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## THE SELIG YEARS

In January 2015, Bud Selig stepped down as commissioner of baseball. He had served in that position since September 1992, although for the first six of those years, he had been acting commissioner. Selig's tenure of slightly more than twenty-two years was the second longest in baseball history. Only Major League Baseball's (MLB's) first commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, served longer.

When Selig took over as commissioner, there were twenty-six Major League teams. To make the play-offs, teams had to win one of the four divisions, as there were no wild cards. There was no interleague play during the regular season, and steroid use was extremely rare and almost never discussed. Selig left the sport with thirty teams, fully one-third of which go the play-offs every year. Interleague play is now taken for granted, and the game is still recovering from a performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) scandal that occurred on Selig's watch.

The year 1991 was the last full season before Selig took over as commissioner; and it ended with a dramatic seven-game World Series as the Minnesota Twins defeated the Atlanta Braves. Games Six and Seven of that World Series are considered among the most exciting postseason games ever. Game Six was won on an eleventh-

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inning walk-off home run by Kirby Puckett. That home run, due in part to the famous television announcer Jack Buck's saying, "And we'll see you tomorrow night" as Puckett's shot left the field, has become one of the most celebrated home runs in baseball history. The next night, Game Seven also went into extra innings and was also won by a walk-off hit, a pinch-hit single by Gene Larkin that gave the Twins a 1–0 win. The Twins pitcher in that game, Jack Morris, threw ten innings of shutout baseball, an outing that has become a central component of Morris's Hall of Fame candidacy that thus far has not ended with enshrinement in Cooperstown.

The 1991 World Series was viewed by an average of thirty-six million people per game. It was one of four World Series between 1986 and 1991 to average more than thirty million viewers per game. Since Selig took over, no World Series has been seen by that many viewers. The closest was the 1995 World Series between the Cleveland Indians and the Atlanta Braves that went seven games and had just under thirty million viewers per game. The 2014 World Series, which also went seven games, averaged fourteen million viewers per game.

Attendance was strong in 1991, as 56,783,759 people paid to see an MLB game, for an average of about 2.18 million per team. In 2014, 73,739,622 fans bought tickets to big league games, for an average of 2.45 million per game, an increase of 12 percent.

In 1991, Roger Clemens, the star pitcher for the Boston Red Sox who later became one of the highest-profile players associated with PED use, was the best-paid player in the Major League, making \$5.3 million that year. In 2014, Zack Greinke of the Los Angeles Dodgers was the highest-paid player in baseball, beginning a multi-year contract at \$28 million per year. The average Major Leaguer made \$851,492 in 1991, or \$1.48 million in 2014 dollars.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, the average big league salary was an estimated \$4 million.<sup>2</sup>

In 1991, 1,034 players appeared in at least one big league game; 878, or 84.9 percent, were born in the United States, not including Puerto Rico. The remaining 15.1 percent of players came from the Dominican Republic (57), Puerto Rico (40), Venezuela (19), Mexico (12), Canada (10), Cuba (4), Germany (3), Jamaica (2), Panama (2), Australia (1), Belize (1), Curaçao (1), Honduras (1), Japan (1), Nica-

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ragua (1), the United Kingdom (1), and the U.S. Virgin Islands (1).<sup>3</sup> Significantly, all three of the German-born players (Mike Blowers, Craig Lefferts, and Dave Pavlas) and the one Japanese-born player (Steve Chitren) were raised in the United States. Danny Cox, born in the United Kingdom, went to college in the United States. Thus, when Selig became commissioner, with the exception of the Australian Craig Shipley, big league baseball was played by men who had all grown up in the United States, Canada, the Caribbean, or Central and South America, in countries where (other than in Curaçao) either English or Spanish was the primary language. There was not a single Japanese, Korean, or Taiwanese player in the big leagues in 1991.

