

9-15-1993

MLB Realignment and Expansion

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "MLB Realignment and Expansion" (1993). *On Sport and Society*. 331.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/331>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR ARETE
September 15, 1993

The vote was 27-1 with only the Texas Rangers against the proposal. And so next season, if the players agree, there will be three divisions in each league in baseball. Realignment will have been achieved, and there will be another round of playoffs. Player approval is likely, as it was the Player's Association who suggested that it was time for realignment, rather than a second tier of playoffs involving second place teams.

Each league will have three divisions, east, central and west, and each division will have five teams except for the west where, for now, there will be four teams. Overall I think this is a positive development.

One of the first positive effects will be to create more geographic sense, especially to the National League where Atlanta and Cincinnati were in the Western Division, while St. Louis and Chicago were in the East. No wonder Americans are geographically illiterate.

Second, the scaling down of divisions will allow more teams to remain in the pennant races deeper into the season. In addition to the three divisional winners, the team with the next best record will make the playoffs, keeping more teams in the hunt deeper into the season. The hope is that this will enhance fan interest, while the new tier of playoffs will enhance television revenues.

Third, realignment sets the stage for further expansion. With each western division one team short of the other divisions, it is likely that the leagues will expand in the very near future. This should be excellent news to fans across the country, but especially to fans in Orlando.

It is clear that major league baseball would like to come into Central Florida, and that it will happen very soon. The only real question is whether major league baseball will go to Tampa\ St.Petersburg or come to Orlando. If Orlando is ready, and there are indications that both Linda Chapin and Glenda Hood are determined it will be, there is no doubt in my mind, that major league baseball would love to come into this market. Orlando needs to put together an ownership group that includes minority representation and a Disney component, and prepare the way for an open-air stadium of first class proportions. If these major steps are taken, and if all the small details are handled, I

personally think that major league baseball would prefer Orlando to Tampa\ St. Petersburg. The only thing the Bay area really has going for it, is guilt residue and a fear of lawsuits from the Giants situation. Neither of these are good reasons for baseball to go to the Bay area, especially if Orlando offers an attractive alternative.

Realignment then is a good idea and has possible significance for Orlando. But never expect everything to be right. There are still problems with this plan, and still things that need to be done.

First, the balanced schedule cannot be allowed to survive. If divisional play and divisional championships are to have full meaning, teams must play more games in division than out of division. This might be difficult to achieve in the western divisions until after expansion, but it could be done. In addition divisional play must be nearly all there is in the final weeks of the season, to give added luster to the divisional pennant races.

Second, the present plans for determining home-field advantage for the playoffs need to be scuttled, so that the number of wins rather than a rotational system is the determining factor. It gives everyone a reason to keep winning.

In addition to adopting the unbalanced schedule, major league baseball must take this opportunity to standardize the rules. The practice of having one set of rules for the National League, and a different set for the American League is absurd. The major issue of course is the Designated Hitter. It is time to either drop it, or force the National League to comply with all of the rest of organized baseball. This discrepancy has distorted the World Series for far too long.

Finally a note on the pennant races. The Giants free-fall has reached eight games. I said weeks ago that the only way the Braves could catch the Giants was if the Giants went into the tank. They have. Although the Braves must be credited with giving them a major push. The Braves have gone from 10 games down to 3 games up since July 22. Meanwhile both Philadelphia and the White Sox are threatening to create pennant races in their divisions, and of course the American League East, as it almost always seems to, should be a horse race to the finish line. Even without Joe Montana or Michael Jordan, baseball remains the national pastime.

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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