

## Bowie Kuhn

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE

Bowie Kuhn  
MAY 13, 2007

Bowie Kuhn once said that he wanted to be remembered as the Baseball Commissioner who presided over a time of tremendous growth in the popularity of the game, and a time when no one questioned the integrity of the game. I read these words over and over again a few weeks ago in many of the obituaries published at the time of the former Commissioner's death. I cannot say that this is how I will remember him, and I do not know how history will remember him.

The memory of Bowie Kuhn that pops into my head, whenever I encounter his name, is that of the court jester of baseball. I know this does not give him his due, but it is always the image his name will evoke for me. It is an image that was born at the second game of the 1976 World Series in Cincinnati, the first weekend night game in Series history. It was a cold night, with temperatures hovering in the low forties. And there was Bowie sitting in the Commissioner's box sans overcoat, wearing only his suit, a gesture apparently designed to tell the world that it was not too cold to have a World Series night game. There was Bowie Kuhn, looking every bit the fool.

Somehow we were to believe that it really wasn't cold, that is was a great night for baseball, and that all those people with blankets and parkas had lost touch with reality. At the end of Kuhn's time as Commissioner, Dave Anderson of the New York Times wrote that Kuhn should retire his thermal underwear and send it to the Hall of Fame at Cooperstown. Indeed!

Another of his less distinguished moments came when he called Jim Bouton to his office and wanted Bouton to renounce his book, Ball Four, which revealed the shocking news that baseball players indulged in sex and alcohol. Kuhn was aghast that anyone in America be privy to that knowledge. In the process, Kuhn's actions guaranteed Bouton's book a spot on best sellers lists across America.

Bowie Kuhn always seemed out of place around baseball. He was someone who seemed to belong more to the sport of polo, even though much of his life was spent in baseball. There was an upper-class arrogance, a haughtiness about him, that was not overbearing, but always part of his persona. Bowie Kuhn seemed to be uncomfortable with ordinary people, people not of his

class. His pedigree was eastern establishment, and his degrees were Princeton '47 and Virginia Law '50. He then joined the right law firm.

Perhaps it was this sense of class and privilege that explains the condescension that marked his interaction with Curt Flood. Flood wrote to Kuhn to tell him he would not accept a trade from the Cardinals to the Phillies because he was not a piece of property, and such a trade violated his rights as a citizen and a human being. Kuhn's reply was telling: "Dear Curt: I certainly agree with you that you, as a human being, are not a piece of property to be bought and sold. This is I think obvious. However, I cannot see its application to the situation at hand."

New York Times columnist Red Smith caught the spirit of Kuhn's response: "Thus the Commissioner restates baseball's labor policy any time there is unrest in the slave cabins. 'Run along, sonny, you bother me.'"

Kuhn's court testimony against Flood was not his finest hour. Over and over again and for years afterward, Kuhn's mantra was simple: "Free agency will destroy baseball." It never did. Those who thought it would were willing to try to destroy the Players' Association rather than work within a framework of collective bargaining and create a normal working relationship between management and labor. Kuhn led that ownership group, and it is only in the past few years that baseball seems to have escaped the atmosphere of total distrust created by Kuhn's service to the Lords of Baseball.

Also among the illusionary views of this Commissioner was his insistence that he represented all of baseball, not just the owners. Despite the many individual confrontations with Charles O. Finley, Ted Turner, George Steinbrenner, Ray Kroc, and Gussie Busch, Kuhn's claim to neutrality rings hollow. In the end, Bowie Kuhn knew who hired him, who paid him, and who could remove him from his role as Commissioner. He loved being Commissioner of Baseball and would do little to jeopardize his continuing run in that role.

Unable to convince the owners to modify free agency in the wake of the Curt Flood ruling by the Supreme Court, Kuhn then led the owners through the McNally-Messersmith arbitration case, which ended in free-agency for the players and another round of failed litigation by the owners. Further down that same road Kuhn presided over the 1981 strike with its infamous split-season of which he was an architect.

Indeed, part of the Kuhn legacy is that he led the owners at a time when over and over and over again they were outsmarted, out negotiated, and out litigated by the Players' Association under the leadership of Marvin Miller. Seemingly always one or two steps behind, Kuhn and the owners never realized what was happening until well after the fact. The power shift from owners to players was certainly overdue, but Kuhn's days as Commissioner aided and abetted an extreme shift in the other direction.

Bowie Kuhn's handling of Henry Aaron's chase of Babe Ruth's home run record is another of the low points of his tenure. There are many explanations for Kuhn's absence on the occasion of Aaron's achievement, but none can excuse this incredible blunder. It was a disgrace.

Considered among Bowie Kuhn's achievements were his negotiation of major advances in the national network television contracts for Major League Baseball. His use of the power of his office to deal with gambling issues was important. His struggle to deal with the use of cocaine in baseball is seen as a major achievement, although he failed to object to the growing dependence between baseball and alcohol, or the widespread use of steroids in sports; nor was he able to curb the widespread use of "greenies."

Bowie Kuhn failed at many levels both as Commissioner and as a human being. History will make its judgment, but for me he remains the court jester 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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