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The Astros et.al.

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE ASTROS et.al.
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In studying World War I, the American historian Bruce Catton identified a simple and ironclad rule concerning technology: What you can do, you must do. I was thinking about the current uproar over the Houston Astros' use of technology to steal signs and I thought about Catton's observation and how it might offer some understanding of what happened in this latest of baseball scandals.

The emergence of baseball as a popular pastime, sport, or obsession in American life goes back into the nineteenth century. This, coincidentally, happens be the same time in which technology was taking a central place in American industry and commerce. The country was dazzled by technology and had faith that it would be the harbinger of progress.

Technology has come to permeate nearly every nook and cranny of our lives. From making war, to industrial production, to basic individual daily tasks, technology seems omnipresent.

Over the last few decades, technology as applied to sport has grown exponentially. From the simple applications of electricity to the emergence of video replay, progress has marched inexorably forward. The evolution of the computer from exotic main frames to hand-held devices has been enthusiastically embraced by the professional statisticians and the individual stat freaks. In baseball, ground zero for this development is located in the Society for American Baseball Research, which, not coincidentally, has led to the coinage of the terms "Sabermetrics" and "Sabermetrician."

Combining the use of video technology, which itself has improved immensely, with sophisticated statistical applications was a natural development. Applying them wherever you could was a given.

In baseball, there is an endless search by players to get some sort of edge on their opponents. Pitchers search for ways to get a leg up on hitters, and hitters are always looking for ways to know what the pitcher will throw at them next. For the hitters, the ancient art of sign stealing has been the means to overcome the pitchers advantage.

Pitchers and hitters have used everything within the realm of the possible, limited only by the expanse of their imagination, to get an edge. The list rolls out into infinity. So certainly, something like the development in Houston should have been expected. The only mystery, as a local sports radio host said the other day, is "in this world of sophisticated high tech, you might wonder why information was being sent by banging on a trash can." Well, maybe that's a metaphor.

The Commissioner of Baseball, Rob Manfred, initiated an investigation of the Houston Astros following an article in The Athletic in which Mike Fiers, former Astros pitcher, described the sign stealing that had occurred in 2017 when he was with the Astros. The investigation confirmed the charges and revealed the extent of the sign stealing that went on through the season and the postseason.

It is very difficult to know how effective and efficient the Astros' system was, and it is equally difficult to know who did and did not make use of the system. Circumstantial evidence on both suggests some foul play. In the long history of sign stealing, it is known that some players don't want to know the signs; some don't trust the information received, while others relish the access to this information. The numbers for the Astros in 2017 and 2018 show that they hit significantly better on the road than at home in terms of batting average, home runs and slugging average. One might have expected otherwise. During the 2017 World Series the splits for some Astro players show a strong home field bias.

Regardless of outcomes, sign stealing is still sign stealing, and the rules of major league baseball are clear. Prior to the last few seasons, those rules regarding use of electronic equipment have been reiterated and restated to every team.

So, what is to be done?

First, what has been done? The General Manager and the Manager of the Houston Astros have been suspended by Major League Baseball, and both were subsequently fired by the Astros. The managers of the Boston Red Sox and New York Mets, who were with the Astros at the time and were instrumental in carrying out the scheme, were fired by their teams. MLB has yet to announce how they will punish these two. The Astros' organization was fined the allowable league maximum, and they have lost their first and second round draft

picks for the next two drafts. The loss of draft picks may be the most damaging of any of the actions taken by MLB.

Second, what else should be done? Some want the Astros' World Series victory overturned; some want all their wins voided; some want players to be suspended. In my view, what has been done is enough. Overturning the result of the World Series or a season of wins seems too broad a sweep given that the actual impact of the Astros, scheme is unknown and unknowable. Surely such an action would also create a demand for such punishments for many more teams who are suspected of engaging in similar sign-stealing practices and other ethically dubious practices. Individual players cooperated with the investigators, and I would imagine were give some sort of guarantee of immunity from punishment for their cooperation. This likely explains why the players were not punished.

One thing that could be done, and indeed should be done, is to turn off all electronic equipment and communications to the dugout from an hour before the first pitch to an hour after the game ends. This would negate much of the technology, but it would also mean shutting down all internet access and social media within the stadium.

Check your phones and I-pads at the gate! How might that go down?

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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