

Play Ball-Baseball Season Is Here Again!

Lincoln Mitchell, Harriman Institute, Columbia University

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The beginning of the baseball season is only a few days away. This is good news to all baseball fans who have made it through another off-season, and another winter. This season, like all others, is full of possibility excitement and questions. Will this be the year the Yankees finally fall apart? How can Mike Trout top his extraordinary rookie season? Are the Nationals going to be as good as they look? Somewhere in the ephemera is Miguel Cabrera still waiting for that slider? All, or most, of these questions, and many others will be answered over the next seven months or so.

Baseball is always evolving in style, rules and structure; and this year will be no different. Minor rule changes regarding pickoff moves will not be noticed by most fans. The growing trend of securing young players to long term contracts continues to make the free agent market weaker and a less viable strategy for building a winner than even a few years ago. Innovative managers are still exploring new ways to manage the bullpen; and every year new statistics are created to measure one or another aspect of player performance.

There are also some changes that do not require new rules, but that would make the game more enjoyable for fans, and in some cases, help teams win. These are changes of style, strategy or marketing, not rules. Here are four of them.

Bring Back Double Headers Over the last decades, double headers have been all but entirely phased out. For years, double headers were a great part of the game, enjoyed by many fans, particularly younger ones. The contemporary day night "double header" where the park is cleared out between games and new tickets are required to attend the second game is little more than a mockery of a real double header. With so many teams playing in new stadiums with many attractions and activities for fans, a double header seems like a natural idea. If teams want to make more money, they could charge 50 percent more for a double header ticket. Fans would still get two games in a day for less than the cost of two games. Teams would get a sold out day of fans buying concessions and souvenirs.

Deeper and Better Benches As teams carry 12 or even 13 pitchers, the depth and quality of benches has declined. As a result, teams are often stuck sending weak hitting middle infielders up to pinch hit in the late innings. This is particularly true for AL teams playing without a DH who often only have one viable pinch hitter. Similarly, NL teams often have few options for DH in interleague games. In general, good benches with players who can provide value offensively make for a more exciting and strategically interesting game. Teams that carry 11 pitchers, so that they can carry more bench players will not only provide a more entertaining product, but will probably win a few extra games as that extra right handed bat, or pinch runner will prove more valuable than the seventh man out of the bullpen over the course of a season.

Innovative Use of the Pitching Staff A related change is that pitching staffs remain a fertile ground for experimentation, particularly with teams more aware of pitch counts and the challenges of keeping a staff healthy and effective over a long season and, for some teams, a post-season. Six-man rotations, pitch and inning counts that do not lead to shutting down top pitchers in the post-season, bullpen construction that does not require carrying two or three pitchers who are well below league average, and four man rotations with shorter outings by starters are just some of the ideas and challenges around structuring pitching staffs. While no one approach here will make the game better, if different teams began thinking about pitching staffs in their own distinct way it would make the game more interesting and stimulating for fans. Moreover, some teams would find ways to organize pitching that would pay off in team wins and losses as well.

Bringing Back the Stolen Base Over the last three seasons, only one player has stolen 50 or more bases. In the 13 seasons from 2000-2012, 25 players stole 50 or more bases. By contrast, from 1990-2002, which includes a strike shortened year and fewer teams, 50 players stole 50 or more bases. From 1980-1992, again with fewer teams and a strike shortened season, 59 players stole 50 or more bases. This decline is partially due to a correction from the early 1980s when fast players with low OBPS, such as Omar Moreno or Vince Coleman were generally overrated and overused, as well as to the high home run era which began in the mid-1990s and lasted until a few years ago. In the lower offense context in which baseball is now played, there is a natural need for faster players who can help their team by stealing bases. Obviously, speed alone is not very valuable, but leadoff hitters who can get on base and steal bases or defensive specialists who, when they are on base, are a threat to steal, can bring real value in low offense contexts. Stolen bases, and even the threat of a stolen base, bring an excitement to the game that is a change of pace from the home run and strikeout variety of baseball which is still somewhat common at the big league level.

Baseball, like many institutions, is constantly evolving. These ideas are relatively small things, which are in the hands of the teams themselves, but they could make the game even more enjoyable and teams more successful and and off the field.