

Baseball and Replacement Players Don't Mix

2-24-1995

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Baseball and Replacement Players Don't Mix" (1995). *On Sport and Society*. 406.
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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
February 24, 1995

If it's true that if you want to understand America you must understand baseball, we could be in big trouble as no one seems to understand the nonsense that is developing in spring training the past few weeks. On the other hand if baseball is a mirror of American culture, what we see in that mirror today cannot be reassuring.

The rituals of spring have begun. Normally this would be the week that pitchers and catchers arrive in camp, and everyone would be anxiously awaiting the arrival of the rest of the players. The air should be full of optimism as the rites of renewal and rebirth are played out. Instead what we have is an absurdity that can inspire no one, wrapped in mantel of greed, avarice, and dissembling. The national pastime has become a national joke, and not a very good one either.

The idea that major league baseball can go on with what are blithely called "replacement players," is beyond all credulity. This gaggle of has-beens, might-have-beens, and never-weres are simply scabs. If the players and owners are greedy, what are we to say of this species which clings to dead dreams at the expense of those who are in a massive power struggle to protect the gains they have made over the years.

These pathetic frustrated athletes need to be at a fantasy camp where they will pay hard cash for their dreams, rather than be willfully exploited by cynical owners out to crush the players union. Not only were the owners willing to wipe out the World Series, they are now about to make a mockery of one of the greatest of American sport rituals.

This is but the most recent nonsense to come out of major league baseball. That a season might start with replacement players is nearly unthinkable, but it is minor compared to the other atrocities that are being contemplated.

There has been talk of two Toronto and two Montreal teams so that baseball can proceed in Canada where the government has some integrity and protects the right to strike. Two managers and two rosters, surely Clueless Bud Selig and the boys cannot be serious. But apparently they are.

The Baltimore Orioles are now saying that they will not open the season with replacement players, and they will not play spring training games with replacement players, and the city council

has backed them. Such a position has led the powers that be to threaten Peter Angelos with fines and a possible loss of his franchise.

But there seems to be some sense out there somewhere. The first signs were when fans began to refrain from buying tickets to spring training games, and when last week they failed to show up to watch the first reporting players.

Then more impressively came George Anderson's decision that he could not proceed with the farce. Sparky Anderson has been one of the most respected managers in major league baseball for several decades now, and at the end of last week he said "there is no place in our game for replacement players." With that he left the Tigers with no assurances that he would be brought back when and if the strike ends.

It was an act of principle and courage and should be given a standing ovation by fans across the country. Other managers like Cito Gaston with Toronto and Phil Regan with the Orioles have already been dismissed from having to make this decision, and it will interesting to see if anyone else walks with Sparky Anderson.

On the Congressional front things remain nearly as foolish. Robert Dole and the Newt have announced that Congress can not get involved every time there is a labor dispute in sport. Of course they can't, but in the case of baseball they are already deeply involved and have been for several decades now.

The anti-trust exemption has left government involved since 1922, and Congress has been even more directly involved since the Curt Flood decision by the Supreme Court in which the court said they believe the exemption was a mistake and should be repealed by the Congress. The exemption makes it possible for the owners to drag their feet on negotiations for as long as they want without fear of court action.

Robert Droll and the Newt need not sound and act as silly as everyone else in this situation. They could support either binding arbitration and end the strike immediately, or they could support the bill to end the exemption and push the situation closer to settlement.

Don't hold your breath and don't even think about the fact that this all could be a reflection of the current state of American life.

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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