In Defense of the World Baseball Classic

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Bud Selig has been a very controversial baseball commissioner. He more or less encouraged steroid use for years, allowing it to become a major problem, before seeking, ineffectively, to address the problem for the last several years. He created the new system of three divisions and the wild card, now wild cards, which have been a mixed bag for baseball. He also presided over a gratuitous offensive boom for about a decade beginning around 1994 which lead to a bloated and less enjoyable style of play.

Selig, however, has done one thing extremely well. He has led MLB into a time when it is more much more international than ever before. Before Selig became commissioner there had only been a handful of Japanese players. Today there are many Japanese players, including some of the game's biggest stars, as well as players from Korea and Taiwan. In addition to the boom in Asian players, there are also more players from Latin America than ever before. In the next decade or so, there will likely be big leaguers from Brazil, China and possibly several European countries. This is great for the game, improving the quality of play on the field and making it more enjoyable for fans.

One of the vehicles for making the game more international is the World Baseball Classic (WBC), which is just getting under way this week. This is an international tournament featuring teams from 16 different polities. The WBC is an unusual event. Some of the best players in the game will play this year, but others will be notably absent. It is likely, for example, that an All Star team of US players who are not participating, such as Buster Posey and Justin Verlander, would beat the US team. On the other hand, some of the game's best and most exciting players like Robinson Cano, R.A. Dickey, Miguel Cabrera and Pablo Sandoval are playing, for their respective countries.

In general, most of the teams combine players who are household names with players about whom any fans know very little. The Dominican Team will feature, Cano, Jose Reyes and Wandy Rodriguez as well as players who have much less experience in the big leagues. The Japanese team, which has won both WBC's to date, will not feature the most prominent Japanese players currently playing in the US like Ichiro Suzuki and Yu Darvish, but will consist entirely of players from the Japanese league. For obvious political reasons, the Cuban team will have no players who have played in the big leagues.

The tournament is imperfect because not all the best players are playing, and pitchers are limited both by pitch count rules and the fear of injury which keeps many of the best pitchers out. Moreover, the quality of play is erratic as there are some teams that are very strong like the US, Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Japan, and others like China, Brazil and Spain which will likely be drubbed, or at least decisively defeated, by most of the better teams.

Because of all this, the WBC has generated some controversy. Some feel that without the best American players, the event is cheapened. Others believe that the scheduling is problematic.
There is some truth to these arguments, but they should not overshadow the benefits of the tournament. First, the tournament generates excitement for baseball in many countries around the world. Countries like Israel, which just missed the WBC this year, or Georgia, whose baseball program is embryonic, can aspire to making it to future WBC’s. This is particularly important as baseball is no longer in the Olympics.

Second, the games themselves can be quite good with a very high quality of play, especially in the later rounds when the weaker teams are eliminated. In 2009, I remember staying up late to watch the Netherlands beat the Dominican Republic. I also remember the blank look on the faces of my two Dutch graduate students the next day when I congratulated them.

The WBC also undermines the trope that baseball is some weird and uniquely American thing, like widespread obesity or not believing in evolution. Many Europeans would probably be surprised to know that there are relatively strong teams in Italy and the Netherlands, while the increasing popularity of the game in Brazil, China and elsewhere would also surprise many.

The WBC is far from perfect, with occasionally uneven play and many of the game's best players deciding to concentrate on spring training rather than the tournament, but it is also a lot of fun for many people and an opportunity to highlight one of baseball's biggest accomplishments in recent years. Selig has gotten a lot of things wrong, but should be recognized for getting this one right.