Of the 1,187 men who played in the big leagues in 2014, 852 or 71.7 percent, a significant drop from 1991, were American-born. In 2014, the 28.3 percent of players who were not American born came from the Dominican Republic (130), Venezuela (89), Cuba (21), Puerto Rico (21), Canada (18), Japan (12), Mexico (10), Colombia (5), Curaçao (5), Panama (4), Germany (3), Nicaragua (3), Taiwan (3), Australia (2) Brazil (2), South Korea (2), Aruba (1), the Bahamas (1), Jamaica (1), the Netherlands (1), and Saudi Arabia (1).<sup>4</sup> All of the Australians, Brazilians, Japanese, and Taiwanese who played in 2014 grew up in those countries, but all the players born in Germany, the Bahamas, and Saudi Arabia grew up in the United States. Didi Gregorius, the one Dutch-born player, grew up in Curaçao. By the time Selig's tenure as commissioner ended, baseball was still dominated by players from the United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, but more countries in the Caribbean; countries where baseball was relatively new, such as Australia and Brazil; and older baseball powers, such as Japan and Taiwan, were also sending players to the big leagues. By any measure, MLB became significantly more international during Selig's time as commissioner.

The internationalization of the game has been an unequivocally good development for baseball, raising the profile of MLB in many countries, introducing great players and highly marketable stars such as Ichiro Suzuki into the big leagues, and strengthening MLB's ability to draw the best players in the world. This globalization has been Selig's most unambiguously positive accomplishment, leading to a better, more fun, and more marketable product.

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Selig's years as commissioner were also marked by tremendous changes in how big league baseball was structured. For decades, any attempts to change baseball had been met by resistance from traditionalists or purists. The introduction of two divisions in each league and one round of play-offs beginning in 1969 and of the designated hitter (DH) in 1973 was greeted with outrage by many baseball fans at the time. Hall of Fame baseball writer Roger Angell, who has spent decades beautifully and compellingly chronicling baseball, wrote of the DH in 1973:

It is probably useless to complain at length about the league's shiny new thingummy . . . but one cannot forget that the game—the game itself, as played out there between the foul lines—has been wrenched out of shape. Gone now . . . is that ancient and unique concept of a player's total individual accountability. . . . Vanished, too, is the strategic fulcrum of baseball—the painful decision about pinch-hitting for your pitcher when you are behind in the late innings. . . . Now the game is farther away from us all, less human and less fun, and suddenly made easy.<sup>5</sup>

It is still not that unusual to find older fans who would prefer to get rid of the DH. Complaints about escalating salaries have been a constant for at least forty years. And any statistical tool more sophisticated than wins and runs batted in (RBIs) is criticized by some segment of baseball fans and kibitzers for taking the soul out of the game.

Even in this context, Selig's introduction of interleague play and two expansions of the play-offs were controversial. Both of these changes struck at traits that made baseball unique among American sports. For decades, the American League (AL) and the National League (NL) had been distinct organizations with different approaches on and off the field. In the 1950s, the NL was much faster to integrate, leading to NL's dominance in the All-Star Games in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s. The AL adapted earlier to the live ball era, so in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, it had a reputation for being more offense-oriented, with such sluggers as Babe Ruth,

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Lou Gehrig, Jimmie Foxx, and Hank Greenberg making the home run king. The NL, on the other hand, developed a reputation for a more pitching- and defense-oriented game during those years.

These distinctions, real or imagined, were exacerbated because teams and players from the AL and the NL rarely played against each other aside from the World Series and the All-Star Game. This rarity meant that those games had an added level of excitement, but it also meant that some of the baseball's potentially best individual matchups and natural rivalries were not given an opportunity to flourish.

