

A New Voice on Disparity

Written by {ga=paulcousineau}

Friday, January 22 2010 7:00 PM -

Since the only pertinent topics of conversation on the corner of Carnegie and Ontario these days consist of the traits a back-up catcher brings to the table and how the Indians are adept at avoiding arbitration, let's cast the gaze back to the disparity in MLB that was touched on (OK, more than touched on) right after the new year. Prompted by Peter Gammons' superb article that appears at MLB.com (his new home, in case you didn't know), Paul thought it was worthwhile to take a couple of snippets from the piece and relate it to what's now been on his mind for the better part of three weeks. New daddy Paulie C continues the discussion on competitive balance in baseball in his latest piece for us.



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(his new home, in case you didn't know), I thought it was worthwhile to take a couple of snippets from the piece (which is definitely worth your time) and relate it to what's now been on my mind for the better part of three weeks.

Gammons introduces the idea of disparity in the sense that while the sport's competitive balance may look solid on the surface, strong currents exist just below the surface that portend a deeper separation between the "haves" and "have nots";:

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"The way the system is right now, there really is no difference between a \$75 million and \$40 million payroll," said Oakland GM Billy Beane. "I think a lot of small-market clubs look at that and ask, 'Why pay \$75 million when \$40 million will buy me as many wins?'

One of the reasons Bud Selig ascended to Commissioner is that he was and remains a strong advocate for revenue sharing, and the plans he has pushed through have greatly contributed to the sport's growth. Yes, in the past 29 years, 19 of the 30 clubs have won a World Series (five for the Yankees, and two apiece for the Blue Jays, Twins, Marlins and Red Sox). The Rays and Rockies have won pennants in the past three years, and Colorado has been in the playoffs twice in that time.

But the dichotomy between large- and small-revenue franchises is again widening.

"When [GM] Theo Epstein took over in Boston, he changed the industry," said Indians GM Mark Shapiro. "Now we see the Red Sox and Yankees operating as if they're creative mid- to small-market teams, and it's widened the gap between them and some of the other franchises."

This is the issue for me as the Red Sox are the prime example of a team that has made the transition to not simply being able to throw money at problems, but how to work the system as well. There is much talk of modifying the amateur player acquisition process in Gammons' piece and there's no question that the acquisition of amateur talent is a start, but my fear is that the Red Sox and the like have figured out so skillfully how to take advantage of the means to acquire amateur talent that it simply becomes the next aspect of the structure that they dominate. Once they have the advantage secure, they'll be just as reticent to give it up as what they already have.

Essentially, we're looking at a slow progression by which the Red Sox (just to use them as an example) use talented youngsters acquired with their economic advantages (but again, within the rules) through the draft and international signings to trade for players (or, more accurately, contracts) that other teams don't want in trades because they have more young talent to step into the pipeline and it avoids the whole competition of the FA market. That is, the Red Sox can put together a package of prospects to get Victor and maybe Adrian Gonzalez to fill holes on their MLB roster and just use the inherent advantages in the draft and

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internationally to just replace those increasingly-fungible parts in their farm system.

Those advantages at all levels are what's really become troubling to me as evidenced by the fact that the Red Sox got Victor without even dipping into their (allegedly) better arms and the Yankees get Granderson without giving up much more than players they can easily replace by manipulating the draft and amateur signings to their favor. When other large-market teams "figure it out" like the Red Sox have, the disparity is only going to grow, particularly in the context of the economic struggles in certain cities...like Cleveland.

Back to Gammons on the idea that maybe change is coming:

"I heard a stream of great ideas from the general managers," Selig said. "They will be at our next Owners Meetings, in May. We want everyone involved in fixing whatever needs to be done to move our game forward and make it better."

Selig also met with his newly formed committee of owners, GM, managers and outsiders, such as George Will.

"Our sport is prospering," said Selig, "but we cannot ignore problems."

Attendees discussed the situations in Cleveland, Oakland, Tampa and Pittsburgh, and other issues.

