

11-13-2001

Downsizing MLB

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Downsizing MLB" (2001). *On Sport and Society*. 191.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/191>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
November 13, 2001

When asked if it was a sad day for baseball when it was announced that two major league baseball teams would be eliminated within the next few weeks, Bud Selig, Baseball's Wizard of Oz, said "no." What did you expect from the man who cancelled the World Series?

Unable to destroy the game with this aforementioned stupidity, Bud Lite has returned to make another run at it. Of course, Bud does not work alone. He has the direction and cooperation of most of the owners of major league baseball. He did when he cancelled the World Series and he does now.

Previous commissioners had the same kind of cooperation, including that of Milwaukee Brewer owner Bud Selig, when they were found guilty of collusion, when they repeatedly lost court and arbitration cases to the Player's Association, and when they lost one labor negotiation after another to the Player's Association.

These are the same people who in the wildest marketing technique in the History of American Business sell their product to the public by repeatedly saying what a terrible business it is, how it is all going down the drain because the players are greedy, and what terrible people the players and agents are as they don't care about the fans and the American public. Such brilliance should not be rewarded, but amazingly it is, primarily because the product transcends its ownership.

These are the same owners who repeatedly have tried to extort the public in city after city by threatening to take their terrible businesses to other cities unless they get new playpens so they can make more and more money. These are the same owners who would not dream of sharing profits with local communities, but who in the name of free enterprise want to socialize their self-proclaimed losses across those communities.

These are the same owners who proclaim their profound commitment to labor peace and collective bargaining but who repeatedly violate contracts, have never bargained in good faith, and seek to break the power of the Major League Baseball Player's Association. Ironically it is precisely these tactics that over the years have made the MLBPA the most powerful labor organization in sport.

These are the same owners who decry the high salaries of players only to turn around year after year and watch one another break new records for giving absurdly high salaries.

The Commissioner said last week that "it makes no sense for baseball to be in markets that generate insufficient local revenues to justify the investment in the franchises." He added that there are many organizations that have a "long record of failing to generate enough revenues to operate a viable franchise."

This should be fair warning to all owners. Over the past decade, taking the public statements of ownership about their losses as our guide, we must conclude that there are only a very few "viable franchises" in the major leagues. Owner after owner, always backed up by Commissioner's own yearly analysis, have told us over and over that everyone is losing money and that they can't possibly go on like this. Does this mean that nearly all major league franchises are in trouble? That nearly all are candidates for elimination?

The answer is, of course, both "yes" and "no." Those owners that are able to intimidate their cities into building new stadia whose profits will go exclusively to their teams will survive. Those franchises that keep all their profits to themselves and fight to the death to prevent revenue sharing of the "NFL kind" will survive.

Those franchises that try to move into the Washington, D.C. area and the territory of Baltimore Oriole's owner Peter Angelos in order to survive, will not be allowed to move or survive. Bud Lite and his band of merry men deem the fact that the Montreal Expos could be saved in Northern Virginia irrelevant.

Those franchises whose elimination could work to the greater profit of the Milwaukee Brewers can not be allowed to survive. The elimination of the Twins will increase the market for the Brewers causing an increase in fan base, an increase in television and radio revenue (currently a major weakness of the Brewer operations), and an increase in Brewer merchandise sales. Of course, Bud Selig whose ownership of the Brewers is in a blind trust, is an honorable man, and therefore this plays no role in his selection of the Twins for elimination, rather than some Florida franchise that would have no affect on the Brewers bottom line.

When all is said and done I have yet to see any solid economic analysis showing how elimination of teams will improve the economic health of baseball as opposed to the health of some select owners. Indeed what it will do is increase ill will at time when baseball seems to finally have recovered from the fallout of the aforementioned cancellation of the 1994 World Series. TV ratings for this years' World Series were the highest in a decade and average attendance at games this season approached an all-time high.

Elimination of teams will sharply increase the number of lawsuits that Major League Baseball will be fighting from both major and minor league cities affected by the elimination of teams. It will guarantee another fierce fight between Major League Baseball and the most powerful union in sports, a fight that MLB is nearly certain to lose. It will again produce public disgust with major league baseball.

The fallout from these developments will produce another period of decreasing revenues in an economic climate that is already shaky. It has already destroyed the upbeat climate following on the magnificent season and World Series just concluded. And finally it will do nothing but exacerbate the real problems of baseball that will once again not be addressed by any of these actions.

You couldn't possibly create such a scenario without being thought a candidate for "professional help." Yet, there are those who insist that Bud Selig is a great and wise man, the Diamond Messiah. Forgive me if I beg to differ.

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

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