For example, the AL's Ted Williams was one of the greatest hitters in baseball history, but other than in All-Star Games, he never batted in an official game against Warren Spahn, Robin Roberts, Don Newcombe, or many of the other great pitchers of his time who played in the NL. Similarly, Mel Ott batted against Lefty Grove only in an All-Star Game despite their being among the best players in the game in the 1930s. Even in the modern era, potential rivalries between teams that shared a region or city were never given a chance to flourish. For example, the Chicago Cubs and the White Sox did not play a meaningful game against each other after the 1906 World Series until the advent of interleague play in 1997. Similarly, the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants played only five games that counted between 1968, when the A's moved to Oakland from Kansas City, and 1997. Those five games were, of course, the 1989 World Series, remembered by most baseball fans not for anything that happened on the field but rather for a major earthquake that struck the Bay Area shortly before Game Three was about to begin. Interleague play changed all that. To this day, many older fans dislike interleague play, viewing it as contrived, responsible for unbalanced schedules, and counter to the gestalt of the game, but many younger fans enjoy it and the new rivalries it has facilitated.

The expanded play-off system was also initially controversial but is now widely accepted and liked. In 1994, MLB switched from two to three divisions in each league and introduced a wild card position for the best second-place finisher. In 2012, a second wild card was added. Consequently, ten teams, or one-third of the total in MLB,

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make the postseason every year. The idea behind this change was to give teams that historically had little chance of winning a division a chance to make it into the play-offs. This goal was achieved as in the first four years following the implementation of this system, with twenty-one of the thirty teams having made at least one postseason appearance. This change was also meant to increase play-off revenue. Many fans like this system, but many others believe it renders the regular-season pennant race, long the most exciting part of baseball, less meaningful and makes it possible for lesser teams to find a back door route to a World Series victory. For example, between 2012 and 2015, three of the eight teams to play in the World Series won fewer than 90 games during the 162-game regular season, while the 2015 Mets won exactly 90 games.

Selig's tenure as commissioner was marred by two unambiguous blemishes. The first was the labor strike that led to the cancellation of the last third of the 1994 season and that year's postseason; the World Series was not played for the first time since 1904. When he left office in 2015, Selig identified the cancellation of the World Series that year as the "saddest" episode of his time as commissioner.<sup>6</sup>

The 1994 strike was a genuine crisis for baseball. At the time, many fans vowed never to return to the game. According to ESPN, "Attendance plunged 20 percent the following year [after the strike], from a record average of 31,612 in 1994 to 25,260."<sup>7</sup> Many worried about the future of MLB and talk of contracting franchises increased, but baseball recovered. That recovery was, in some respects, Selig's greatest accomplishment, but it also bore the seeds of what became the other most notable negative of Selig's time as commissioner.

It is not possible to know with certainty when the modern steroid era began, but it is quite likely that it began before the 1994 strike. During or immediately after the All-Star Game that year, one of my New York baseball friends looked beyond his East Coast myopia to ask me (the biggest Giants fan he knew), "Who's that bald white dude with the Giants with all those home runs?" He was referring to Matt Williams, who had thirty-three home runs at the time of the All-Star Game and ended up leading all of baseball with

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forty-three home runs in that strike-shortened year. Williams was linked to steroid use in 2002, but some suspect that he was using as early as 1994.

Regardless of when the steroid era began, it was in full swing by the late 1990s. The seminal event of baseball's poststrike recovery was the battle between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa to break Roger Maris's single-season home run record in 1998. At the time, the race was covered as a good-natured, all-American story, complete with racial diversity and two different but equally well liked protagonists. The best example of this spin was the December 21, 1998, issue of *Sports Illustrated* honoring Sosa and McGwire as "Sportsmen of the Year." The photo on the cover shows the heavily muscled men in Roman-style togas and gold-leaf crowns. The text of the accompanying article, which never mentioned PEDs or steroids, is unambiguously laudatory:

