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Baseball's Jeremiad

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Over the past two years baseball writers and commentators have pronounced the death or serious illness of the national pastime. The chorus of complaints has become deafening. To those who know their history this is not a surprise. This sort of jeremiad has marked nearly every decade in baseball history.

About a year and a half ago, just after the greatest World Series of all-time between the Twins and Braves, a high point in modern baseball history, an avalanche commentaries flooded the media with the prophecies of gloom and doom. Players were paid too much, were becoming selfish millionaires, and above all didn't care about the fans.

Then during this past off-season the jeremiad chorus grew louder. TV was killing the game. The games were too long and boring. There were too many teams. Young children no longer cared about baseball. Late night World Series games were the cause of the loss of the generational link in baseball. Salaries were out of hand, and getting worse. Baseball was killing itself with the dismissal of Fay Vincent, the Marge Schott fiasco, and the mercenary using of St. Petersburg by the Giants.

And furthermore attendance was down. TV ratings were off. CBS and ESPN were both losing big money. The giant TV contracts that had fueled the extravagant salary inflation were coming to an end. The cash cow of television was nearly dead. Weak franchises in small markets would be driven to the wall.

The high point of all of this came with the publication of Coming Apart at the Seams by Peter Gammons and Jack Sands, whose sub-title, How Baseball Owners, Players and Television Executives Led Our National Pastime to the Brink of Disaster summarized nicely their diagnosis of the fatal illness.

This lamentation is a most characteristically American phenomenon. The Jeremiad is perhaps the oldest rhetorical ritual form in American English, and has been a staple of American life since the Puritans polished it into a high art in the mid-17th century. Typical of the jeremiad form, the Gammons and Sands book offers hope for an unprecedented golden age if only the proper reforms are implemented. Repent oh ye sinners, the millennium approaches. Gammons and Sands await the second coming of a personage with the combined qualities of Bart Giamatti and Kenesaw Mountain Landis.

Is the game really in trouble? On life support systems? I must say I find very little solid evidence to support the claim. In simple empirical terms the record attendance being logged in many cities for the first two weeks of the new season are offered in evidence.

But more to the point are the hard economic realities. Eli Jacobs bought the Baltimore Orioles in 1988 for about \$80M. He convinced the city of Baltimore to build him a new stadium, and then this spring he was offered \$120 Million for the birds. Oddly Gammons was stunned that it brought so little. Jacobs only turned a \$40M profit on an investment of \$80M. Poor fellow. A similar problem was faced in Seattle, the alleged financial black hole of baseball. In 1981 George Agryos bought the M's for \$13M. He sold them in 1990 for \$77.5M to Jeff Smulyan, who then turned around and sold the Mariners for 110M last year. Such are the perils of ownership.

As for TV revenues, don't cry for me Argentina. First, it must be pointed out that TV revenue decreases are only being predicted, they have not yet happened. I mention this because the first major renegotiation of TV contracts which took place in Canada a year ago was preceded by predictions of a major drop. Instead revenues doubled. In addition TV income from cable continues to rise significantly, and with the advances in cable technology the future looks very good. If on any given night you could have whatever game you wanted in any part of the country, would you pay two or three dollars for it?

And what of related revenues such as team merchandise, parking, concessions, hidden subsidies, luxury boxes? These are all going up. Profits have been consistently strong throughout the last several decades, although it should be pointed out that depending how you measure it, most any team in baseball can be shown to be losing money. But the key number is resale price, and it just keeps on going up.

It is good to remember this: In the history of baseball only one team in 112 years ever went bankrupt; and to quote Don Fehr, "you will find two things are always true (in baseball). You never have enough pitchers, and nobody ever made money."

As for the concerns about leadership, this is a perennial concern. Owners have always been ignorant and hell bent on the destruction of the game. There was a saying in the early part of this century that baseball survived only because God looked out

for fools, drunks, and the national pastime. God is no busier now than he was then. As for the lack of a commissioner, I am not convinced that one is needed. Certainly there needs to be some sort of central administration, but baseball does not need the fascism of a Judge Landis, nor the sentimentality of a Bart Giamatti.

In the end what will sustain the game is not commissioners and revenues, but the game itself, with its grace and beauty, its demands for excellence of athletic skill, and its endless variety and drama put on display on a daily basis. These things never change.

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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