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Baseball Changes

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At the end of this baseball season there will a fundamental shift in the organization of Major League Baseball. At the opening of the next season the Houston Astros will be an American League team. The change was forced by Baseball Commissioner "Bud" Selig who made it a prerequisite to the purchase of the Houston franchise.

For too long there has been an imbalance in the leagues with fourteen teams in the American League and sixteen in the National League. Now each league will have fifteen teams. This will fundamentally change the patterns of competition in the major leagues.

Since the beginning of inter-league play there have been certain periods during the season when American League teams play National League teams, except that because of the imbalance there were always two National League teams playing each other while inter-league play was taking place. The other feature of inter-league play was the fact that natural rivals, such as the Cubs and White Sox or the Yankees and Mets, were scheduled against each year each year while the other teams played teams on a rotation basis. All of this became a talking point this week as the 2013 schedules have been released.

Now that will end. Throughout the season there will be inter-league play. There will always be one team from each league playing each other, because of the odd number of teams in each league. This has been a controversial move but one that many baseball people, especially the Commissioner, feel will be a good one. It will create more overall balance in each team's schedule. The natural rivalry games across leagues will remain, but there will be four rather than six games, consisting of two two-game series. There has already been grumbling about this.

During the off season last year and heading into this season there was a considerable amount of discussion of this movement of the Astros to the American League and the scheduling changes that will result. Another part of the discussion involved the Designated Hitter and what might now become of it with inter-league play being an everyday part of the game.

A number of the prominent baseball writers were predicting that the Designated Hitter would now come into universal use. Some predicted that the Commissioner of Baseball would take the occasion of this realignment of the leagues to impose the DH on the National League. It is one of few leagues in the known universe that has refused to adapt and adopt the DH. The refusal has been wrapped in the mantle of smugness and arrogance that has long marked the "Senior" circuit.

Oddly all of the discussion of ending the NL holdout vanished when the season began, or shortly thereafter. Next season will be the fortieth anniversary of the coming of the Designated Hitter to baseball. Isn't it about time for the Commissioner to act to end this strange baseball anomaly?

Why should the National League have to change? NL diehards will ask. The simple answer is that they are the only ones out of step. A more realistic answer is the Player's Association will not allow the elimination of the jobs of at least fourteen of its members.

The other response is why not let well enough alone. This difference has lasted for forty years and it has not destroyed the game. This is true, but I would argue this is due more to the resilience of the game than to the wisdom of the National League.

The real trouble with the existence of two different rules involving the hitting lineup is in fact quite substantial. It distorts those lineups when teams from the National League play teams from the American League. Consequently the teams that meet in the World Series are not the same teams that won the championships of their respective leagues.

There has not been a World Series game for nearly forty years now in which the authentic league champions have faced each other. Under the current arrangement when a World Series game is played in the National League ballpark, the American League team can not use the DH. This radically changes the lineup and affects the way in which that lineup rolls over. Quite simply the American League champion never appears intact in the National League city.

In the other direction, when a National League team plays a World Series game in an American League city its lineup is also disrupted. Some would argue that being able to use the DH will strengthen the offensive power of the National League team. Others argue that the National League rosters are set differently than American League rosters so in fact whatever advantage they might gain offensively by adding another hitter is negated. Either way we can say once again that for the past four decades the National League Champion has never played a World Series game in an American League city.

Add that up and what that means is that for the last four decades the National League Champion has not faced the American League Champion in the World Series. In a sport that cherishes tradition, headed by a Commissioner who cherishes the history and purity of the game, how can this be allowed to continue?

This off-season will be a time of significant, and some would say radical, change. Among the changes that the Commissioner should mandate is the end of the National League refusal to use the DH. After four decades it's time for a real World Series once again.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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