

8-24-1994

Baseball Strike: The Issues and the Fans

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Baseball Strike: The Issues and the Fans" (1994). *On Sport and Society*. 375.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/375>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
August 24, 1994

Is Beach Volleyball destined to become the Sport of the 90's? Have you seen enough of this thing? Watching National League pitchers strike-out was more exciting than this.

While about to O.D. on Beach Volleyball and wondering who the spectators might be, what they do in real life, if they have one, other equally profound thoughts passed through my baseball starved brain over the past two long weeks without the major league boys of summer.

Who are these people who start these fan groups? The ones who 1) were trying to prevent the baseball strike 2) having failed that are now trying to end the strike and 3) are trying to organize a boycott of the game? Are these simply members of the leisured poor who have nothing else to do? Or are they people who have a major need to see their name in the paper or be interviewed on a sports call-in show? Do these people really believe that any of their activity will have any interest for Donald Fehr, Richard Ravitch, or anyone else in baseball? And of course one wonders what happens to the membership fees and t-shirt money generated by these fans against the strike movements. In fact if these people make enough on a baseball boycott campaign they will be able to buy a pair of season tickets for their favorite team as soon as the strike is over.

And then there are those pathetic Congressmen who get up on the floor of the House when the chamber is empty, except for C-Span cameras, and blabber on and on about their half-witted solutions to the strike. Do these morons think that people don't understand the difference between introducing and pushing a serious bill to address the issues like baseball's anti-trust exemption or a national sports commissioner, and calling for representatives of each side be locked in a room until overwhelmed by body odors? These politicians posture more than Ravitch and Fehr, and look several times more ridiculous doing so.

Why is it that people can't accept the simple fact that sport, including baseball, is big business? There are serious issues that divide players and owners, and the collective bargaining process, which includes the use of the strike mechanism, is a part of the means that management and labor use to resolve differences. This strike is not an assault on fans or on the national pastime, it is a simple act of the collective bargaining process. It is a very good mechanism for the power

forces within an industry to negotiate with one another. It beats either wage slavery or violence and should be allowed to work itself out.

When other entertainers go on strike there seems to be some understanding that important work issues are at stake. But this does not seem to be comprehensible within sport. These issues involve power relationships, working conditions, and money.

This really is a fairly simple matter. The players over the past twenty years have greatly enhanced their power vis-a-vis the owners, largely by their acquisition of free agency. The owners want that power back and would like to virtually end free agency with a salary cap. This is a struggle over fundamental power and control.

One point repeatedly made by owners, which seems fairly simple and obvious, is that some teams are losing money. Just look at Seattle. Economist Andrew Zimbalist in *Baseball and Billions* points out that Seattle owner Jeff Smulyan claimed losses of \$20M in 1989 and '90. However when proper adjustments are made for interest costs and player depreciation allowances, the losses were really quite small. Then if further adjustments are made for one-time extraordinary expenses and excess budgeting, the Mariners actually made a small profit. Smulyan's actual losses and financial difficulties were coming from his radio network, not his baseball team. Maybe this why after he bought the team for \$77.5M in 1989 he was able to sell it for \$125M four years later, a whopping return on investment.

What is known as the worst franchise in baseball, a financial black hole, at worst broke even, and then sold in just four years for a profit of \$47.5M. Is this really the story of an industry in trouble?

Certainly this a legitimate question that needs to be answered by owners, before the players or the fans accept the claim that franchises are headed down the drain. On the other hand it is difficult to identify with the players, whose average salary is \$1.2M, although in fact only 239 players are at or above that salary and 507 are below, with the median salary at \$500,000. If you factor in the minor league players the median salary drops to about \$7000. The top people make a lot of money, and the ordinary performers make ordinary salaries. Sort of like real life.

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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