



Sports

by Jerry Keys

Earlier this month ESPN analyst Scott Van Pelt was suspended for an indefinite period of time for making disparaging comments about Major League Baseball's commissioner, Bud Selig. The main focus of his suspension revolved around the sarcastic comments about Bud Selig's \$18.5 million salary in 2007. The entire commentary can be heard on you tube;

www.youtube.com/watch?v=O8ChNQWHZGg

In 1992, Selig became an increasingly vocal adversary of then commissioner Fay Vincent. Along with a majority of owners, they succeeded in forcing Vincent to resign. He then became the "de facto" acting commissioner. Selig has yet to relinquish the title. Let's take a memorable look back at things he has done over the last fifteen-plus years. He instituted a new three-division format with each division winner seizing a playoff spot, and a wildcard slot for the team with the best record who did not win their division. Sounds good doesn't it?

In the first year of its existence, the 1994 strike-shortened season, two division winners would have been the AL West winning Texas Rangers (52-62) and the NL West winners Los Angeles Dodgers (58-56). Either the Cincinnati Reds (66-48) or Houston Astros (66-49) would have been shut out of the "never to be" 1994 playoffs. The 1994 season was not the only year to have teams left out of the playoffs because they finished third in an ultra competitive division; while the winner of a weak division garnished a playoff berth.

There are a plethora of other examples and I will choose one more as an example. In 1997 the Houston Astros won the NL Central with an 84-78 record. The wildcard team was the Florida Marlins at 92-70.

Two teams with better records got left out in the cold, the third place NL East New York Mets (88-74) and Los Angeles Dodgers, the second place team in the NL West, also with an 88-74 mark.

In the early 1960's the American and National Leagues expanded from eight to ten teams. In 1969 they expanded to twelve teams and to heighten a team's playoff chances, broke the Leagues up into two divisions, the East and West; with six teams in each. I thought that idea was pretty crafty, especially in the aftermath of the New York Yankees and Brooklyn/LA Dodgers monopolies of the last twenty years.

The newly devised league championship was a best-of-5 series (first team to win three won) and the World Series remained the best-of-7. The league championship was expanded to the best-of-7 as well in 1985. Ten years later, a newly expanded playoff system started (would have in 1994 but we all know why it never occurred), where the four playoff teams would play a best-of-five (divisional playoff), then the best-of-7 league championship, and at long last, the World Series.

Baseball owners wanted the fans to feel their team had a much better chance at post-season play than in decades past. Yes that may be true but what is so disheartening, baseball purists know good and well it was more for gate receipts than fan excitement.

Speaking of increased revenue for baseball teams, the owners and Bud "Moe Howard" Selig each were aware of the increased use of performance enhancing drugs (PED). Several players' union team representatives began making comments about it being in use via teammates comments. Selig even acknowledged he tried to implement steroid testing as early as 1995. In

1995 I was still a baseball purist who would read pages and pages of baseball news in most major news outlets. I never heard a peep of it. I even contacted dozens of other baseball fanatics (over half now reformed) about ever hearing of anything such as this. Not one heard a whisper.

The first whisper came in 1998 and it had nothing to do with Selig, it had to do with a bottle of andro in Mark McGwire's locker. Suddenly over the next four-five years the old superstar standard of 40 homers became commonplace to 55-60 homers. At the same time, a pitcher's quality ERA jumped from 3.25 to around 4.00 or 4.25. Maybe that was a major reason why the average innings per start for starting pitchers diminished, unless a pitcher still wanted to toss 275 innings but carry a 5.00 ERA.

Another "brainchild" of Selig's was inter-league play. It does not take a rocket scientist to estimate that led to a very unbalanced schedule for numerous teams, some teams that missed the playoffs by a game or two. In addition, the winner of the All-Star game decided what NL or AL team had home-field advantage in the World Series. What if the two teams that made it to the Series only had one representative at the game and one or neither did not get a chance to participate in the game?

Oh, and the 2002 All-Star Game at his newly built Miller Park in Milwaukee.

Theft By Deception

The game ended in a 7-7 tie due to Selig declaring the game should not continue (his reason was all the players in the game already saw playing time). That consequence led to the home field advantage "idea" a year later. Selig also decided to eliminate the AL and NL offices and presidencies. And to add insult to injury for Minnesota Twins fans, Selig attempted to get their team contracted after the 2001 season. In the seven seasons since that attempt, the Twins have captured four division titles and tied for another forcing a one-game playoff. Selig's beloved Brewers...four losing seasons (one over 100 losses), one .500 season, and two over-.500 seasons, including one wild card entry. And Bud...I sure think he can pick 'em. Well there is his haircut....I about forgot that.

This leads me back to Scott Van Pelt's comments directed at Selig's salary, or as I would say a tremendously overpaid salary. Van Pelt made no threatening remarks, made no comments about his immediate family in negative light, nor did he demean his character. In my opinion, he simply stated he was paid too much and lived like an aristocrat. So what? Is he not protected under the First Amendment of the Constitution?

I forgot to mention ESPN and Major League Baseball have a multi-billion dollar agreement covering "Live Game Streaming, Expanded Highlights on Multiple Platforms, Emerging Platforms

and Syndication" to name a few. This contract was renewed through 2013. Ahhhhh.....now it comes out. Is Selig untouchable? And will he not allow anything negative to be spoken about him? Wasn't that similar to the Great Purge in Russia 1936-38 under the tyrant Joseph Stalin? Not entirely so, I do not expect to see Van Pelt working in Barrow, Alaska but he may very well face roadblocks in his wake while he seeks gainful employment in the sports field. Van Pelt built a considerable viewing/listening audience and that was the major reason he was suspended "indefinitely".

In a way, I guess I am lucky. I contribute articles to a small paper in a small city in the corner of Tennessee. Nevertheless, I would like a few things to be known about Selig's handling of the steroid policy. He made several threats to suspend several superstars for their PED use. They have to this point all been paper threats. I guess it was easier for him to throw his clout at Van Pelt than admitted users such as Jason Giambi, Andy Pettitte, or Alex Rodriguez. What ever became of his crackdown on Barry Bonds? It's okay to suspend marginal players but does he lose his spine when it comes to players who are household names? That never stopped Pete Rozelle or Paul Tagliabue of the NFL and they made only a fraction of what he hauls in yearly.

I was once a baseball purist. I will never forget when the Atlanta Braves or Chicago Cubs had a west coast trip. That meant baseball until 2 A.M. during the summer. Or better yet, a Braves game at 7:35 and a Cubs game at 10:30. That's what I remember most about growing up with the game. Then came the Emperor. Baseball was my mistress until the 1994 strike. Although I still loved the game, it just was not the same. As every year passes by, the kid inside me that loved the game dies a little bit more. After hearing about every home run record tainted and their heir apparent to Mr. Congeniality, Bonds (see August 2007 article The People News), just admitting to steroid use (for the true number of years we will never know), I am not sure if I will ever embrace the game again. All of my childhood idols are either retired or dead (except a couple in their last year(s)).

I would rather the ending be somewhat romantic as was the relationship it bestowed upon me for nearly thirty years. Allow baseball to move forward as I turn around and reminisce on how it used to be. Each of us would be hard pressed not to turn and peek to see if the other is watching as we go our separate ways. But we are both stubborn and hard-headed. It should not have to end this way....but it looks like it will. Thanks for the memories and best wishes in later life. Goodbye.

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