

VIEW From The Cheap Seats

By Mark Savoie

Unless there have been some Earth shattering events since the time I wrote this column until today, the baseball season is dead. Long live the football season!... and the hockey and basketball seasons as well. Unfortunately it may even be too late for the last two of these sports. The NHL has taken a very hard line stance with regard to the NHLPA during this fall's training camp, and the NBA players have challenged the very legality of the draft in the U.S. court system.

Since baseball's labour difficulties of this year began, the question which many baseball fans have found themselves asking is: 'Who is right?' The simple answer to the question is that both sides are wrong, therefore neither side is right. The givers of this response look at the size of the numbers being tossed around, then at the size of the number in their bank account, and then they jump to the immediate conclusion that both the owners and the players are greedy little spoiled brats.

You can hear these same people rhapsodising about the days when players played baseball for the love of the game. They point back to the fifties and sixties—as far back as their myopic memories will allow—and argue that the fact that very few baseball players got rich off their contracts as proof that money was not the overriding concern for these players.

What these people are forgetting is that the reasons players did not get paid nearly what players of today are getting—even when inflation is accounted for—is because back then the owners were in complete control. Binding arbitration and free agency were not options available to the players, and, because of the reserve clause, players were ultimately forced to accept their team's contract offer or refrain from playing altogether. The owners used this power like a sledgehammer. When Ralph Kiner—the one star player for the dismal Pittsburgh Pirates of the early 1950s—requested a raise in pay, he was told by legendary general manager Branch Rickey, "Forget it, we

could've finished last without you."

The point is that baseball players at the major league level have never played for the 'love of the game.' From the earliest days of professionalism in the 1860s players have always sold their services to the highest bidder whenever they had the right to do so. As in all things, there have been exceptions, but these have been rare. Even Saint Joe DiMaggio once got into a bitter contract dispute with the New York Yankees. He held out long into the 1938 season before finally signing a contract that offered just 56% of what he had demanded. In the interim he was crucified by the press and the fans; the whole episode later being described by him as the unhappiest time of his life.

So we know that players are greedy, and always have been. The only reason we notice it more now is because the numbers are so large that we (fans, owners, players, media) have forgotten that money is not really the issue. What is at issue is the principle of freedom of movement, of freedom of choice, of the freedom to determine one's own life. So what if they are greedy; anything less than unrestricted free agency and the abolishment of the draft is an inherent violation of the players' human rights.

Whether or not the players actually win or lose this strike, it is inevitable that they will win in the long run. And it is a long run. Make no mistake; this season's strike is simply a continuation of the strikes of 1981 and 1973, and there are more to come. In all ways that matter, the issues are exactly the same. In fact, the issues are exactly the same as they were when the players formed their own separate league in 1890. The fight has been going on for that long! Over the last hundred years the issue has been brought to court several times. Every single time, with but one exception, the players have won. That is why, when this finally does go to the courts, the owners will end up on the losing side.

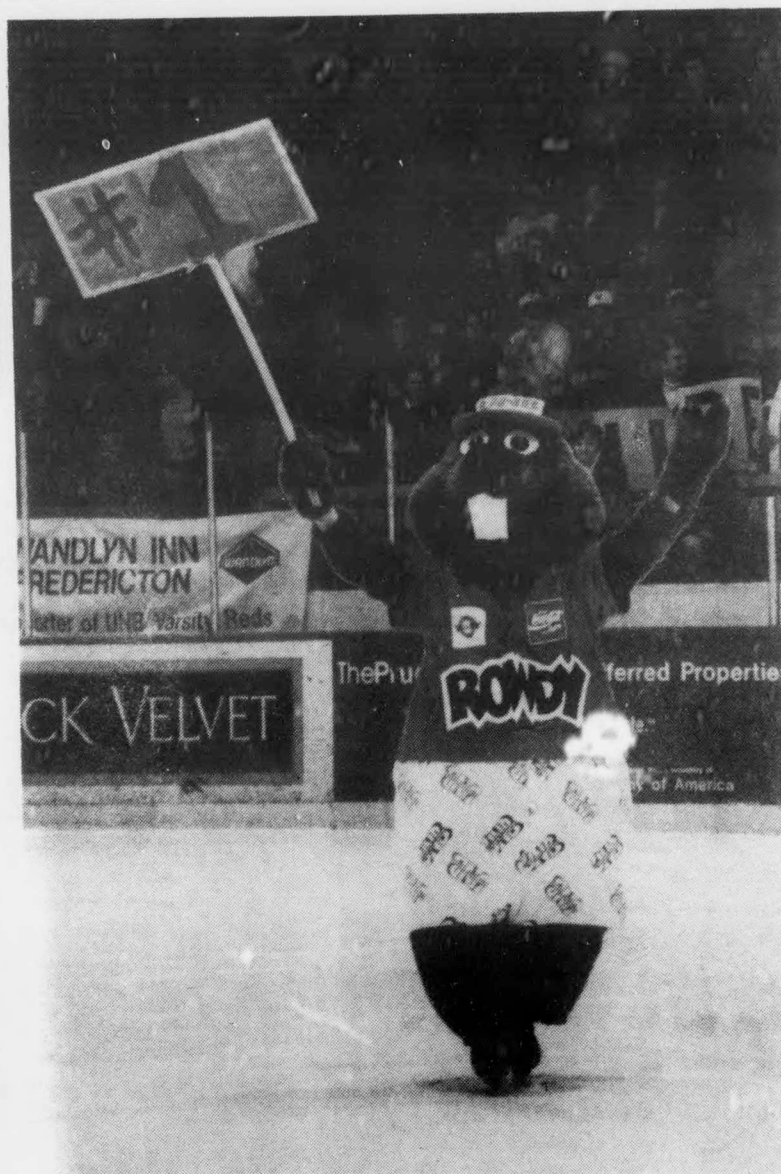
This is why the NHL and the Québec Nordiques had so much difficulty dealing with Eric Lindros. What Lindros was able to realise is that the NHL's draft is inherently illegal. Fortunately for

the NHL, Lindros stopped short of taking it to the courts. The NBA's player union, however, has threatened to do just that. When and if this happens the NBA will lose, which is why the NBA will do everything in its power to settle out of court.

The argument used by the owners in all of these sports is that things such as the draft and the reserve clause are necessary in order to ensure competitive balance. What they have failed to do is convincingly show why this is so, and, more importantly, why competitive balance should be held as being more important than a person's fundamental human rights.

The power base in North America sports has shifted irrevocably to the players. Owners will never get it back. They will, however, continue to make massive amounts of money, despite the players' huge salaries, simply because fans will continue to show up at the ballpark or watch on TV. With each successive season, sport becomes increasingly important to North American society. So long as that trend continues, and there is no end in sight, owners will continue to be willing to pay players these massive salaries.

It is true that unless some form of profit sharing is decided upon, small market teams will be forced either out of the sport altogether, or into the minors. This is not a good thing, (especially to Canadians, since most Canadian cities are small market), but neither is it the end of the world as we know it. It is an unfortunate fact of life that those with the most money have the most earning potential. Sports is no exception to this rule. If it is true that only large market teams will be able to win the World Series or Stanley Cup in the future, then maybe it's time for those of us who live in small market cities to start paying closer attention to the minor leagues. But, in order for us to do that, minor league teams will have to go back to trying to win, rather than merely developing talent for the majors. As I see it, this is the direction that professional sports will have to take, but it is a long ways away with many detours en route.



Rowdy at a hockey game cheering the Varsity Reds on to victory. Rowdy can often be found at varsity events boosting support for the home team.

Photo by Kevin G. Porter



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