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Baseball's New Landscape: Playoff Structure

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In a week when those looking for signs of the end of the world saw Jimmy Johnson leave Dallas and the Gators make the final four, major league baseball also presents a new face. The 1994 season opens with three divisions in each league, producing three divisional champions, plus one wild card team, and an extra tier of playoffs. The compelling force in this change is television, which can only make money on playoffs and the World Series and loses money during the regular season.

Opening day has also changed. It is now opening night. The season will still begin in Cincinnati, but it will start on Sunday night rather than Monday afternoon. Why? Television. ESPN's Sunday Night baseball was the most watched of the ESPN games and so a Sunday Night opener was demanded from the boys at SportsCenter. Tradition? We'll start a new tradition. Is television taking over baseball. No, it already had taken it over years ago, as it has taken over all of the major money sports.

What about divisional play and wild cards? Does this represent the end of American Civilization as we know it. I doubt it. Does this mean that we can no longer follow Jacques Barzun's advice that those who would seek to understand America had better study baseball? Quite the contrary. This change may in fact reinforce Barzun's point, as it demonstrates how powerful a force television has become in American society, and how insignificant tradition is in the face of the forces of the marketplace. This is a market-driven world in which we live, and anything that stands in the way of those forces must be eliminated. Of what value is tradition in the face of millions? The lessons are clear, and these insights from baseball remain valid.

Have we seen the last pennant race? No. There will still be pennant races of a sort, and there will still be the drama of the last days of the season, and there is a chance that there may be more of those dramas than ever before.

But still there are problems. First, the television people have dictated that the first round of playoffs will be seen on a regional basis only. Second, although there are three divisions in each league there is no attempt to create intra-divisional rivalries by having teams play more in division than outside their division. Third, the labor agreement between the owners and the MLBPA has expired and there is no sign that any serious

negotiations on a new agreement have taken place. The owners continue to claim they are losing money, which no one believes; the players continue to cash bigger and bigger checks, which everyone resents; the owners continue to discuss revenue sharing and a salary cap; and the players continue to doubt the truth of anything coming from the owners.

Complicating matters on the labor front is the fact that revenues from television have become something of a mystery. There is no set figure from the networks for TV rights, as baseball will join the networks in selling commercial time, and then revenues will be distributed. The potential here for playing with the numbers is massive, and in a poisoned atmosphere such as that between players and owners, distrust and suspicion are everywhere. That can only mean trouble.

Most predictions at this point are that TV revenues will fall considerably, which means that there should be some impact on salaries. What would it take for the players to accept lower salaries? How many franchises will need to go belly up for the players to believe that there is some sort of problem? Will either ever happen? Time will tell, but in the meantime there will be much rancor, a lot of lies, and before the season ends there will certainly be a strike.

So finally a look at the six divisions and the likely winners. In the AL East Toronto will repeat with the Tigers, Yankees, O's, and Red Sox watching them. In the Central, perhaps the weakest and most interesting division, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Minnesota, and Cleveland will chase the White Sox, with the Indians the real sleeper here. In the West Texas should win with Seattle, Oakland and California chasing them.

In the NL East last year's divisional winners face off with the Braves likely to win, followed closely by the Phillies and Expos, and not so closely by the Mets and Marlins. In the Central Houston looks like the front runner with the Cubs, Cardinals, Pirates and Reds in pursuit. While out West the Rockies will watch the Giants pull away from the Dodgers and Padres in what could be the division without any pennant race at all.

In the end the Braves should go the World Series and meet the team representing the best organization in all of baseball, as the Toronto Blue Jays have a great shot at a three-peat. But it's still a 162 game season in which anything can and will

happen. So, Play Ball! The National Pastime is back. Opening Day is at hand.

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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