Baseball Commissioner

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As I record this piece the baseball owners are meeting in Chicago to decide the future of Baseball Commissioner Fay Vincent. He has been under fire for several months now. The immediate issues are Mr. Vincent's use of his powers to force a realignment, an attempt he abandoned earlier this week, and his renewed challenge to the power of the superstations like WGN and TBS. Some owners see the Commissioner as too friendly to the players and would like to remove him so that they could fly headlong into a struggle to the death with the MLBPA. They would reopen the contract at the end of the year, lock the players out, and try to force the end of arbitration. These owners are challenging both the commissioner's powers and the notion that a commissioner can not be removed from office.

After the 1919 Black Sox Scandal broke in 1920 the owners felt they needed some distinguished and well-known figure to take the reigns of power over baseball, restoring public confidence in the integrity of the game. Although not distinguished, Judge Landis was well-known, especially in Chicago where he was frequently seen in a box seat at Comiskey Park, and where he established a dismal record for justice in the court room. Landis was a grandstander who knew how to please the crowds with his tirades against radicals, his attacks on Standard Oil, and his indictment of Kaiser Wilhelm during World War I.

But most attractive of all Judge Landis had helped to arbitrate a settlement of the Federal League Case in 1915. In this case baseball had been challenged under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act as an illegal monopoly. In a sense Landis was rewarded for his assistance by being made the Czar of Baseball.

Prior to the Black Sox scandal baseball did not have a commissioner. It was ruled by a three man commission which was structurally weak and failed miserably in dealing with problems facing the game, especially the problem of gambling. The Commission was simply ignored when individual owners did not care to acknowledge its power.

When Landis agreed to become Commissioner he understood the weak position of the owners and demanded total control of baseball. They gave it to him and regretted the action many times over. Ironically they never really needed Landis, as the rise of Babe Ruth and the new style of power baseball soon made everyone forget about baseball's problems.
Landis said he took the job for the youth of America who needed to know that baseball was upright and honest. It is more likely that he took the job because he loved power. This Judge who was named after a Mountain ruled with an iron hand for the next two and one-half decades, and no owner successfully challenged his power. During the course of his rule he seemed to have endowed the office of Commissioner of Baseball with sacrosanct powers.

His successor, Sen. A.B. "Happy" Chandler of Kentucky, was quickly disabused of that notion, serving one rather turbulent term which ended in 1950 when Chandler failed to get a vote of confidence from the owners. His successor was sportswriter turned National League President Ford Frick who served fourteen years as the stooge of the owners. He played second-fiddle to the powerful owners like Walter O'Malley of the Dodgers and Dan Topping of the Yankees.

In 1965 General William Eckert was chosen to succeed Frick. He was a bad choice and remains to this day "Baseball's Unknown Soldier." He was fired in December of 1968.

In 1969 New York Lawyer Bowie Kuhn was chosen as the new Commissioner and for the first time in nearly two decades baseball had a commissioner who would at least try to increase the power and prestige of the office. He had limited success as large areas of the baseball business remained outside his purview. Kuhn did show the ability to challenge at least one owner, Charles O. Finley, but that was the exception that proved the rule. In the end Bowie Kuhn was dismissed by the owners.

His successor Peter Ueberroth demanded and received increased power as Commissioner, and became a kind of CEO of the game. He greatly enhanced the business operations of the owners and intervened directly in labor disputes. The owners didn't like it, but they had to live it. What they did like was the increased TV money that Ueberroth had acquired, and the early results of the collusion that Ueberroth had orchestrated.

Following Ueberroth was Bart Giamatti whose PR was excellent and who exercised the power to ban a player for life. With Giamatti's death in 1989 and Fay Vincent's rise to power, it has been clear that an increasing number of owners are restive and ready to reclaim all power from the Commissioner. If they try and if they fire Fay Vincent he says he will take them to court under the terms of Article Nine of the Major League Agreement.
which says that there will be no diminution of the powers of a Commissioner while that Commissioner is in office.

Such developments would not be in the best interests of baseball, nor would a court fight. But that would never stop the owners, who have never demonstrated that they have any idea of what might be in the best interests of baseball.

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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