

3-7-2002

Contraction, Baseball, the Courts, the Commissioner, and the Sale of the Red Sox

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Contraction, Baseball, the Courts, the Commissioner, and the Sale of the Red Sox" (2002). *On Sport and Society*. 593.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/593>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
FEBRUARY 7, 2002

It should be noted that the Chief Justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, Kathleen A. Blatz, signed the ruling in which the court refused to review a lower court decision preventing the contraction of the Minnesota Twins in Bud Selig's master plan for major league baseball.

"Blatz," during my days in Milwaukee was known as "the beer that made Milwaukee famous."

Now Blatz will be known "as the judge who made the Commissioner furious."

Following the Court ruling Selig announced that for the year 2002 contraction is dead. It is however still very much on the agenda of major league owners.

It has been an interesting past few weeks on the baseball front leaving one to wonder if it would have been possible to imagine a reality like this. Or perhaps we are all on drugs and none of this has happened.

First the Commissioner announced that two teams will be contracted for the 2002 season and that no decision has been made on which two it will be. Of course, the decision had been made and Minnesota and Montreal were the chosen ones. Selig also said that there could ultimately be as many as four teams contracted, maybe even six.

Although the Commissioner said no decision had been made on which teams to contract, people in Minnesota swung into action on the political and legal front to prevent the contraction of the Twins. Members of Congress, from Minnesota and beyond, denounced the decision and threatened to take away baseball's antitrust exemption. Others moved for an injunction against Major League Baseball.

Stories surfaced of a loan by Twins owner Carl Pohlad to Selig that violated a rule of major league baseball. News of other such loans followed. Several people were unkind enough to point out that the elimination of the Minnesota Twins would benefit two people: Carl Pohlad, the current Twins owner who would get more money from the deal than the sale of the team could bring; and Bud Selig whose Milwaukee Brewers would suddenly see a major expansion of their fan

base and media market. Hearings were set before the House Judiciary Committee and the chairman of the committee Congressman John Conyers called for the Commissioner to resign.

Selig dutifully went before the Congress, blew smoke all over the room, revealed nothing in his several hours of testimony, and walked away. It was a stellar performance worthy of any used car dealer. A few days later Selig announced that although contraction was still on the table, relocation of franchises was now a possibility and of course Northern Virginia a.k.a. the Washington, D.C. area was identified as the prime candidate for relocation. That helped quiet the Washington front at least for the moment.

Meanwhile the Boston Red Sox were in the final stages of being sold. In the end they were not sold to the highest bidder. In fact two higher bidders were turned down because the Commissioner had already decided that the current owner of the Florida Marlins, John Henry, would be awarded the franchise regardless of any other offers.

Massachusetts' Attorney General Thomas F. Reilly, citing the Commissioner's role in the sale said, "It's just another example of how they operate. It's a club. That's what it is. They get the benefit of the exemption from antitrust. When you see how they operate, it's not a pretty sight."

Be that as it may John Henry's group got the Red Sox and now Henry will sell the Marlins to Jeffery Loria, owner of the Expos whom will then take his management team from Montreal to Miami. As for the Expos they will be run by the Commissioner's office and this should insure a major disaster in Quebec.

Why Montreal is not being moved to Northern Virginia to avoid the further losses that will be incurred this year is a question not asked, nor would it be answered if it were asked. The Commissioner will of course be able to point to the upcoming losses in Montreal as further proof that baseball is in dire straits and that contraction is a necessity.

Meanwhile back in Minnesota Selig has hinted that things could change and the Twins could still be saved. All that is needed there is a new owner and a new stadium, or

perhaps a new publicly financed stadium would be enough by itself. Extortion by any other name is still extortion.

Finally let it be noted that Major League Baseball which Selig claims lost \$300M in 2001 has at the same time salted away a war chest of several hundred millions in preparation for a possible strike. It also somehow has the money for massive contraction buyouts. Many of these losses are the result of some rather creative accounting, as Major League Baseball plays a kind of reverse Enron game hiding its profits to show artificial losses while the all-knowing Selig performs the mirror image of Ken Lay.

If all of this seems beyond human comprehension, and if Bud Selig looks like some sort of bumbling leader, the man Fay Vincent once called a "small town schlepper," do not be fooled. This is all rational and calculated and Bud Selig's leadership is precisely what the baseball owners want. There is a calculated brilliance in all he does, even if it is a dangerous game that he plays.

The only question remaining to be answered is whether in this game it is more important whether you win or lose or how you play the game?

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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