Sports

Major League Baseball should punish players in the sign-stealing scandal

COREY KIRK

Prior to the pandemic dominating the headlines in the world of sports, this baseball offseason has been muddied. Fingers have been pointed, action has been taken and consequences have been laid out. This is what sign-stealing has brought to Major League Baseball in the past few years, and these players should be punished.

Sign-stealing is generally defined as the act of decoding the opponent's signs to provide a tactical advantage by relaying the signs to the batter.

How long has it been around the game? Allegations have been flying since the turn of the 20th century. As the game evolved, so did the sign-stealing. Throughout time we have seen tools as wide-ranging as the use of an underground wire system, use of the scoreboard, a bright peach nectar can, the work of a mascot, and the use of a refrigerator light bulb.

Did these actions face any type of consequences? Sort of. The occasional fine was issued, protests were filed, and a strict set of rules was laid out once cameras were introduced at the ballparks right around the 1960s.

That all changed this past offseason.

In 2014, MLB introduced a challenge system that brought monitors right into the dugouts to give opportunities for teams to challenge plays called by an umpire. Three years later, after the Boston Red Sox were fined for misusing the technology with the work of an Apple Watch, MLB Commissioner Robert Manfred made it very loud and clear:

Technological sign-stealing is prohibited. Abide by these rules or face even more serious sanctions.

Fast forward to the present day and Manfred is standing by his word. The Houston Astros were caught stealing signs after the 2017 season, using the technology to give their batters an extra advantage. By banging on a trash can, they were able to tip off the person at the plate what pitch was coming. A later investigation in the offseason uncovered that during the 2018 season the Red Sox were using their monitors to learn what pitches were being thrown to their hitters.

The outcry for punishment was loud and clear among other teams and fans. Manfred didn't pull any punches, rolling out his last punishments just this past week. Between the two teams, millions of dollars in fines were assessed, draft picks were lost and suspensions were doled out.

But what about the players involved?

Outside of half-hearted apologies, they are still being told not to comment on the matter. Manfred decided not to punish any Astros or Red Sox players. But the outcry from the fans and players around the league poured in.

Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout expressed a loss of respect for those involved.

Chicago Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant speculated that players would have continued to steal signs if they hadn't been caught.

Atlanta Braves outfielder Nick Markakis was so angry he suggested the Astros deserved a beating.

It comes as no surprise that players are going to take matters into their own hands. Prior to the pandemic halting baseball, Vegas gambling sites were giving odds on how many Astros and Red Sox would be hit by pitches. MLB officials can attempt to regulate this, but it just won't go away.

As for the fans, they too are calling for retribution. At one point the Los Angeles City Council asked the MLB commissioner to award both World Series titles to the Los Angeles Dodgers, which lost the 2017 World Series to the Astros and the 2018 Series to the Red Sox. New York Yankees fans and players, including pitcher C.C. Sabathia, said they were cheated from an opportunity to play in the World Series.

Fans are justified in their anger, but taking away World Series titles from the Astros and Red Sox won't be satisfying enough for me. Let these titles stand, and educate those who reflect back on those victories, much as we reflect on Barry Bonds as the home run king.

Another asterisk in the record book.

As for discipline, my proposed punishment is to make these two teams ineligible for the playoffs for two years. Every player from both rosters during seasons when sign-stealing was confirmed should be ineligible to be on a playoff roster, meaning that even if they played for a different team they couldn't compete in the postseason.

As for personal accolades, the players wouldn't be eligible to win any type of awards for two seasons as well.

Although sign-stealing directly benefits batters, pitchers on both teams also need to face consequences too. After former Houston pitcher Mike Fiers brought this to light, it's fair that the entire clubhouse should be accountable for these actions.

Punishment for sign-stealing needs to evolve. We have seen a three-strikes policy on steroid use that serves as a strong deterrent.

So do I think this would be the end of sign-stealing? Absolutely not. Players will seek a competitive advantage through another form of sign-stealing in the future. After all, some players still take performance-enhancing drugs even though they know the potential ramifications.

For the sport long known as "America's Pastime," hurdles like this have challenged MLB officials in the past. Where I think Commissioner Manfred stuck to his guns with punishments to the upper brass, he shouldn't have just omitted consequences from these players. A zero-tolerance policy should have been felt from top to bottom of the Houston Astros and the Boston Red Sox rosters.

Immediate deterrence would have done serious damage to any form of sign-stealing.

Corey Kirk is sports editor of the Baker City Herald.

BRIEFING

Major League Baseball ponders 3-division system if season starts

NEW YORK (AP) — Major League Baseball is exploring various options that could allow the season to start if the medical situation allows, including a plan in which the 30 teams might be split into three regional divisions.

Among the formats under consideration is one in which teams could be restricted to playing within their region, two people familiar with the discussions said Tuesday. The people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because no public statements were authorized.

That plan, if used, would break up the traditional alignments of the American and National Leagues. It also would cut travel during the coronavirus pandemic.

Another variation would have teams start in Arizona, Texas and Florida, playing in empty ballparks, and then if the health situation allows, switch later to their regular-season sites. Opening day had been scheduled for March 26, but the new coronavirus caused MLB to delay the start to mid-May at the earliest.

North Carolina governor says NASCAR race can happen in May

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — NASCAR can go forward with the Coca-Cola 600 at Charlotte Motor Speedway without fans in attendance at the end of May unless health conditions deteriorate in the state, the governor of North Carolina said.

Gov. Roy Cooper said he and state public health officials have had discussions with NASCAR and the speedway located in Concord regarding safety protocols for staging the race. Cooper said the state offered input on NASCAR's plan, but he believes the race can go forward on Memorial Day weekend for the 60th straight year.

Chargers don't expect Herbert to be team's immediate starter

COSTA MESA, Calif. — The Los Angeles Chargers are hopeful Justin Herbert can develop into a franchise quarterback. They are planning on a patient approach.

Before Herbert can become the face of the franchise, general manager Tom Telesco just wants him to learn the playbook.

"There's no pressure on Justin to walk in on Day One — we're not asking him to come in here and carry the football whatsoever — just asking him to come in, start competing, start learning and we'll take it from there," Telesco said of Herbert, the former Oregon star who was the sixth overall pick in the NFL draft. "Really not asking him to be the face of the franchise."

The Chargers hope Tyrod Taylor can begin the season as the starter.

— Joe Reedy, AP Sports Writer

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