McGwire and Sosa gave America a summer that won't be forgotten: a summer of stroke and counterstroke, of packed houses and curtain calls, of rivals embracing and gloves in the bleachers and adults turned into kids—the Summer of Long Balls and Love. It wasn't just the lengths they went to with bats in their hands. It was also that they went to such lengths to conduct the great home run race with dignity and sportsmanship, with a sense of joy and openness. Never have two men chased legends and each other that hard and that long or invited so much of America onto their backs for the ride.<sup>8</sup>

This feel-good story, along with many others like it, was written even after AP reporter Steve Wilstein spotted a bottle of androstenedione, a steroid, in McGwire's locker late in the 1998 season.<sup>9</sup>

Wilstein's discovery did little to diminish the excitement around Sosa and McGwire's home run chase in 1998. Over the next years, home run and other offensive records fell as baseball entered an era where bloated sluggers took the game to its highest scoring period since the early 1930s. From 1995 to 2000, the six years following the strike, runs per team per game ranged from 4.77 to 5.14

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and thrice exceeded 5 runs per game. That benchmark had not been met since 1936, sixty years earlier. For most of these years, baseball officials did nothing to stop steroid use. Eventually, MLB conducted a few half-hearted investigations and ultimately handed out suspensions, but the steroid era lasted well over a decade, radically changed the feel and history of the game, and was never sufficiently addressed by Selig. For all the impressive advances and innovations Selig brought to the game, steroids will always be an undeniable, and unfortunate, part of his legacy as well.

### The State of Baseball Today

Every year, baseball fans are told that the state of the game has never been stronger. Selig himself made this point in a 2013 interview toward the end of his long tenure as commissioner, saying, “Look at our attendance numbers. Look at our ratings. By any reasonable measurement, the grand old game has never been so popular.”<sup>10</sup> Selig, who only stopped serving as baseball’s commissioner and cheerleader in chief in 2015, said more or less the same thing at the end of every baseball season since the mid-1990s, after baseball had recovered from the damage from the strike of 1994.

According to some measures, Selig’s optimism was accurate. Revenues remain strong at the big league level, and big television contracts continue to bring more money into the game than ever before. Additionally, as Selig also noted, and contrary to the occasional kvetch from retired players or curmudgeonly journalists, on-the-field play has never been stronger. The high salaries and growing international reach of American baseball has ensured that the best baseball players in the world are largely playing in the MLB and that the sport will continue to attract top athletes. The World Baseball Classic (WBC) has grown in popularity in recent years as well, further strengthening baseball’s popularity outside the United States, particularly in such countries as the Netherlands, China, or Australia, which are not traditionally baseball powerhouses.

Baseball indeed has some impressive indicators of strong financial health. In 2014, more than 73 million tickets to big league baseball games were sold, meaning on average that each of the thirty big



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league teams sold more than 2.4 million tickets. That marked the twelfth consecutive year that overall ticket sales exceeded seventy million. By comparison, in the 1980s, the best year for attendance was 1989, when just over fifty-five million people bought tickets for an average of slightly more than 2.1 million tickets sold for each of the twenty-six teams, the first time that baseball ever averaged more than two million tickets sold per team. As late as 1975, the then twenty-four big league teams had never sold even a combined thirty million tickets.<sup>11</sup>

Attendance figures are not the only quantitative measures of baseball's wealth. Annual television revenue from ESPN, Fox, and TBS is currently \$1.5 billion per year. MLB Advanced Media (MLBAM), the content provider in charge of baseball's official web presence, generates roughly \$600 million per year. This income, shared between the teams, contributes substantially to the financial health of MLB, the high salaries for players, the profits made by individual teams, and the appreciation in value of most big league franchises.

