Killing the Umpires Union

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Kill the Umpire! Kill the Umpire!

It's one of the oldest cliches in American sport. And in the early days of baseball sometimes they tried, and on the rare occasion they succeeded.

This week it wasn't exactly "Kill the Umpire!" but it was nearly as deadly for twenty-two of the Men in Blue. Howard Ganz, one of the lawyers for Major League Baseball and its permanent-acting-commissioner-for-life, put it another way: "We smoked them!"

There's nothing else quite like a graceless winner.

After a court mediated agreement this week between Major League Baseball and the Umpires Union, twenty-two umpires, some highly respected with one and two decades in the game, some considered the very best at their craft, are no longer working in the American and National Leagues. How did it come this? Who is to blame? What, if anything, is the significance of these developments?

Perhaps a little history is in order.

In 1965 the National League umpires formed a union and the American League umps followed three years later. American League president Joe Cronin illustrating baseball's conception of the collective bargaining process fired Al Salerno and Bill Valentine.

In 1970 the umpires walked out on the first game of playoffs insisting on more pay for more games in the expanded playoff system. "Substitute umpires" or "scabs" worked the first game and that fiasco was enough. The umpires won this skirmish.

Still the Men in Blue were not making major gains. Then in 1978 they approached Richie Phillips to lead their effort. Phillips had achieved considerable success representing the NBA referees and looked like the right man at the right place at the right time. Within a year he organized the umps into a solid movement, received recognition for the union by the National Labor Relations Board, and then launched the umps into a seven-week strike to open the 1979 season.
The owners turned to "scabs" and held out until May 18 despite the heavy complaining about incompetent umpires. It was in fact a travesty on the game. Nor was the settlement necessarily the best one for the game. Umpires were put under contract with the league presidents, a pay scale based on years of service was adopted, and post-season assignments were put on a rotation rather than merit basis.

In 1982 a four-year agreement was signed after another strike threat returning the merit system for post-season and all-star assignments. Salaries were significantly increased. In 1984 Phillips wanted more money for umpires working the playoffs. This produced another strike in the first round of playoffs and more "scab" umpiring.

New Commissioner Peter Ueberroth got both sides to accept binding arbitration, and as arbitrator he issued a settlement giving the umpires a package worth considerably more than they had asked for. This was in fact a power play by Ueberroth to gain control of the owners and league presidents, and it so happened that the umpires were positioned to benefit. Ueberroth saw the absurdity of the owners trying to save $23,000 per club over something as important to the game as umpiring. The next year arbitrator Richard M. Nixon awarded the umpires another raise.

By now Richie Phillips was looking like a genius, the umpires pay and working conditions had vastly improved. Perhaps the umpires began to feel more important than they should.

During Fay Vincent's term as commissioner umpires were given more freedom from the league presidents. Vincent's protection of Umpire Joe West from the National League's attempt to discipline him is often interpreted as a further loss of control over the umps. Throughout the nineties there has been increased criticism of umpires for their arrogance and aggression on the field. They became increasingly testy over criticism from the press and players, and especially over instant replay.

Richie Phillips reflected these attitudes as his success continued. In 1995 the umpires were locked out by major league baseball but Phillips was able to negotiate an improved contract. An air of invincibility was building.

All however was not well. After the Roberto Alomar spitting incident with umpire John Hirschbeck, the umpires asked for a post-season meeting to discuss the patterns of aggression and
confrontation on the field by both players and umps. One meeting was held, a committee was formed, but Major League baseball never convened the committee again.

The Umpires Union also felt threatened by a new umpire evaluation system implemented this season by Bud Selig and Sandy Alderson. Rumors spread that these evaluations would be used to dismiss twenty umpires at the end of the season. Selig was seen as out to get the umpires, break their union, and make Richie Phillips disappear.

So the umpires under Phillip's leadership decided on a preemptive strike. Rather than wait for the contract to run out, the umpires developed a strategy to force baseball into an early contract renewal. In July a mass resignation strategy was launched, and within days it resembled one of the early failures of the American space program crashing back onto the pad. Fifty umpires signed letters of resignation, and many quickly withdrew them. In the end only twenty-two stayed the course.

It is clear now that Phillips had miscalculated on both Baseball's reaction to the resignation strategy and on the solidarity of his rank and file. It may prove fatal for Phillips and likely already is for twenty-two of the Men in Blue.

It is clear too that Major League Baseball has seized this opportunity to crush a union and rid themselves of Phillips. They will risk the integrity of the games in the pennant drive and post-season play for victory. This should come as no surprise as these are the same people who did what two World Wars had been unable to do, cancel a World Series. The only real surprise is that this time Major League Baseball may win.

For all of this to occur with the approach of Labor Day only adds to the historic character of the moment.

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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