

7-19-2008

Ugla's Ugly Adventure: the All-Star Game

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Ugla's Ugly Adventure: the All-Star Game" (2008). *On Sport and Society*. 775.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/775>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Uggl'a's Ugly Adventure: the All-Star Game
JULY 19, 2008

Some will remember it as Uggl'a's Ugly Adventure. Others will remember it for its record length in both innings and time. Some will remember it as nearly replicating the game of 2002 in Milwaukee when the managers ran out of players and someone (the Commissioner) had the good sense to stop the game. That was the infamous tie. Tuesday night it was beginning to look as though another tie, the third in All-Star History, was in the offing. In fact it was probably only an inning away.

One of those irritating aphorisms, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," clearly should have been applied after that 2002 game. Instead, in full panic from the talk show chatter and some of the media hounds, Commissioner Bud decided that he would fix the All-Star Game.

It wasn't broke!

The 2002 game offered plenty of good pitching, great catches, big hits, and everyone got to see every player on the All-Star teams.

Someone needed to remind the Commissioner that the All-Star Game, to borrow from David Letterman, is only an exhibition, not a competition. There is nothing at all immoral, illegal, or unacceptable about a tie in the All-Star game. The point of the All-Star Game, at least until Selig "fixed" it, was to showcase the best talent in baseball in an exhibition game about midway through the season. Notice the words "showcase" and "exhibition" Mr. Commissioner. This was not a competition.

Then unfortunately people made a big hoo-ha about the tie. After twenty-four hours no one cared. It was just one more thing to hit Bud over the head with for the sheer fun of it. Who won or who lost the All-Star Game was never the point. Nothing was at stake.

That all changed of course when, displaying his usual brilliance, Commissioner Selig moved to fix what wasn't broken, and came up with the ridiculous idea that the league that won the All-Star Game should host the World Series, and therefore get the home field advantage. Why?

It made no sense. A make-shift team winning an exhibition game should not be allowed to determine anything. It should simply be enjoyed. The Commissioner's marketing premise was that "now the game means something." Hey, it always meant something. It meant you got to see the greatest players, playing the greatest game, for fun. Not money. Not home field. Just fun. Is something wrong with that? I have seen a lot of All-Star Games and I didn't care who won. I just wanted to see the great players facing each other. That was enough. If the game ended in a tie, as it did in 1961, it was not a big thing.

The history of the All-Star Games suggests that winning the game tends to go in cycles as one league will dominate for several years, then there will be a shift and the other league will dominate. Right now the American League is in one of those dominant periods and as a result the National League pennant winner, through no fault of its own, can not get home field advantage for the World Series. Home field has been critical in influencing the winners of the World Series. Why should the National League be punished? Well, perhaps they deserve it for holding out on the DH, but that aside, why?

Again, what was the problem with the way in which home field was determined for several decades. It rotated between leagues. No one got hurt, no one was upset, it didn't destroy the game. It seemed an equitable way of doing things. But then Bud fixed it. Now equity is gone and American League dominance is bolstered by Bud's artificial insemination of pseudo-meaning into the game.

Before leaving this subject I want to say one other thing about the problem that led to the tie in 2002 and nearly to the tie the other night. Sometime in the last decade or so a shift has taken place in attitude toward the All-Star Game. It once was that players were held out, saved, just in case the game went to extra innings. Often three or more players on either team would go to the game and not play. That practice has nearly ended. If someone is chosen for the game and goes to the game, they expect to play. The managers are under great pressure to get everyone into the game. If they do not, as was the case with Albert Pujols in 2007, the player complains.

No one has ever liked going to the game and not playing, but it used to be that players understood that this could happen if they were not voted onto the team as starters. In the first All-Star Game in 1933 six players did not get into the game. Six did not get into the game in 1934, and eight did not get into the game in 1935. Jimmy Foxx who was on the American League roster

in all three years did not see action until 1935. As late as 1995 there were nine players who did not get into the game.

Something changed shortly thereafter. Managers started hearing the complaints of those who did not get into the game. Their agents, too, were complaining. The All-Star Game could produce fame, which might translate into endorsements, which meant money to both the player and the agent. Getting into the All-Star Game now had market value.

This is what produced the problem in 2002 when both managers ran out of players. It happened again on Tuesday night. There are ways to handle this, of course. The rosters could be expanded with the clear message that being at the game doesn't guarantee that you will get into the game.

Maybe everyone should lighten up. Let's enjoy the All-Star Game and the All-Star experience, as the marketeers now call it. If a player doesn't want to be honored by their peers because they may not get in the game, let them stay home. It is an exhibition, and not a competition. Let's get back to that atmosphere and let the Commissioner begin by unfixing what wasn't broke.

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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