According to an article in *Forbes*, when all sources of revenue, including local media deals, tickets, and other sales were taken into consideration, MLB's gross revenue in 2014 was \$9 billion—an increase of 321 percent of the \$2.14 billion in revenue (in 2014 dollars) that MLB generated in 1995.<sup>12</sup>

MLBAM has been an impressive source of supplementary revenue for MLB, but it has also offered fans exciting new ways to enjoy the game. Today, fans can watch any game outside their media markets on any day during the season on their phones, tablets, desktop computers, or televisions. While watching those games, they can review statistical data, pitch charts, scouting reports, and highlights. Much of baseball's success during the twenty-first century can be attributed to how well MLB has adapted to the new technological environment. Baseball did not shy away from the Internet but embraced it and crafted an excellent and technically sophisticated product for its consumers. Needless to say, this new technology has also provided fans the opportunity to talk about baseball online, buy and sell memorabilia, and otherwise more easily enjoy various aspects of the game.

Selig's annual statements about the health of the game were not pulled out of the air but reflected in the financial data and products being offered to fans. His successor, Rob Manfred, will almost certainly continue to report on the financial health of baseball. While these reports may be factual, they do not quite represent the entire truth.

### The Other Side of Baseball's Success Story

On April 7, 2014, the Houston Astros hosted the awkwardly and redundantly named Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. The Astros had begun the season by splitting their first six games, a decent start for a team that was not expected to go anywhere. The Angels had a slightly worse record of 2–4 going into the game, but behind C. J. Wilson's eight strong innings in which he gave up only one run, they easily beat the Astros by a score of 9–1. Houston's lineup was young and not very well known, although their second baseman, Jose Altuve, would be recognized as a star before the season was over. The Angels' lineup was loaded and included future Hall of Famer Albert Pujols, a young center fielder named Mike Trout thought by many to be the best player in the game, and other well-known players, including Howie Kendrick and the controversial slugger Josh Hamilton.

Only 17,936 fans showed up to Houston's Minute Maid Park for this early-season Monday night game, but the attendance was not what made the game significant. It was the television audience—or, more accurately, the lack of one—that gave the game importance. The Nielsen rating for that game was 0.0, meaning that none of the TVs in the more-than-five-hundred Nielsen households in the greater Houston area were tuned to this game. The 0.0 rating does not mean that literally nobody in Houston watched the game, but it indicates that only a very small number of people did.<sup>13</sup> The Astros had also received a 0.0 Nielsen rating for a game late in the 2013 season, when they lost to the Cleveland Indians by a score of 9–2.

These two Astros' games are dramatic examples, but it remains true that watching baseball on television is not as exciting to viewers as MLB would like people to believe. In 2012, MLB added an addi-

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tional wild card play-in game between the two wild card teams; those games are typically viewed by between three and five million people.<sup>14</sup> These are respectable numbers, particularly for a cable network, such as ESPN, but they hardly qualify as a ratings juggernaut. In 2015, because of the presence of the New York Yankees and the Chicago Cubs, both large-market teams with national followings, viewership for the AL and the NL play-in games approached eight million each.<sup>15</sup> Over the last decade, baseball's preeminent event, the World Series, still has usually drawn between fifteen and twenty million viewers per game, but this is a fraction of the twenty to forty million viewers who tuned in to watch World Series games in previous eras.

Game Seven of the 2014 World Series drew about 23.5 million viewers. This was not bad for the current era and a much higher number of viewers than any of the previous six games of the series had attracted. However, this was less than half the number of viewers who watched Game Seven of the 1991 World Series, another dramatic championship played between two small- to medium-market teams.<sup>16</sup> Significantly, Game Seven in 2014 drew about as many television viewers in the United States as the women's soccer World Cup final, which the United States won in the summer of 2015.<sup>17</sup>

Many factors are driving this downward trend, but primarily the different ways Americans consume entertainment and watch television in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Some might argue, yet again, that baseball has become boring, but even if that is not true, it is apparent that the declining number of television viewers is not good for an industry that still relies on television contracts to generate much of its revenue.

One cannot, of course, blame Selig or MLB for the changing ways Americans consume their media, but this evolution will have an impact on MLB. As more households eschew expensive cable-television packages, as television viewership continues to decline, and as younger Americans in particular no longer consume entertainment through traditional means, baseball could face even larger problems in this regard.

