

Heading Towards Extinction

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

Thursday, February 18 2010 10:12 PM -



Football and basketball may be headed for their version of labor wars, but the sport in the most trouble and the least interested in addressing it is baseball. In fact, baseball's economics make the problems in football and basketball look positively quaint by comparison.

There are a million places you could start with baseball and everyone of them will be right, but I'll just give you two. On Monday, perennial bottom-feeders, the Washington Nationals, signed Chien-Ming Wang to a \$2 million, one-year contract. It includes an opportunity for Wang to earn another \$3 million in performance bonuses.

I'm not exactly sure the bonus targets that Wang may have but I'm pretty sure that Steve Carlton in his prime couldn't achieve whatever it is they may be with the Nationals and Carlton's a guy that won 27 games for the 1972 Philadelphia Phillies team that only won 59 overall, still among the greatest accomplishments ever in baseball.

So assuming Wang won't sniff the \$3 million in bonuses, that still leaves him with the ability to cash \$2 million worth of paychecks, which seems fair, doesn't it? After all, Ming did go 1-6 last season and had a 9.64 ERA before having shoulder surgery.

The bigger question this all begs is why anyone would want to invest their time and energy in watching a league that lacks such self-discipline and self-respect. If people think Congress frits away the nation's money, it's nothing compared to what baseball does with its fans' money. I

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take back every snarky thought I've ever had about congressional earmarks that are used to fund vanity projects. The next time I hear about a million bucks going to fund research on spider monkeys I'll just remember that the Nationals once gave \$2 million to a washed up pitcher with a bum shoulder.

As bad as this is, though, it pales in comparison to the Indians offering Russell Branyan a big league contract. I take that back. It pales in comparison to the fact that the Indians have offered Russell Branyan a big league contract and are bidding against two other teams for the privilege of signing him.

I should probably offer a disclaimer before going any further about how baseball has to be on the verge of an apocalypse if Branyan at his age (I think he's about 173 years old), or Branyan at any age, can still manage to get teams to sign him for millions.

I'm not a Branyan fan. In fact, I once wrote a short story where Branyan was the protagonist. It was published on these very pages, in fact. The point of this mostly fictional story, as near as I can recall, was that Branyan had such little plate discipline that someone from the crowd could probably take the mound and strike him out. In fact, I'm still willing to put up some money that this could be the case.

Indeed, Branyan isn't just an incredibly lousy hitter, he's equally bad in the field. It made me chuckle to read that the Indians see Branyan as offering protection at three positions-first base, outfield and designated hitter. Let's be honest here. Branyan offers protection only in the sense that he's a slight improvement over actually not having someone play those positions. I don't mean that pejoratively, either. I mean it actually. If, say, Manny Acta one day, while filling out the line up card, asked himself "would I be worse off defensively if I had no one play third base or I put Branyan in there" it would take him until the third inning to come up with an answer.

I was at an Indians game years ago with my oldest daughter. It was June 10, 2001, a Sunday. We had great seats about 10 rows behind the Indians' dug out. Jaret Wright was on the mound, still trying to come back from his own arm and shoulder problems. It was a beautiful day, except for the fact that Wright got his brains bashed in against the Cincinnati Reds, giving up 8 runs in 1 1/3 innings.

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But the day wasn't a total wash out. Brayan started in left field and had a throwing error in the first inning that helped Wright come unglued. In the 6th inning, he moved to third base and promptly offered up another throwing error. Two in one game and from entirely different positions. Try to find that kind of achievement duplicated elsewhere. Good look Elias Sports Bureau.

And that was when Brayan was in his prime. Over the years, Brayan hasn't gotten any better at anything. Although he's never played a full season in his career, the reason Brayan keeps sticking around is the result of his occasional ability to hit the long ball. According to baseball-reference.com, Brayan's career statistics project out to 162-game average of 30 home runs, 73 RBI. To general managers like Mark Shapiro, trolling for players like hobos scan the sand at a beach for coins with a metal detector, these numbers look pretty good.

What Shapiro and his ilk always overlook in a "yea, but" sort of way is the fact that the value added by these 30 home runs is more than offset by the rest of what comes with it.

Look at it this way. Brayan is a .234 hitter who strikes out nearly 40% of the time. Assuming 5 at bats per game, Brayan will strike out twice, game in and game out. That goes along with the two other outs he'll make, game in and game out, all the while giving the team the equivalent of 1 hit per game. And for all that, once a week one of those hits will be a home run.

Last season Brayan "earned" \$1.4 million playing for Seattle. Because Tampa Bay and Boston supposedly are also in the mix for his limited services, that means Brayan is likely to command even more this season. And that's the rub.

In any other era, Brayan would long since have been out of baseball. He's awful in the field, awful at the plate and yet hangs around because teams can't seem to help tripping over themselves to literally throw millions at him in the continued but failed hope that he can deliver more than an occasional, majestic shot over the center field fence.

I certainly don't begrudge Brayan sticking around to take the money. If someone was willing to give you a winning million dollar lottery ticket every year and all you had to do was show up and wave at the ball, wouldn't you do it, too?

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The people I begrudge are the Shapiros of the world and the owners that let them throw that kind of money away while pinching pennies elsewhere. Talk about stepping over a dollar to pick up a dime. There isn't even one credible scenario that I can imagine where any team signing Branyan for that kind of money makes any sense.

For Cleveland, Branyan brings absolutely nothing to the roster. Even if he helps them win an extra game or two (a feat I herewith deem impossible), that won't make any difference in the standings. The Indians have absolutely no chance of getting to the playoffs this season anyway so why waste even one roster spot on someone like Branyan?

For Tampa Bay and Boston, two teams fighting for the playoffs where winning one more game could be crucial, you could make the argument that if he helps either win at least that one more game than he's worth the investment. But that's assuming that in the process of helping you win that one more game he doesn't cost you a few in the process.

I've watched Branyan play over the years with a bit of perverse fascination and I can tell you unequivocally that if you march him out there day in and day out, he'll cost you more games than he'll help you win. With his track record you can rest assured that more than a few times he'll strike out at some crucial moment with runners in scoring position. And if you deploy him in spot duty, the odds are overwhelmingly stacked against you that he'll do anything more than simply take up space. You'd be better off with a space heater.

If you want to take it even a step further, signing Branyan at even league minimum makes no sense. At that price I would much rather have literally anyone on the AAA roster instead. At least with a younger player there is the illusion of hope. With Branyan, and all the players like him, there isn't even that illusion.

But as much as this is about Branyan it's not about Branyan at all. It's about the fact that baseball economics are a mess, the number of competitive teams has dwindled down to a few and instead of fixing the problem they keep adding to it by paying millions of dollars to players that by now should be working at Big Lots.

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I don't pretend to understand why baseball keeps inflicting the same old wounds on itself each year but I do understand the ramifications. Professional baseball should now officially be declared an endangered species, like the giant panda, and treated similarly, meaning that unless there is drastic action soon, it too is heading for extinction.