

8-15-1997

On Sport and Society 8-15-1997

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "On Sport and Society 8-15-1997" (1997). *On Sport and Society*. 160.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/160>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
AUGUST 15, 1997

While sitting and waiting for the National Rifle Association to intervene on behalf of Barry Switzer and Alan Iverson, and contemplating Greg Maddox signing for 11.5 million dollars per year, and Kevin Garnett turning down 17 million dollars per year and demanding 22.5, I tried to concentrate on the more important issues. For example, will Bud Selig ever leave the commissioner's office while still breathing, and, what do I think about radical realignment in baseball?

Anytime baseball people talk about something being radical, I assume that they're talking about some kind of action that was viewed as liberal about a century ago. Much to my surprise, as I started looking at radical realignment, it really is radical.

Under discussion is a complete restructuring of the two leagues as we know them, into two leagues-still called the American and National League-with two divisions each. Each division will have geography as its organizing principle. The problem is that this will relocate many teams into a new league in which they will play a very different schedule, and it could lead to either the death or standardization of the Designated Hitter. The latter is something akin to the apocalypse for National League purists, who years ago lost their purity over artificial turf and so now cling desperately to their fantasy purity.

The American League will contain the Eastern teams in two divisions of seven teams each, and the National League will contain the Western teams in two divisions of eight teams each. This will set up the possibility of another expansion by two teams in the near future.

This plan does have some appeal. East and West will again become directional terms in at least one sport, and this may help our geographically challenged sports fans who still think that Atlanta is out west because for years both the NFL and the National League said so. In more practical terms, realignment, if it is accompanied by an unbalanced schedule, would allow for the development of intense regional rivalries, and insure that teams in divisional pennant races will be playing each other in September.

One of the under-discussed problems with all sport in our time is the proliferation of teams and players that has reduced the number of times teams play each other and therefore the number

of times people in any given city see the opposing players. This is part of why so many teams and players have become anonymous in many cities.

In addition this problem of anonymous players will be further reduced within leagues by the fact that a large number of games will no longer be played either before most fans are off work on one coast or after most fans go to bed on the other coast. At one time it was hoped that this problem would be eliminated by the United States Congress reducing the country to two time zones but such an excellent idea could never pass the U.S. Congress.

An added benefit to teams would be the greatly reduced travel schedule producing both savings to the owners as well as saving wear and tear on the players.

All and all these are ideas that have considerable merit.

The purists who oppose realignment talk about defending the traditions of baseball, but I am always a bit puzzled by what exactly those traditions might be. What seems to be the tradition to be defended this time, is that the American and National Leagues have existed side-by-side for a little less than a hundred years, which is a little more than the life-span of an average American.

Anything that old in America qualifies as a tradition, as this is perhaps the only society in the history of mankind to designate events as "the first annual" whatever. But then how deep and powerful is this tradition?

How many expansions have there been during this time period? How many different teams have there been in Washington, and how many are there now? How many locations have the Oakland Athletics or the Atlanta Braves called home in the last fifty years? How many different teams have there been in Seattle and Milwaukee? How many names have the Anaheim Angles had during their accumulating tradition? How many cities have been extorted into building new ball parks and giving away real estate and taxes in the defense of this same tradition? How many players were in earlier times traded off to distant cities in the name of tradition, and how many now walk easily away from tradition to another location with more dollars?

Indeed I am baffled by this defense of tradition as an argument against realignment, and so find myself persuaded more by a

deepening of rivalries and the creation of a powerful regional identity which will clash head on in a rejuvenated World Series.

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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