

Play Ball??? (With A Truism That PR People Should Never Forget)

Arthur Solomon

Once again, Major League Baseball team owner and some of their players are in disagreement. The issue this time is to “Play Ball” or not to “Play Ball” in the era of the [coronavirus](#).

Only the most fanatic of fanatic sports fans still believe that the owners of Major League Baseball clubs (MLB), and other sports team owners, care about them. They should have learned the truth decades ago as franchises packed their bulging money bags and moved to cities that would yield them even more money. Major League Baseball ballplayers were way ahead of fans in knowing the truth about club owners. They knew that the owners never had the best interests of the players in mind when they attempted to prevent them from having a say regarding their employment.



The players wanted to be treated like other Americans workers. And it was a talented center fielder named Curt Flood that ignited the movement that ultimately led to the players being treated like citizens, instead of like the club owners' chattel's, when, in 1969, he refused being traded after the season. The case eventually reached the Supreme Court, which ruled against Flood. Nevertheless his actions were instrumental in eventually giving players the rights of employment granted to other U.S. citizens, which occurred six years later.

In 1975, pitchers Dave McNally and Andy Messersmith refused to

sign contracts and played the season without one. Later that year, arbitrator Peter Seitz, on December 23, 1975, ruled that Major League Baseball players became free agents upon playing one year for their team without a contract, effectively nullifying baseball's reserve clause.

Now, as baseball stadiums are filled with cardboard cutouts replacing living fans, team owners and the players are faced with a situation that, hopefully, even the most fanatic of fanatics would admit is more important than the game: Life and death. Which raises one of two questions regarding baseball.

Question One: Should the club owners of the so-called national pastime, (great PR slogan that has outlived its usefulness as brain-destroying football has become the most popular sport in the U.S.) cancel the remainder of its 60 game season because so many players and coaches have been infected with the coronavirus?

Before the first full week of what will certainly be remembered as the Asterisk Season, at least 17 members of the Miami Marlins have tested positive for covid-19, and the team suspended play for at least a week. Because of the Marlins situation other teams also had to cancel games.

As in the days before Curt Flood, Dave McNally and Andy Messersmith, once again some baseball players have decided that what baseball thinks is best for them isn't. The Washington Senators, after a team vote, refused to play the Marlins, and at least 14 players from various teams decided to sit out the entire truncated season.

The fear of baseball players catching the virus and bringing it home to their children, wives, parents and others was perhaps best said by Milwaukee Brewers outfielder Ryan Braun, who said, in a story reported in the July 29 New York Times, "There's a real level of fear and anxiety for all of us, especially all of us that have children, anybody who may have underlying health conditions, anybody who has an older parent,

coaches and everybody else.” It’s not easy for any of us to think we’ll be flying home to our families without knowing the results of tests, he said.

While it’s true that the cardboard fans in the stand are unlikely to be infected by the virus, it’s almost impossible to prevent even the most socially-distance conscious players to avoid being in contact with other none playing people during the course of the season – managers, coaches, umpires, video and radio technicians, travel coordinators, club house personnel and trainers, and so many other individuals that might be necessary for a team to play one game.

Given the fact that some on-the-field individuals wear a mask during a baseball game and others don’t, in effect, team sports in 2020 are like a Petri dish loaded with coronaviruses seeking a new home – humans. And yet, the moguls that control the business of sports continue to deny reality and insist they have taken all measures to prevent the spread of the disease. But the coronavirus disagrees.

Especially ludicrous is that the National Football League is still planning for a full season. If that happens, it should be a banner year for running backs as they run through the socially-distanced six feet between linemen. Right?

The only sensible thing for baseball, football, basketball and hockey to do is to do what the International Olympic Committee did several weeks ago: Cancel their games set to begin in July, pretend that the Tokyo 2020 summer games never existed and rebranded it Tokyo 2021.

But, of course, the super rich sports team owners, like all people who fit into that category, always think they have all the answers and sports fanatics will agree with the decisions to play until the players are infected, because as Tevye said in Broadway’s Fiddler on the Roof, “And it won’t make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong. When you’re rich,

they think you really know.” Except in MLB’s situation, letting the team’s travel in the midst of the worst health crisis in the U.S. in 102 years has already been proven wrong.

However, there is one aspect of sports and coronavirus that even the most fanatic of the fanatics sports fan should be bothered about. That is **Question Two**: How come the baseball players can get back their coronavirus test results in a day or so, but Joe and Jane Fan and their children have to wait much more than a week to get the results of their coronavirus tests?” On July 29, the Wall Street Journal reported sports leagues, including the National Basketball Association, Women’s National League Basketball Association and two soccer leagues, all playing in the bubble, can get test results back in a few hours. That’s a question that must be answered, even though we already know what the probable answer will be – money talks.

The results from the first week of the baseball season are clear. Instead of “Play ball,” the commissioner should shout, “Season cancelled.”

PR Lesson: Any one in our business long enough is certain to have disappointments because the success of even the best crafted program is often at the mercy of happenings that you can’t control. Dwelling on “what might have been” in our business is a sure road to failure.



About the Author: Arthur Solomon, a former journalist, was a senior VP/senior counselor at Burson-Marsteller, and was responsible for restructuring, managing and playing key roles in some of the most significant national and international sports and non-sports

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