



If I Were Baseball Commissioner

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I am suspicious of despots. This is America. Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, so-called "savior" of baseball, was a racist whose death was a precondition to the game's integration. So the Commissioner I propose to be would live in the real world of limits and conditions. For a time, I was the dean of students at a small college: students thought my authority extended to the far horizon and back. I knew, however, how many masters I served. Authority, one learns when one tastes it, is overrated.

So my authority would be benign. I would fake nobody. I would be diplomat, scholar, negotiator, fan. I would embarrass no one. My respect for players, umpires, and owners would be visible and present. To the degree to which the game is in trouble, it is because these people don't get along, don't trust each other, don't understand their common bond. I think at some level even the owners are educable.

I would save the game from the Philistines and infidels, who live outside the game and would suck it dry, by the power of my love. My love for the game. I would overcome.

My love of the game would be readily apparent. It would grow on you. It would not resemble the rah-rah schtick of Tommy Lasorda, nor would it ever have the lugubrious weight of the current emperor with no clothes, Bud Selig.

I would go to a lot of games. I would sit proudly in those good front row Commissioner box seats. The fans in the bleachers would be glad



for me that I had those great seats for they would see how happy I was to be there. Oh, I would visit the bleachers, have a hot dog and a chat, and then I would return to my great seats, a real fan, among the supercilious season ticket holders whose lives often amount to a series of wonderful things taken for granted.

I would ask exuberant former ballplayers to sit with me in these great seats, Bill Lee, Tom Seaver, Kirby Puckett, and we would have such a good time, enjoying the game, telling stories, laughing and joking, that people would catch our spirit, our infectious love for the game. I would, yes, I would, bring Pete Rose to a game with me and we would have a dialogue that would go something like this:

"Pete, did you gamble on baseball games? Tell the truth."

"Yes, I did."

"Are you sorry? Do you understand why that is such a bad idea?"

"I am truly sorry—and yes, I understand the error of my ways."

"Do you gamble now—and will you ever gamble again?"

"I do not gamble now—nor will I ever again."

"Pete, do you love the game—still?"

"I have always loved the game—and I always will."

We would shake hands and embrace, right there at the ballpark, and I would say, "Then, my brother in baseball, I reinstate you. But you must redeem yourself with the fans. Go and humbly express this love among the people."

I would be sorry that I was not Commissioner when Billy Martin was alive so I could have saved him from his alcoholism, and the cruel manipulations of his owner, by exploiting his obvious love of the game. "Billy, stop drinking," I would have said in private conversations, and I would have used my authority to provide incentives: "stop drinking and humiliating yourself, or I will take the game away from you."

So you see, I would be benign but not toothless. When I had to wield my authority nakedly, I would do so swiftly and conclusively. Beanballs, and retaliations, disrespect of the umpires (I wouldn't demand saintly behavior, I would enjoy a good rhubarb), likewise disrespect of the players by the umpires, drunken and abusive fans, and other excesses that demean the game, would have to cease. Players would face long suspensions which would disrupt their teams and disappoint their teammates. Umpires would stop their belligerence, return to the dignified



role of arbiter and peacemaker, or they too would be buying tickets to see a game.

I would not just go to major league games. I would confirm that baseball is alive and well outside the pleasure domes of the professional elite. I would go often to minor league parks where the baseball is good, the parking is free, and the beer is cold. I would not dance on the dugout with the furry mascot—I would not be a clown—I would wear a shirt and a tie and keep my hair trimmed, mine is not intended to be a class statement, but I would stay for the whole game, then go into the locker rooms and meet the young players and transfix them with stories of the game's great heroes: Ted Williams and his pristine batting excellence and sacrifice in two wars; Satchel Paige and his glorious entry into white baseball for the Indians in 1948; the martyred Roberto Clemente who died on a mercy mission to aid Nicaraguan hurricane victims after getting his 3000th hit in his last at-bat in 1972; and so many more.

I would not drive by a high school game without stopping to watch a few innings. I would accept invitations to attend high school banquets and little league parties at the end of the season. I would give out the trophies to the Babe Ruth champs in cities and towns across America. I would do this to acknowledge that baseball's greatness comes from the ground up, the thrill of the grass is grass-roots. I would tell these very young players about the glorious history of the game and regale them with stories of great players and games and teams.

I would go to practices and teach kids good bunting technique, which I could do, and a sure-fire pick-off play at second. I would go to college games and maybe sit with a scout or bird-dog who had a radar gun and a stopwatch and we would talk about "prospects" and meet their parents and friends.

It's all baseball, the game itself, and it's good.

I'd march right into the inner city and go to schools to talk to kids and their teachers, and leave baseball gear with them—gloves and balls and bats. I'd make sure the R.B.I. program (Restore Baseball in the Inner City) is generously funded so that we might arrest and reverse the decline in interest among African-American youth for this game that produced the impeccable Jackie Robinson. Before long, Ken Griffey Jr. and Frank Thomas and Barry Bonds would call me and ask if they could come along—and I would say, "yes, of course."



I would go on Jay Leno and accept his brickbats with unfailing good humour—and I would show footage of the game's great contemporary players demonstrating their awesome talents and ballistic skills. I'd go on *Nightline* with sober Ted Koppel and explain the progress the game was making to live the dream of Jackie Robinson.

And even if the progress were slow and I were submitting to discouragement, I would go to a game the next day and be restored.

I would go visit Ted Williams in Florida and talk hitting and bring him the best wishes of all baseball fans throughout the country.

I know. I know. It's a job. There's work to be done. I would have a staff, a coalition of all the constituents who have played the game and made it what it is. I'd have a ton of young interns running around, thinking of ways to engage their contemporaries in baseball. My right hand helper would be a fabulously rich, dollar-a-year guy, absolutely at ease (unlike me) in boardrooms and country clubs. Somebody the owners trusted as one of them. I'd have slick lawyers and accountants who all wore the baseball caps of their favorite teams to work.

What would happen during the off-season, November to February? There are still games to see, people to meet. I would be the official ambassador to the world of baseball. I would visit the Florida and Arizona instructional leagues and fly off to winter leagues around the globe. I would make baseball even bigger in Australia. I'd learn Spanish and greet players in their native tongue. I would play catch with Fidel Castro, Jesse Helms be damned.

I would do all this in the name of baseball, the national pastime. For you see, the problem with baseball, the infection that is sapping the game, does not spring from technical causes—the DH, artificial playing surfaces, games too long, salaries too great, and so on.

The joy has gone.

Bring back the joy.

The Commissioner must be the game's number one fan. I could do it.