Currently, live sports is one of the main attractions of cable television, particularly for men. Therefore, as long as cable packages are still sold to customers, baseball fans will be forced to sub-

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scribe. This bundling will help ensure some revenue for MLB, but if fewer people are watching cable overall, the stations will not be able to charge as much for advertising and opportunities to push new sitcoms and the like during the play-offs. Thus, airing the World Series will not be as lucrative for stations, such as Fox, that currently have big contracts with MLB.

Disappointing television ratings are only one of the challenges facing MLB today and potentially threatening its future. Although game attendance figures remain strong, these figures are often based solely on ticket sales. The number of people actually attending the games is a different, and less encouraging, metric. Nowhere is this clearer than in Yankee Stadium, where the team consistently reports sellouts and impressive attendance figures,<sup>18</sup> but even a casual observer cannot help but notice the number of empty seats at many games. This disparity is not just a matter of people leaving early to beat the traffic or to catch an earlier subway home, but simply the result of people who have bought tickets—in many cases, season tickets—not attending the games.

If a team has trouble selling tickets, the causes could include an economic downturn, overpriced tickets, or the team's poor performance on the field dissuading fans from spending money to watch them lose. However, unused tickets may be symptomatic of a bigger problem: they indicate that ticket holders believe they have better things to do than to use the tickets for which they have paid good money, or that ticket holders could not resell tickets (or, in some cases, literally cannot give them away). This scenario represents a growing concern for a business that relies on the sales of expensive tickets as a significant revenue source.

Yankee Stadium is, of course, the game's most visible, and, other than Fenway Park, expensive, stadium, but the problem is not just limited to the new ballpark in the Bronx.<sup>19</sup> Empty seats can be seen throughout the regular season at most stadiums. In many cases, those seats represent unused rather than unsold tickets. In the short run, that situation may seem better for baseball, but those unused tickets are a measure of the fans' lack of enthusiasm about the game.

Baseball, like many forms of entertainment, is a product based on the idea of celebrities and a particular relationship that exists

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between celebrities and fans. The media's model of building baseball players into larger-than-life figures while covering up their faults has not been applicable for decades. We are far removed from the time when substance abuse by such stars as Mickey Mantle could be systematically ignored for more than a decade or when Babe Ruth's bouts of gonorrhea could be euphemistically, and almost universally, described as stomachaches.

A handful of current baseball stars are excellent at managing their images. Derek Jeter and Mariano Rivera, two recent Yankee greats and future Hall of Famers, are strong examples. However, many of the game's biggest stars in recent years, including Alex Rodriguez and Barry Bonds, were broadly disliked by baseball fans. An article in *The Onion*, a humor website, titled "Yankee Rookie Nervously Tells A-Rod How Much He Used to Hate Him as a Kid" summarizes this development very well.<sup>20</sup>

Some baseball stars have always been unpleasant to fans, rude to reporters, and had character flaws. Ty Cobb, Ted Williams, and, in some respects, Pete Rose are just some of the all-time greats who fit this description, but the relationship between celebrities and their fans has changed in the age of Twitter and a constant need for connections and information. In general, baseball has proved very adept at responding to technological changes, but this very adaptability may pose an unexpected, and more difficult to counter, set of threats to the game.

The evolving nature of baseball's broad role in society is further evidenced by the changes in youth sports. These changes have been occurring over the last several decades but have yielded an environment where almost no sandlot or other informal baseball play remains; instead, youth baseball is largely played in organized teams and leagues. While this evolution has led to some very strong youth baseball programs that are developing very good players, it has also relegated baseball to a niche sport that is no longer played by as large a proportion of American children, particularly boys, as it was in previous generations.

It is possible that this change will have no effect on the future of the game, but it is also very likely that children who seek out different activities and sports to play will continue to follow different

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sports and activities when they get older. The most obvious threat to baseball in this regard is soccer, but other sports and activities ranging from snowboarding to cycling could have a similar impact on baseball's popularity.

