
Ban the Designated Hitter

BY JOSEPH NOCERA

Sports, as any cliché-spouting coach will happily tell you, are like life. How true, how true. Today, though, I'm pleased to introduce my own corollary to this most overused of truths. Sometimes, sports are like a particular slice of life: the public sector slice. Nocera's Law says that at those moments when sports resembles government, sports lose.

I offer, as Exhibit A, baseball's designated hitter. Like so many government programs, the designated hitter, which the American League instituted 20 years ago (the National League never succumbed), was born of good intentions that were never fulfilled. Like the government, it provides gainful employment for workers who either have lost most of their skills (Greg Luzinski! Jack Clark!) or don't have many skills to begin with (Sam Horn! Steve Balboni!) It robs the game of some of its most interesting strategy; managers in a non-designated hitter world choose their teams weighing both the offensive and defensive talents of each player. The DH rule eliminates that strategic consideration for one player, affecting both line-up decisions and game tactics for the whole team. The designated hitter also distorts records, screws up young ballplayers, and makes a complete mess of the World Series. Just as presidents occasionally try—and usually

fail—to get rid of a government department whose time has passed, so have baseball commissioners tried and failed to get rid of the designated hitter. Fay Vincent used to regularly label it “an abomination”—and look where that got him. That this travesty lives on today is a testament to the power of inertia and entrenched unions. But then, can't the same be said for the Agricultural Extension Service?

I loathe the designated hitter, but what I particularly loathe about it is its sheer pointlessness. Twenty years ago, the designated hitter came into being because the game was in the doldrums and needed an infusion of offensive excitement—or so the numbskull owners believed. Their diagnosis, in fact, was correct—the game was in the doldrums—but what brought it back were the decisions, in the late 1960s, to lower the pitcher's mound while shrinking the strike zone (which, as they say, helped level the playing field between pitchers and hitters), and the return to baseball by nostalgic baby boomers.

In fact, it's not too much to say that the DH has done absolutely nothing to make the game more interesting or exciting. The players who fill this position are almost never intrinsically exciting—the DH practically defines mediocrity in sports. In the whole 20-year period it has existed, can you think of any designated hitters who could unambiguously be classified as all stars? I can think of exactly one: Paul Molitor, who was Toronto's DH

Joseph Nocera, an editor of The Washington Monthly from 1978 to 1979 and now a columnist for GQ magazine, is writing a book about the history of personal finance in America, to be published this fall by Simon & Schuster.

this year. One all star every 20 years just doesn't cut it.

What is exciting is watching a manager handle what used to be the classic baseball situation: What does he do late in a close game, with two outs, runners on second and third, and the pitcher coming to bat? What's exciting is seeing a good-hitting pitcher help his own cause—something that happens much less often than it used to, even in the National League, because minor league pitchers rarely hit anymore. What's even more exciting is seeing a pitcher being called on to pinch hit, something that used to happen once in a while before the DH robbed the game of such fun moments.

Of course, if you follow baseball, you know all this. And chances are you agree with me. So why can't anyone put the DH out of its misery? The simple, painful answer is that baseball's all-powerful players' union won't let it happen. See, the DH is the perfect position for old guys who can't run or throw anymore—and who, if they played any other sport, would have long since retired. Old guys are card-carrying union members. They like having these jobs where they make \$2 million a year for 15 minutes of hitting a day. Who wouldn't? If the DH were abolished, that roster spot would in all likelihood go to some hungry kid in Triple A who makes \$10,000 a year, and whose path to the majors is being blocked by an over-the-hill DH. The kid, you will not be surprised to learn, is not a member of the players' union. To its ever-lasting shame, the players' union is restricted to major league players. So think of the DH as the ultimate bad bureaucrat: He wants to get paid a lot, do little work, and keep out anyone else who could do the job better.

So that's the reform I would institute if someone handed me the magic reform wand. I would abolish the DH. It would make the game better, the managers smarter, and the fans happier. It would create jobs for the deserving, not the undeserving. It would return sanity to the World Series. In sum, it would make America a better place. □

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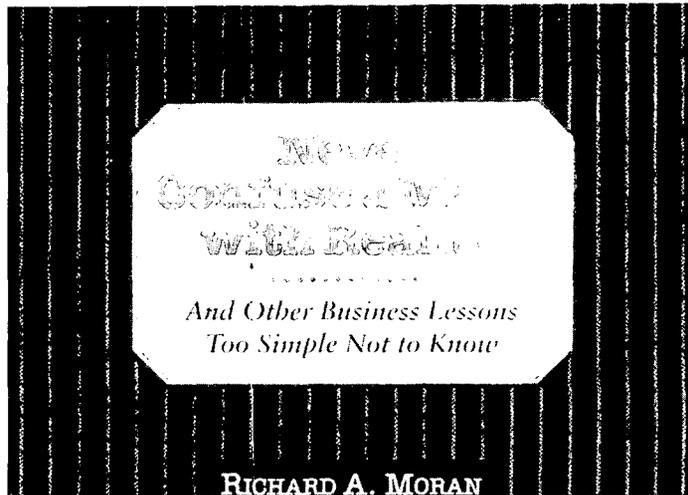
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National Labor Relations Board

Memorandum

TO : Headquarters Employees

DATE: November 18, 1993

FROM : Gloria Joseph
Director of Administration

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