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NL or AL, or what's the difference?

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
NL or AL, or what's the difference?
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The first two rounds of the playoffs have produced some amazing baseball, although once again I have been struck by the fact that FOX Sports, as did previous networks, continue to trot out inadequate and second rate announcers and analysts to present this high level of play and drama. With all of the excellent talent working major league baseball across the nation, one wonders how difficult it must be for the major networks to ignore the best and settle for second best, or at times even less.

That said, there have been two pluses on the FOX broadcasting teams in the playoffs with the additions of Bob Brenly to the Brennaman/Lyons team and of Lou Pinella to the mix of Buck and McCarver. FOX has finally found a way to reduce the words that Tim McCarver can squeeze into a telecast. Branch Rickey would have called this addition by subtraction.

One of the most irritating things in recent years has been the habit of Joe Buck, and many others, of insisting on making a distinction between National League and American League baseball. This is part of the long-standing arrogance of National Leaguers (and the legacy of John McGraw) who have declared National League baseball superior to that of the American League.

As far as I can fathom, these arbiters of excellence find bunts, stolen bases, and sacrifice flies qualitatively superior to runs, hits, and home runs. No one ever explains why that should be the case, they just assume that it is.

The arbiters of excellence also seem to be enthralled by that amazingly complex maneuver 'the double switch,' which they seem to equate with brain surgery, trotting it out as the coup de grace to prove the superiority of National League baseball. I gather that fan surveys consistently show that the average ticket-buying spectator is sent into near orgasm by this mental prestidigitation, although I must confess that I have never heard 'the double switch' evoke the same sort of roar that a home run by a DH elicits.

Even more amazing is to hear the discussion of who is playing National League baseball. First of all, the Chicago White Sox are in the American League and have been there since the League was founded over a century ago. How they could be playing National League baseball in the American League remains a mystery to me. But the experts assure us they are. In addition, the Sox manager Ozzie Guillen played most of his career as a White Sox and in the American League. One wonders, then, how he learned to play National League baseball, unless his short stay with the Atlanta Braves transformed him.

Tony LaRussa, the managerial guru and poster boy for National League baseball in our time, spent most of his managerial years in the American League with the White Sox and the A's. He spent most of his playing days in the American League as well. So where did he learn National League baseball and how did he get so good at the occult art and high science of 'the double switch'? America needs to know.

David Eckstein, the Cardinal short stop, is repeatedly cited as an aficionado of the finest qualities of National League baseball, although until this year he spent his career in the American League playing for the Anaheim Angels who, although in the American League, seem to play National League baseball according to several analysts. Jim Edmonds played much of his career in Anaheim as well, and it is difficult to know if he plays American or National League baseball, although some think the fact that he often gets his uniform dirty a sign that he plays the National League game. Mike Scioscia manages the Angels in the American League, but he played in the National League. The question is, how long will it take before he forgets how to do the daunting 'double switch'?

Even more confusing is the case of Phil Garner and the Houston Astros. Garner played most of his career in the National League, although he played his first four years in Oakland. He has managed two different teams in the American League, spending eight years in Milwaukee and two-plus in Detroit. Now he is in the National League managing a team that by most expert standards seems to play American League baseball because of the nature of the ballpark itself. Amazing as it may seem, he has already mastered the 'double switch.'

It would seem, then, that the Astros are a National League team playing in an American League park, although we cannot be certain that this is the case. As for Phil Garner, I would guess that he is probably a National League guy managing a National

League team in an American League-style ballpark, with a great deal of American League experience on his résumé, but he must certainly be a National League guy because his nickname is 'Scrap Iron.'

At one time, as you may remember, there were National League umpires and American League umpires. Now there are simply Major League umpires. This has led to considerable confusion during the current playoffs, as it's extremely difficult to know whether the many mistakes that have been made were American League mistakes or National League mistakes.

Perhaps Joe and Timmy can clarify this for us in the upcoming World Series when the distinction between the National League team and the American League team will be further muddled by the fact that, when in the National League park, the American League team will be forced to play by National League rules, and when in the American League park, the National League team will be forced to play by American League rules. Does this mean that in the American League park they will be playing American League baseball, and in the National League park, the National League game? As the Russians say, 'Only Pushkin knows.'

Clearly the advantage will go to those teams and managers whose experience is bilingual and are adept at both styles of play.

The only thing we can be certain of, is that good pitching beats good hitting all the time.

Except when it doesn't.

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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