

Troubled MLB must reach a cooperative agreement

How bad are things getting for baseball?

Pretty bad. The players' union is setting a strike date, Commissioner Bud Selig foresees several teams going bankrupt, the owners are planning to relocate and eliminate some teams, and a recent retiree is writing a controversial "tell-all" book about his experiences behind the scenes.

The biggest problem is the polarization of the haves and have-nots in the game. The attendance in cities such as Kansas City and Montreal have been pitiful. The Royals drew 40,605 on Opening Day against the Minnesota Twins but have only averaged 15,400 since.

Since an Opening Day crowd of 34,351, the Expos, who were close to extinction last fall, have only had one game with an attendance of more than 20,000, and it took \$5 tickets and \$1 hot dogs to do it. Excluding those two games, Montreal is averaging only 6,600 fans per game.

A third team that is suffering even worse is the Anaheim Angels. Since April 24, the Angels have been one of the hottest teams in baseball, yet during that time, Anaheim has had an average home attendance of 23,200. The average

seems high compared to the Royals and Expos but is pretty sad considering more than 12 million people live in Los Angeles and Orange County — and the ballpark's capacity is more than 45,000.

The fact is that people are turned off by the disparity of team salaries in baseball. The more a team spends, the more fans it puts into a stadium. All the teams with top-10 salaries draw more than 29,000 fans a game. This is led by Arizona, San Francisco and Seattle, who all average more than 39,000.

The Cubs, Cardinals and Orioles average more than 32,000 fans a game because of tradition and years of fan appreciation. Unfortunately, they are exceptions to the rule.

The disparity is not only between teams, but players as well. This year, the top 4 percent of the league's money-makers will earn more than 20 percent of the players' salary money. This is led by such team-hoppers as Yankees first baseman Jason Giambi (a former Athletic) and Rangers shortstop Alex Rodriguez (a former Mariner).

These disparities are causing economic problems, and negotiations between owners and players aren't going well.

GUEST COMMENTARY Peter Martini

Nobody wants a repeat of the devastation of 1994, when the World Series was wiped out by an ugly strike. There are no easy answers, but one might end up being a salary cap. I've always been against a salary cap for baseball and so has the players' union for obvious reasons.

But as Selig so generously pointed out a few weeks ago, as if we didn't already know, six to eight teams could go bankrupt within the next two years if nothing changes in the economic system.

Last fall, owners tried to help the economic situation by eliminating the Expos and the Twins. But a judge ordered that the Twins had a legal obligation to play in the Metrodome this season, thus temporarily halting the contraction. By filling just 42 percent of the stands on average, the Minnesota fans aren't making a strong case to keep the team. However, I believe the team can be saved.

The Expos, on the other hand, are most likely done in Montreal after this year. Odds are they'll either be contracted or relocated.

Washington, D.C., has lobbied heavily for the franchise and seems to be a front-runner if the owners decide to relocate.

In short, baseball expanded too much, too quickly during the 1990s, so contraction wouldn't be all bad if the right teams are chosen — I vote for the Expos and Devil Rays. Then I would move the Marlins to the nation's capital.

Another problem just revealed is that former player Jose Canseco is going to write a book describing the behavior of players. As you can imagine, this has stirred up many emotions by players and former players who don't want the book published.

Barry Bonds said he doesn't think finger-pointing will do the game any good. Former Padres All-star Tony Gwynn said he believes Canseco is "worthy of consideration" for the Hall of Fame, however, if Canseco writes his book, Gwynn would change his mind.

Canseco wasn't the most moral or fan-friendly player in the game, but one thing I've always admired about him is his Charles Barkley-like frankness and honesty. I don't think he would lie in his book, but he might exaggerate some things.

It has been reported that Canseco said 85 percent of baseball players use steroids, but I find

that very difficult to believe. Do I think the report is true? Yes. Do I think Canseco was honest? Yes.

I think Canseco is honest about what he has seen in his career, but I don't think his experiences represent baseball as a whole.

However, people already think baseball players are overpaid, and if this book gets published, then they could view players as overpaid druggies.

Canseco's book could also put a negative stigma on the performance and accomplishments of baseball players. Whenever a player hits a home run, fans will wonder if he or steroids did it. As it is, former player Ken Caminiti recently announced that he used steroids during his 1996 MVP season with the Padres.

Either way, baseball needs to change its economic system and public perception. That goes for both owners and players. It can start this summer by having the two sides come together to set an agreement that can last for more than just eight years.

If they don't, and another strike happens, the sport could lose its fans forever.

Peter Martini is a freelance reporter for the Emerald. His views do not necessarily represent those of the Emerald.

Sports brief

Asian rivals present united front for World Cup

Thirty years after Ping-Pong diplomacy thawed hostilities between the United States and China, soccer diplomacy might prove to be a turning point in the relationship between three unfriendly neighbors.

Korea and Japan, which have co-existed in disharmony for centuries, are co-hosts of the World Cup, and determined to present a smiling, united front as the globe peers in on Asia for the four weeks of the tournament.

Isolated and poverty-stricken North Korea, still technically at war with South Korea and on belligerent terms with Japan, is hoping the World Cup will lead to aid

and some token of acceptance from nations that regard it as a Cold War throwback.

"There is considerable friction in the entire area," said June Teufel Dreyer, chair of the University of Miami political science department. "Koreans like to describe their country as the nut caught between nut-crackers Japan and China. Japan has a history of conquering Korea. The World Cup is meant

as a confidence-building measure. If they can have a successful soccer tournament together, they might like each other better."

The rivalries are acute off and on the field. South Korea, a five-time World Cup dud, is hoping to advance to the second round on home soil. Japan, proud of how its domestic league has surpassed Korea's in terms of talent, is also looking to make a worldwide impression.

"Japan is looking nervously over its shoulder because its economy has been in the doldrums since 1990," Teufel Dreyer said. "Koreans are very astute and hard-working. Japan sees a scrappy little rival."

Japan has periodically invaded

Korea since the 13th century. During Japan's annexation of Korea from 1909 to 1945, Korean children were educated in the Japanese language, Koreans were forced to adopt Japanese names and many Koreans were forcibly taken to Japan to do menial work or serve in the Japanese army.

After Japan was defeated in World War II, Korea was split in two by the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1950, North Korea invaded South Korea, and the Korean War raged for three years. The demilitarized zone still divides the peninsula.

— Linda Robertson
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