"I went there expecting it to be the same old thing," one NL GM said. "I was stunned. I think every one of us feels much better than we did three months ago."

Leveling the playing field is not just taking central funds and handing them to players. It's about scouting and bringing the development of 16-to-24-year-olds into the 21st century. It is not going to happen quickly, although Selig constantly reminds the owners of the Red Sox and Yankees that they need competitive teams playing in their sold-out parks every night. Executives from two teams projected both the Yankees and Red Sox to win 110 games this season. However, ask Cashman or Epstein and they'll tell you that they genuinely fear the Rays because of the organization and creativity of Andrew Friedman, the team's

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executive vice president of labor relations and human resources, and they see the Orioles being restored to the power they enjoyed in the mid-1990s, before CEO Peter Angelos ran out Pat Gillick.

While "leveling the playing field is not just taking central funds and handing them to players...and is about scouting and development", there is a point in that "development" process that certain teams aren't sitting at the same card table. For as much as the Yankees and Red Sox "genuinely fear the Rays because of the organization and creativity of Andrew Friedman", ultimately the difference in the margin for error for teams like the Yankees and Red Sox versus the margin of error for a team like the Rays will catch up to this "creativity" as the Rays being sabotaged by an albatross of a contract (see Hafner, Travis) or by injuries without the ability to simply add more pieces without concern for dollars eventually makes this "fear" short-lived.

Look no further than the Diamondbacks' recent designation for assignment of Eric Byrnes with one year remaining on his 3-year, \$33M deal and GM Josh Byrnes comments on it to get a sense of what the teams that can't just eat bad contracts or essentially make big mistakes in spending that larger revenue teams can absorb. [Byrnes explained the situation in Arizona](#) as such, "Teams are either philosophically or economically more built to take bigger risks. We're not. We have to take either proactive measures on contracts or medium-size risks. In the scope of baseball, this was probably a medium-size risk and it didn't work out, and it hurt us."

How many teams does that statement apply to?

Once you come up with an answer to make that statement not so for that number of teams, then progress is being made. Until then, it's just a waiting game for the larger revenue teams to wait for a team (like the Indians or Diamondbacks or, perhaps in the future, the Rays) to make that debilitating mistake and reap the benefits of being able to add the payroll that the smaller revenue team can't handle.

Back to Sweet Pete one last time for the big finish:

I'm like you...I'd like to think that baseball realizes it needs to find a way to ensure that not only can Mauer, Gonzalez, Zack Greinke and Sizemore play where they belong for what they deserve, but that in 2018, Stanton and Strasburg can be the

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faces of the Marlins and Nationals, not further chapters in the Hundred-Year War between the Yankees and Red Sox.

It is worth noting that Gammons was in town last week for the Indians' Winter Development program (which explains the oddly placed mention of Jason Donald at the start of the article), so I wouldn't be surprised if some of this came from conversations with the Polo Shirt Mafia down at the corner of Carnegie and Ontario, who allowed the CC-Lee match-up in Game 1 of the Fall Classic (the perfect moment to talk about the disparity of baseball) to pass with only the sound of crickets coming from the Indians.

Regardless of where Gammons had this revelation, perhaps the small-market teams have finally found their mouthpiece to level the playing field in some manner, to plead the case that these "chapters in the Hundred-Year War between the Yankees and Red Sox" is not good for the long-term health of baseball. If they have found that voice in Peter Gammons, perhaps something will be done about this with Gammons carrying the torch at the front of the crusade. In fact, having Gammons out front on a topic like this is a prudent path to take so as not to have the explanation of disparity come off as moaning from the small market clubs and having it come instead from the keyboard of a universally respected journalist who has only the best interests of the game in mind.

I'm not going to pretend to know how this happens, but I'll be damned if I still don't think that [the idea put forth here](#) could work. Sure it may not be bulletproof, but it would at least represent a jumping off point for this thing to find a happy medium where players can "play where they belong for what they deserve".

Until we'll just have to enjoy the beauty of the game while attempting to avoid the ugliness of the sport.