

An All-Star Mess

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Tuesday, July 10 2007 7:00 PM -

Gary chimes in with his thoughts on the present state of the All-Star game for us as well this morning, and his take isn't far off from Mike Beckwith's ... just a little more harsh. Gary says that one word best sums up the All-Star festivities in today's game. Indifference. And that the 2002 debacle that saw the game end in a 7-7 tie was a sign of the game's insignificance.



Be honest. Did any of you actually see Victor Martinez's home run live last night in the All Star game? Didn't think so, which only proves the point that major league baseball's self-described "midsummer classic" is not only boring, it's inconvenient.

(By the way, giving yourself a nickname is the ultimate act of desperation, like Michael Jackson referring to himself as the "King of Pop.")

Throw in the fact the game is also irrelevant and you have the Holy Trinity of reasons why the game has long since outlived whatever usefulness it once had.

Baseball's All Star game was invented in 1933 by a Chicago sportswriter with way too much time on his hands. Since then it has served, ostensibly, to showcase the best talent in baseball in an annual clash between the leagues. One could argue that when there wasn't interleague play as there is today, the All Star game was a bit more compelling because, outside the World Series, it was the only other time that the two leagues ever got together. Compare that to the NBA and NFL all star games. Because the two conferences in each sport always have played against each other during the regular season, there is no real novelty, for example, in seeing LeBron James play against Kobe Bryant or Peyton Manning going against Brian Urlacher.

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But whatever appeal the novelty factor may have once had has long since left baseball's All Star game. Now it represents that three or four day break during the regular season when most baseball fans find something else to do, like complain about their own team on sports talk shows or cut the lawn.

To most Clevelanders, the All Star memory most etched in their minds was Pete Rose barreling into Ray Fosse in the 1970 game, an injury from which Fosse was never the same thereafter. But all this really did was cement the fact that Rose was a jerk and Cleveland was cursed. It hardly heightened interest in the game overall. In fact, if anything, it gave the participants another reason to want to avoid playing the game altogether.

If you watch the game or any of the festivities around it, the most prevalent emotion among the players seems to be indifference. For most, all it really represents is an opportunity to achieve an incentive bonus in their contracts. To the actual all stars, having to play the game, even if just for the perfunctory inning or two, is more of an injury risk than anything else and deprives them of the three or four day break that most of their other teammates get to enjoy. That's why so many players actually beg off playing each year with a variety of mystery ailments, like ingrown fingernails and the miseries. It's like calling off work with a fake cold in order to go golfing.

There was a time when baseball's All Star game was more popular. Heck, from 1960-1962, two all star games were played each year. But whatever appeal it may have once had has long since left the building.

No question the nadir was reached when the worst commissioner of any professional sport ever, Bud Selig, ended the 2002 game by declaring a tie after 11 innings when both teams ran out of pitchers. Of course, when that kind of thing happens during the regular season, which it does occasionally, managers are forced to use a position player on the mound. But apparently the thought of

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such a thing happening in an All Star game was too much for Selig to contemplate and so he ended a game in a way in which, by rule, no baseball game can ever end-in a tie. Of course, Selig need not have broken that rule. He could have, for example, allowed the managers to reuse a pitcher, a violation of the rules as well but less of an offense in an All Star game than simply ending it as if it had never taken place. As Selig noted then "this will never happen again." It shouldn't have happened at all.

But getting all discombobulated about the 2002 game is hardly worth the effort it took to write this sentence. The truth of the matter is that if Selig simply declared that future games were being cancelled due to lack of interest, the only folks who would get all weepy-eyed would be a handful of sportswriters who'd miss out on what amounts to a vacation at their employer's expense.

If you think that assessment is harsh, consider that the ratings for the game continue to dwindle. In 1967, for example, a full 50% of the households with televisions were tuned into the All Star game. Last year, that number was 16%, which was actually 2% more than the year before when the All Star game hit its lowest ratings ever. It is certainly true that in 1967, a television viewer had basically three choices: ABC, NBC and CBS. These days, there are dozens and dozens of cable and satellite channels, not to mention the various on-demand channels, from which to choose. But it also is true that if given a choice, most do not choose to watch the All Star game. (The same thing is true as well with regard to the NBA's all star game and the NFL's Pro Bowl. In fact, both events suffer from such abysmally low ratings, it's reasonable to assume that outside of hard core fans, most folks probably don't realize that each sport does, in fact, have an all star game.)

Given the lack of fan interest, the real question is why does Major League Baseball (or the NBA or the NFL, for that matter) continue to put on this exhibition? Selig would have everyone believe that by putting home field advantage in the World Series as the prize for winning the All Star game, he has restored the luster to the game. That might be true if the only participants were

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those from teams leading their divisions at the break. But why, exactly, would Tampa Bay's representative in any given year actually care about ensuring an American League victory in order to gain an advantage in the World Series? Certainly, if the ratings are any indication, and they are, the fans could care less.

One could do a google search and find about a million and one columns offering suggestions on how to improve the All Star game. To that I say, why bother? Improving the All Star game is like buying a buying a fat guy a new suit, as if that will make all the difference.

Rather than spend any more time trying to fix this mess, why not work on something worth working on, like reassessing the continued worth of interleague play and the unbalanced schedule. How about Selig using his "good of the game" powers as commissioner to either force the American League to drop the DH or the National League to adopt it? How about figuring out a way of making sure that playoff and World Series games don't end at 12:30 a.m. in the eastern time zone? In other words, there are any number of more worthy things to fix about baseball.

In this regard, Scott Boras, the super agent, sent Selig a letter outlining ways to improve the World Series, which itself is suffering from a lack of interest. Boras would have the series expanded to nine games with two being at a neutral site, with cities bidding for the right to hold those two games similar to the Super Bowl. He'd also use that opening weekend at the neutral site as a forum for announcing all of the major award winners, such as Cy Young and rookie of the year, as well as announcing the new Hall of Famers.

Whatever one thinks of Boras' suggestions or the hutzpah it took for him to make them, know this: he's at least trying to actually bring some pizzazz back to the game. The same can hardly be said for Selig. In fact, the extent of Selig's taste for innovation came and left with his decision of award home field advantage to

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the league winning the All Star game.

Thus for now and probably forevermore, or at least until Selig steps down, not much will change. The game will be played, no one will care, and columns like this will continue to be written. But if things continue as they are, soon it will be worth asking: If they throw an All Star game and no one bothers to show, will that mean it was never played?