

Time for the US to get serious in the WBC

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Time for the US to get serious in the WBC
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In case you haven't heard, and apparently many in the United States have not, Japan is the World Champion of Baseball for the second time running. No, they did not win the World Series, they won the World Baseball Classic, and for the second time in as many tries the United States did not make it to the finals. If this were basketball the outcry in the United States would be deafening. In fact, there is no outcry.

What once was The National Pastime of the United States seems to be approaching the status of the National Afterthought. Since the 1960s when football, led by professional football, became the favorite sport of Americans, baseball has slipped in public favor and interest. It is disturbing enough that the United States cannot win the World Baseball Classic, but that there is so little response to the loss goes well beyond disturbing.

When the United States slipped out of the championship elite in international basketball there was not only outrage, but there was a move to do something about it. The first reaction of course was to blame the referees, followed by blaming the fact that "the best players" were not participating. The Dream Team was the first reaction and their demolition of the competition at the Olympics offered some psychic relief. It did not, however, end the bleeding and the international losses. So it was, that in preparation for the last Olympics a team was put together well in advance of the games, a team rather than a collection of all-stars. The players, coaches, and owners dedicated themselves to the concept of team basketball for well over a year in advance of the games.

It is now time for the baseball establishment including owners, coaches, and players to get together and dedicate themselves to putting a championship team on the field in international competition. Throughout the past few weeks it was said over and over again that the best players were not participating on the U.S. team. Who are these mythical best players? Weren't there a bevy of all-stars and dedicated millionaires out there wearing the uniform of Team USA?

It is true there were players missing who might have helped the cause, particularly pitchers. However some fifty players who were invited to play did not choose to play. Some were injured,

some claimed injury, and some were not allowed to play by their team owners. Unless and until the owners are fully committed to the WBC, Team USA and indeed other teams will not have their full complement of excellence. In fairness, it should be said the players who were there gave it all they had.

Team owners are among the first to wave the flag, put flags on uniforms and batting helmets, have "God Bless America" played in the stadiums, insist that all players stand at attention for the national anthem while flags the size of Texas cover the field, sponsor "I Am an American Day," pass out flags, support the troops, and fully support any patriotic action that might make them some money or at least cost them little or nothing. However, don't ask these owners to allow their star players to participate in the World Baseball Championship.

The owners seem to assume that their players can't sprain an ankle, pull a hamstring, or develop arm problems in spring training games. Some owners who allowed their players to join Team USA called them back at the slightest twinge of a muscle. Two Red Sox players who left Team USA were back on the field playing in spring training games for the Red Sox before they were due to play their next game for Team USA.

If owners worry about injuries because of the money they might lose, then they should either not let their players in any games until the regular season begins, or they should purchase injury insurance.

NBA stars were on the courts going all out for Team USA without a concern for injury. Are baseball players less interested in international competition than basketball players? If you watched the WBC games and listened to players on Team USA, it is clear that is not the case.

What both owners and players must bring to the WBC before there is any further need for discussion of reforms in tournament format is one thing: commitment. That means a commitment to both winning and to Team USA. Without commitment there is no point in playing in the WBC, and without commitment from everyone involved in Major League Baseball, Team USA will never compete successfully against teams from Japan, Korea, Venezuela, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Mexico, and perhaps even Australia and the Netherlands.

Commitment will lead to the best players from all teams being made available to the WBC competition, the willingness of

pitchers and catchers to report in January to ready themselves for the March tournament, and the position players to report early as well. Commitment to winning means choosing a solid team, allowing the manager to manage to win, rather than to manage to prepare players for the regular season, and it means curbing egos for the good of the team.

As to the excuse that a tournament starting in March puts the U.S. at a disadvantage because it takes place during spring training, one need only refer to Japan. Both the U.S. and Japan have baseball seasons that begin in April and end in October. Japan seems not to suffer from the realities of the calendar as they were ready to go. Japan had commitment from players, managers, and owners.

So put away the excuses. Make a commitment equal to that given by the NBA players and owners. Prepare for play with same diligence of the Japanese and Koreans, and perhaps then Team USA will be able to play the National Pastime at the highest level of excellence.

If this is too much to ask, then get Team USA out of international competition before they again become a national embarrassment like they were in the first two WBC competitions. The WBC is one of the few good ideas Bud Selig has ever had. The country of baseball needs to get behind it.

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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