cities in the nation from having real baseball.

The Hollow Victory of the Players Union: The irony, of course, is that the owners created the minor league system in their greed to control the players, yet now those same minor leagues hold the owners captive to the players union - passing on the huge revenues in the sport to the players. It's good, from my point of view, that the true producers get the revenue - why give it to Steinbrenner and Reinsdorf? And our heroes - who carry so much meaning for us and do, at times, represent our better selves -should be treated with dignity. But in the current system, only a favor few player-producers as so treated and rewarded. Minor league players (and indeed a goodly percentage of major league players with short careers) are left out of the clover. More important, most of the nation - most of our cities - are deprived of good baseball while those that have it are constantly being blackmailed for more public subsidies and stadia. Nor do the players always have that much respect for the game, for its history, for those that won them their favored

position today (see the union's web site), or least of all for the fans. It wasn't enough to break the monopsony; the monopoly has to go too.

James' Revolutionary (and Civic) Vision: "There should be leagues, and there should be pennant races, and there should be civic pride invested in them," James writes - and not just in 30 cities but in every city. Instead we have a monopoly that threatens cities with the removal of the only real professional baseball in the land and thus extracts huge public subsidies and sports stadia. With a variety of leagues that actually competed with one another, for fans, players, media contracts, "[b]uilding and maintaining a stadium would be strictly a matter of civic pride, as it should be." Cities might themselves own the teams (profiting from what I argue in my op-ed piece is a socially-created form of wealth), competing with other cities to have the best teams, the best fans, the best parks, the best schools, the best communities (all of which would help in the competition for the best players), and plowing the profits back into the city. More leagues (not two but six, eight, ten), more teams (not thirty but sixty and more), more players (not 800 but 6400), more fans (not 70 million but 170 million) - not a tiny clique of superrich owners and players that most of us see only on Sportscenter - but baseball back among the people, once again at the center of our civic life - these are the potential rewards of the revolution James calls for.

Would it Work?: Fans? Are there enough? In 1949, Lincoln, Nebraska had a free minor league team that drew 149,000 fans - it would draw 300,000 today. Nebraska football draws 500,000 fans a year - most of whom have nothing to do with the University but follow a team that is trying to win. Add civic pride about a winning team in Lincoln and the fans are no problem. But it will be a minor league team!!! Nebraska couldn't beat the Kansas City Chiefs but people still flock to their games. Kansas Jayhawk basketball will get a far higher TV audience than the Boston Celtics where James lives. People like effort, competition, winning - at whatever level (how many of us have thrilled to high school or even elementary school sports). Players? Read his argument on 21 - 800 out of 240,000,000 or 6,400 out of 240,000,000? And his hundred yard dash point on the same page.

How Do We Get There from Here? James offers two possibilities. End the anti-trust exemption is the first essential thing. Then do one of two things. Divide the existing leagues into three or four independent leagues that are prohibited from colluding in any way - on media contracts, or player procurement, on franchise location. Let those leagues compete for placing teams in new cities, for new players, for media contracts. The other, slower - but perhaps more effective means - is to force the major leagues to divest themselves of all relationships with minor league teams. Free those teams to try to win and to improve their teams and their leagues. We might soon see the PCL making a move to become a major league - planting a team in LA and blowing a wad on Junior Griffey. The competition won't always be pretty (which is why I like to emphasize the need for public teams) and MLB will have to be prevented from expanding so as to supplant teams in cities that try to improve - but it's worth a try. Read bottom of 22.