

11-16-1994

The Baseball Strike and the Issues

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The Baseball Strike and the Issues" (1994). *On Sport and Society*. 417.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/417>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
November 16, 1994

How long has it been now? Two months. Three months. Does anyone remember exactly when the baseball strike began? For the record it was August 12, 1994, some three months and a week ago. Then in early September came word that the season was gone, and the playoffs and World Series were down the drain.

The questions concerning what lies ahead are numerous and to some extent ominous. The question of where we are now is nearly unanswerable.

The big change in the last week is that Richard Ravitch is gone as the leader of the ownership negotiating team, having been replaced by John Harrington who operates the Red Sox, and the owners are saying they have given up the salary cap in favor of a tax on revenues.

The only other major change at this point is that there is a federal mediator working on the stalled negotiations. But no mediator can mediate if two parties are not interested in a settlement.

It is clear now that ownership is not seeking a settlement but only a surrender which they know will not come soon. As for the players they still are looking to maintain the status quo and will not likely settle for anything less than an capitulation by the owners.

What all this means is that this strike is very likely to continue on through the off-season and right into the beginning of spring training. The camps will open, but who will come? This indeed is the major question to be answered. One owner recently said that when the camps open he expects a significant number of minor leaguers to report along with a few major leaguers. He believes that the first to break the picket line will be the Latin players, who are more dependent on the money and have a different approach to game because of its significance in their lives. They are, some owners believe, more concerned with themselves and their families than with union solidarity.

Once the Latin players break ranks other major leaguers will follow, maybe not in great numbers initially, but enough to enable the owners to put a legitimate product on the field. And once the games begin, the fans begin to come out to the ballparks, and the games start appearing on television, these games will acquire a legitimacy of their own. And in the end

most of the remaining players will report and the union will be broken.

Ah, at last, an owner who is willing to admit what this confrontation has been about all along. This is what the firing of the Commissioner was about, what bringing in Richard Ravitch was about, and what the stonewalling in negotiations has been about.

If this scenario proceeds to its conclusion there will be some very ugly incidents along the way, and the bitterness that will linger both on and off the field will taint the game for years to come. And the trail of lawsuits could be endless.

There are other serious issues facing both players and owners. If the start of next season is in doubt how can major league teams market themselves in the off-season? Can you sell season tickets? Will there be a TV contract? How much would fans pay to watch replacement player teams? What would all of this do the value of the franchises, and how would that affect newer ownership groups who are mortgaged to the hilt? How badly will the selling of merchandise, a major source of new revenues, be affected by continuing labor strife?

Other technical questions will haunt the future negotiations. Will all of this time that has passed count as time in service toward a player's eligibility for arbitration and free agency? And what of the status of current free agents? If there is no contract and the owners attempt to impose a new one, does everyone then automatically become free agents?

And so as fall turns into winter, and winter to spring, major and minor questions abound. But I would venture to guess that the two most important questions are, how many and which players will report to spring training and cross the picket line? And will television put out real money to televise games involving replacement players? If either of these things happens it will assert tremendous pressure on the players and the union. It will also go a long way in determining not just the outcome of this strike, but in determining the future shape and form of major league baseball as we head into the 21st century.

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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