

Infield Fly Girl

“It’s wild to me that we’re materially changing the way baseball is played and experienced and the only reason anyone can come up with is because it might make people who already don’t like baseball slightly more tolerant of the game length.” *Infield Fly Girl*, on Facebook

My neighbor finds interesting facts about baseball or comments like those of Infield Fly Girl and shares them with me because he knows of my passion for the game. In this instance, he passed along an opinion with implications beyond tinkering with the details of a game.

For the benefit of those for whom tolerance for baseball has not yet developed, no matter how long a game lasts, here are details. Over the years, the average time of a baseball game has climbed from somewhere near two hours for nine innings to about three hours. Never mind that the average time of a professional football game is near three hours as well, despite the fact that there are only 60 minutes of playing time, and the average time one play takes is about seven seconds.

The Powers that Be in Baseball, meaning the owners and the Commissioner, have concluded that elapsed time is the reason for diminishing interest. Perhaps they are right. When watching a game, I am impatient with the batter who, after every pitch, steps out of the batter’s box and adjusts both batting gloves or the pitcher who always aims for the edge of the plate and often misses rather than challenging the batter to hit the ball to one of the seven people standing behind the pitcher who would be eager to field a batted ball. Now there will be a time clock controlling how much time will elapse between pitches.

I got to see a spring training game last week where the clock was in use. The game moved along well. No batters adjusted his batting gloves after every pitch. Would someone who doesn’t like baseball have been won over?

The changes in baseball rules began a couple of years ago when, in the event of innings beyond nine, the team at bat begins their turn up with a runner already at second base and no outs. Now we have made the bases bigger in an attempt to encourage more base stealing and prohibited infielder shifts designed to increase the fielding team’s chances to field a ball and record an out.

Baseball is a game that revels in statistics. Regularly, current pundits compare present-day numbers with past numbers to make their case for GOATS—Greatest Of All Time. But, if a runner in 2023 steals more than 130 bases in a season (the current record), running to bases a few inches bigger, how will those numbers compare? If a batter compiles a higher batting average because there are fewer fielders in the way of a batted ball, will the change in the rules mean that the new average will merit an asterisk?

Messing with the rules then creates a challenge for pundits and their fans who relish the numbers. And what does any of that have to do with reducing the amount of time it takes to play a nine-inning baseball game?

Face it. Baseball has to compete with a wider variety of sports diversions than in the past. Soccer has grown in popularity. College football has become the minor leagues for the professional leagues. March Madness has as much appeal as a marketing tool as the Super Bowl or the World Series. No need to mention the myriad other athletic endeavors that compete for one's attention.

Furthermore, I have not seen any Major League Owners in an unemployment line recently. They are still making a boatload of money, much of it coming from television rights. They are the ones messing with the rules, hoping to lure back a marginal number of the "people who already don't like baseball." Every viewer equates with some dollar amount.

Yes, I am a Baseball Curmudgeon. I think, though, that what we see in this effort to speed up and/or improve the game is not just a problem for baseball. The way things were is always bumping up against the ways things could be better. The key questions: better in whose mind and in what way?

People of a Certain Age, a significant challenge for you and me as we move through our lives is to reconcile what we have learned, known, and come to rely on with what is emerging, what new truths have been uncovered, what new sensibilities might be expected from life. By now, you and I have established interests and expectations based on experience and learning.

When someone proposes that things could be better, asking the questions "in whose mind" and "in what way" seem reasonable. To what extent will the answers we find for those questions be shaped by what we believe already?

I imagine Infield Fly Girl to be younger than me (most people are these days) yet she values what exists now over what might be. She made me think about to whom the game belongs: the current fans, the owners, the players, the pundits? Or all of the above, the community of baseball?

For it is true that baseball, a game, is at the core of a community sharing experiences without life and death ramifications. Don't we need more of those shared experiences no matter the length of the game?

Submitted by Daniel E. White March 27, 2023

Click here to forward your comments to Dan at danwhitehi@gmail.com