

Taming the brats of summer



JEFF MARION

If Major League Baseball were run like a real business, it would have gone under long ago.

This business has got to be the only one whose employees demand 58 percent of the revenue, the only one that allows some of its franchisees to run up multi-million dollar debts annually, and the only company that can't afford to pay its workers, despite having a more popular product than ever before. Welcome to the business that is major league baseball.

America's national pastime is on the verge of its eighth labor stoppage in its illustrious history, as a new collective bargaining agreement between the owners (greedy) and the players (even greedier) has not yet been reached.

Experts and insiders are predicting that an agreement will not be reached anytime soon and that the Players' Association, led by Donald Fehr, could go on strike as soon as the middle of July. In order to avoid a strike, the players would have to accept the owners' latest proposal, which includes an eight percent decrease in player revenue and an end to salary arbitration. Needless to say, the players aren't happy about having the status quo taken away from them and have turned a cold shoulder on the owners. Baseball fans might want to get to the ballparks soon because it looks like the boys of summer might be taking an early vacation.

For fans of baseball, the impacts of another strike are obvious. Baseball is not like other sports in that you can't call replacement workers (affectionately known as "scabs" in union lingo) in to continue the season.

A strike this year could be extremely detrimental to baseball because two players — Ken Griffey, Jr. of the Seattle Mariners and Frank Thomas of the Chicago White Sox — both have outside chances at breaking Roger Maris' single season home run record of 61. However, their shot to rewrite the record book will probably never materialize because they and their money-hungry peers can't live with \$7 to \$11.7 billion of Major League Baseball's revenue over the next seven years. Go figure.

Although the players seem to be the ones to blame for this mess, it's the owners who have set the precedent by allowing their workers disgustingly lucrative contracts time and time again. Every time Griffey gets a new contract, then Thomas wants a new one, and so will Barry Bonds. This is the pattern that owners have let take place and it has caused salaries to spiral upward ever since.

Also, recent history shows that the owners will give in to the players' demands if a strike occurs. This fact offers the Players' Association no incentive to try to prevent a strike. If the stoppage is long enough, the players will most likely get what they want. In the business of Major League Baseball, the employees call all the shots. It's a classic case of the tail wagging the dog.

You would think that all this mess would drive fans away from the ballpark, but that hasn't occurred. Attendance at major league ballparks is at an all-time high as ticket prices continue to rise. Every time a player sits out because of a contract dispute, you will hear fans complain about "those high-priced bums" and yet these same fans still attend the games.

If the owners continue to make more money in ticket sales, the fans can't expect any improvement in how they handle that revenue. As it stands now, neither the players or the owners are held accountable for inefficient business practices. Somewhere along the line, that has to change.

No business could possibly operate like Major League Baseball. The saddest part of this impending strike is that the only people affected are the fans. After all this has passed, the owners and the players will still be dirt rich. The only thing we can do is forget about them and focus on what the game of baseball is really all about. Baseball is about the kid who shows up two hours early to the ballpark in the hope of getting an autograph. It's about the Little League World Series, and about parents playing catch with their children on a Saturday afternoon.

This is America's national pastime in its purest form. The spoiled brats of summer will go on squabbling about dollar figures whether they strike or not. Meanwhile, kids of all ages will continue to enjoy the game they love. Maybe the pros could learn a lesson or two from them.

Jeff Marion is an advertising account executive at the Emerald.

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