Baseball is not the only sport that faces a battery of challenges that threaten to disrupt its highest-level league. Basketball and football face similar challenges related to cable television, although football, largely because it is played only once a week, has a much more loyal television following. The Super Bowl remains the most broadly watched sports event in the United States, and every Sunday in the late fall and early winter, millions of Americans watch the teams in the National Football League (NFL) on television, despite the number of scandals and accusations of criminal behavior aimed at its players.

Youth football faces a different kind of a crisis, as more American families are reluctant to let their sons play organized football at all because of safety concerns. Clearly, the future of football is uncertain. It is possible that all professional sports now face a similar battery of challenges, but exploring those non-baseball issues is not the purpose of this work.

### Big League Baseball's Current Position

To better probe or explore the possible future of big league baseball, it is necessary to have some sense of the development of the game at its highest level. The history of big league baseball is almost infinite, offering countless different angles from which to explore the game's evolution over the past century or more. It would be impossible, and not particularly useful, to probe all of those angles here. Nonetheless, of particular relevance is MLB's dominant role in organized baseball today. This reality informs a great deal about big league baseball, its economic strength, and its current good fortunes. Moreover, understanding how MLB reached its current status provides valuable insight, and an important foundation, for understanding what its future might look like.

MLB was not always such a hugely dominant force in baseball, even in the United States. For much of the twentieth century, and

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throughout all of baseball's nineteenth century, MLB competed with various minor leagues, the Negro Leagues, barnstormers, leagues outside the United States, and other forms of what, in 2014, Scott Simkus termed "Outsider Baseball" for status, the best players, and revenue.<sup>21</sup>

Today, barnstorming is almost nonexistent, and nearly all professional teams are affiliated with a big league club. A few independent leagues and teams exist, such as the St. Paul Saints and the Wichita Wingnuts, but these represent a very small proportion of the professional players in the United States. Additionally, even most international tournaments, most notably the WBC, are now, in one form or another, run by MLB. Leagues in countries outside the United States—for example, in Japan and Korea—are not part of MLB, but in many parts of the world where baseball is strong, such as the Dominican Republic or Venezuela, the best players are quickly funneled to MLB teams.

Thus, MLB is an increasingly dominant hegemon on the American and the global baseball scene. That hegemony affects almost every pitch that is thrown in the United States, from youth baseball all the way up to the World Series. It is a product of a confluence of events largely outside the realm of baseball, including such developments as the civil rights movement and population shifts following World War II. MLB's domination of the sport was not inevitable, but that is what has happened over the past fifty or sixty years. Just as it was not inevitable, it is also not irreversible. Other developments that extend beyond baseball, such as increased globalization, the rise of China as an economic power, and even the ubiquitous nature of social media, may begin to erode MLB's hegemony in the coming decades.

No league in any major sport enjoys a similar position to MLB either domestically or internationally. While the NFL and the National Basketball Association (NBA) are extremely popular multi-billion-dollar industries with lucrative contracts for players largely funded by cable providers and strong Internet strategies, they do not monopolize all of organized football and basketball in the United States the way MLB does for baseball. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) enjoys a close relationship with

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the NFL and the NBA, but it is independent of those professional organizations. Although college basketball and football function essentially as minor leagues for the NBA and the NFL, respectively, they are not affiliated with those professional leagues. College baseball is becoming more popular in the United States, but it has not yet come close to the level of popularity enjoyed by college football or basketball. Moreover, college does not function as the minor or developmental league in baseball the way it does in other major sports, not least because of the extensive minor league system in baseball.

College teams, in any sport, have goals that are independent from those of professional sports. They need to generate revenue, keep their alumni donor bases happy, and win games in a way that does not apply to affiliated minor league teams. Similarly, college sports teams enjoy a loyal and constantly renewing fan base that is different from those of minor league teams. These different incentives ensure the independence of NCAA sports from the NFL or the NBA. Additionally, if the NCAA were ever to substantially change its football and basketball policies—for example, by offering fewer scholarships—it would create problems for the NFL and the NBA that these two leagues are currently unequipped to address.

MLB's role in global baseball is greater than that of any comparable institution in any other sport. The Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) is very important as a governing body in international soccer, but it does not play a leadership role in any individual countries. The NBA promotes its product overseas, but it does not organize international basketball. Football remains much more uniquely American than baseball and has a very small global footprint. Cricket has no global governing body that is largely the product of one country. Of course, individual baseball leagues exist in such places as Japan, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba, but (with the exception of Cuba) MLB has strong ties with these leagues. Additionally, not least because baseball has not been an Olympic sport for years, MLB organizes and sets the rules for the world's premiere international baseball tournament, the WBC.

This stronghold is particularly notable given that MLB itself is a relatively new entity. For most of the twentieth century, the



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American and the National Leagues were separate organizations that made their own policies. For example, during the twentieth century, each league had its own umpires and even played under slightly different sets of rules. The most well-known rule difference was that the AL played with a designated hitter, while the NL did not.<sup>22</sup> A lesser-known rule difference was that if a league or a division ended in a tie, a one-game play-off was used in the AL, but a best-of-three format was used in the NL. There were other differences between the leagues as well. For example, the AL embraced the power game more quickly than the NL beginning in the 1920s. The NL, however, integrated more quickly than the AL.

For most of the twentieth century, player movement between the leagues was slightly less common as well. All of these variations contributed to a more competitive relationship between the two leagues. All-Star Games, for example, were taken much more seriously by everybody involved. For many years, the AL, because it was formed after the NL, was seen as something of an upstart league. Most glaringly, in 1904, the NL champion New York Giants refused to play the AL champion Boston Red Sox in what would have been the second World Series, because they viewed the AL as an inferior league. One of the legacies of this dynamic is that until the last few decades, writers and baseball people would, with decreasing frequency, refer to the NL as the “senior circuit” and the AL as the “junior circuit.”

Until the two leagues merged in 2000, much of the governing power lay with the leagues themselves. The consolidation of power had been moving toward less separation between the two leagues, as such issues as negotiating collective-bargaining agreements between owners and players required collaboration between the two leagues, but this union was not finalized until 2000. Since 2000, MLB has become a much bigger brand, with the three initials being strongly identified with big league baseball. Even during the 1970s through the 1990s, although the initials were used as a kind of shorthand in writing, MLB was rarely pronounced as such. This prominence has changed over the course of the past fifteen years primarily because of MLB’s efforts to brand big league baseball with those three letters and the success of MLBAM products.

## Has Big League Baseball Survived?

Before asking the question of whether big league baseball *will* survive, it is worth probing the assumption that big league baseball has, in fact, survived *so far*. Regardless of the answer, baseball has unquestionably changed an enormous amount, not just in the years when Selig was commissioner but in the years before his tenure as well.

Over the past seventy-five years, big league baseball has evolved from a business located in only ten cities in the Northeast and the Midwest, played by white people, with only a few teams having anything approaching a farm system. Moreover, the big leagues competed with the Pacific Coast League (PCL), the Negro Leagues, and off-season barnstormers for attention, players, and revenue. The business was not particularly lucrative, as players often had to work in the off-season to make ends meet, thousands of tickets for almost every game went unsold, television contracts were still in the future, and owners often had to sell their best players after a few years.

The institution has transformed a great deal over the years, but some constants have emerged. Big league baseball still represents the best baseball around. It has always been dominated by the United States, American money, and American players. Since the late nineteenth century, it has consistently consolidated its hegemony to become a larger and wealthier business with each passing decade. The coming decades, however, could usher in changes for big league baseball.