

Game Changers:
Baseball Fans, Strikes, and Free Agency, 1966-1981

Carolina Siqueira Paranhos Velloso

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Instructor Robert Bland

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In 2002, journalist Bob Costas remarked, "it's not an overstatement to say that between 1966 and 1981 there was a revolution in baseball that in turn changed all of professional team sports in America."¹ This so-called revolution refers to the transformation of labor relations in baseball. Before 1966, a player could not prevent or refuse a trade to any other club at any time, negotiate his salary, request compensation for being traded, or offer his services to any other club at any point in his career. Players achieved astounding new rights between 1966 and 1981, and after 1981 a player could refuse a trade involving him if he had been in the Major Leagues for at least ten years and with his current club for at least five; request that, in the event that he and his club disagreed over the raise in his salary, his salary be determined by a third party in binding arbitration if the player had been in the Major Leagues for at least two years; and earn free agency and the right to negotiate a contract with any club after six years in the Major Leagues.² The Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) brought about these changes in one of the most successful runs of any labor union. What began as a loosely organized group in 1953 developed into a formidable, unified force under executive director Marvin Miller, whose tenure, not coincidentally, lasted from 1966 to 1982. The gains achieved by the players are remarkable, perhaps the most significant being the abolishment of the reserve clause and subsequent establishment of free agency in 1976.³ As a result, the game changed dramatically during this time, and baseball fans had to adapt along with it. Although it is widely assumed that fans, increasingly displeased with so many rapid changes, profoundly altered their relationship with baseball when its players began making inconceivably high salaries with the advent of free

¹ Bob Costas, foreword to *The End of Baseball as We Knew It: The Players' Union, 1960-81*, by Charles Korr (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), xi.

² Charles Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It: The Players' Union, 1960-81* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3.

³ Edward J. Reilly, ed. *Baseball and American Culture: Across the Diamond* (Binghamton, NY: The Haworth Press, Inc., 2003), 221-238.

agency, it was a work stoppage five years later that truly caused a long-lasting resentment of fans towards the players and team owners. Attendance statistics, fan opinions found in contemporary newspapers and magazines, and opinion polls help to illustrate the disenchantment of fans towards the 1981 baseball strike.

From the game's inception in the nineteenth century to the end of the 1960s, baseball was virtually unchanged in the way it operated. The owners possessed an overwhelming amount of power and authority. They not only determined how much their players earned during their entire careers, but also controlled them into retirement, meaning that an ex-player could not pursue a coaching, broadcasting, or any other opportunity with another club because of his former team's lifetime control over him.⁴ The source of this power came from the reserve clause, first implemented 1879 by the National League.⁵ Basically, it allowed owners to "reserve" the players on their teams from any outside influence, effectively granting the owners control over every aspect of their players' careers, including salaries, demotions, suspensions, trades, etc. The players had no recourse to challenge what was imposed upon them, except to quit the profession. Many were frustrated with the system, but did not think that they would be able to provoke much change, since they had no real recourse. However, a number of other players before 1966 were not interested in challenging baseball's status quo. Infielder Steve Boros, who was involved with the MLBPA, stated that, pre-1966, many players felt that they were "getting paid good money to play a kids' game."⁶ They entered the profession aware of its terms and mostly accepted them. It was seen by many not only as unprofessional to challenge the established rules of a system that was much bigger than them, but also unsportsmanlike, being fans as well as players, to disrupt the traditional aspects of the game. The owners, for their part, believed that the tradition of

⁴ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 4

⁵ The American League was formed in 1900 and merged with the NL in 1903.

⁶ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 27.

baseball was essential to the preservation and continuation of the game in its current form and any significant change would be detrimental. "Baseball and its players have lived well under the reserve clause for many, many years," remarked Atlanta Braves vice-president and general manager Paul Richards. Marvin Miller, however, snidely asserted that "as soon as you mention the reserve clause to an owner, the hands fly up in the air and there are predictions that any change in it would ruin baseball."⁷

Keeping power in the hands of the front-office executives, and thus keeping the game's traditional structure largely intact, also seemed to be a preoccupation outside of the baseball community. In 1922 the Supreme Court determined that organized baseball was exempt from federal anti-trust laws, a decision which, according to one historian, "was more a panegyric to the virtues of baseball and its important role in American culture than any informed commentary on antitrust law."⁸ Essentially, this ruling strengthened the idea that baseball was simply entertainment and should not be treated like a commercial enterprise, interstate or otherwise. It also allowed the owners and Major League Baseball to exercise almost a total monopoly over the game. The first prominent challenge to the reserve system would only come three years after Marvin Miller's hiring as the Association's first full-time executive director in 1966.

Curt Flood's groundbreaking lawsuit was the important first step in the players' rights movement, since Flood saw the reserve system for what it was: a tool that was not in the best interests of the game, as owners had long successfully contended, but rather a means of assuring that players had no say whatsoever in how much money they earned, where they'd play the next day, and under what conditions. In October 1969, the Gold Glove-winning and All-Star center fielder was traded from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies; Flood, however,

⁷ Ed Rumill, "Baseball's Reserve Clause: Is it Really Wrong?" *Christian Science Monitor*, March 15, 1972; "Review of Reserve Clause Request Submitted To Baseball Club Owners," *The Hartford Courant*, August 1, 1967.

⁸ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 4.

refused to move. After Commissioner Bowie Kuhn denied his request to declare him a free agent, Flood shocked the baseball world by filing a \$4.1 million lawsuit against the Commissioner and MLB, arguing that the reserve clause violated antitrust laws.⁹ "I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes," he famously remarked. "I believe that any system which produces that result violates my basic rights as a citizen and is inconsistent with the laws of the United States and of the several States."¹⁰ However, Flood had little sympathy from fans or the media, who painted him as a greedy, ungrateful militant. Players were also hesitant to publicly support him because they feared repercussions on their own careers. On August 12, 1970, the New York District Court sided with the owners, a decision that was upheld on April 7, 1971 by the court of appeals. Even though his effort was ultimately unsuccessful, Curt Flood became a pioneer in baseball labor history for inspiring other players to more prominently challenge the reserve system in the hope that "after the courts rule that the present reserve system is unlawful, the employers will be obligated to do what they should have done years ago. They will sit down with the players and negotiate reasonable conditions of employment."¹¹

Baseball's value as America's "national pastime" was perhaps at an all-time high when the 1970s rolled in, as the decade began amid lots of apprehension - U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War was at its peak, scientific breakthroughs provoked uncertain thoughts about the future, and episodes like the Stonewall riots exemplified the continued struggle for civil rights. Baseball was an escape to the fans, a "refuge for Americans yearning for the nostalgic,

⁹ Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), 8-10.

¹⁰ Curt Flood, *The Way it Is* (New York: Trident Press, 1970), 194.

¹¹Ibid., 206.

comforting glow of simpler times"¹² Fans, in general, watched baseball for enjoyment and to escape the uncertainties in their daily lives. They were largely uninterested in the business of baseball, and were far more concerned about the types of trades being made and the state of their team's farm system than about the issues of salary, free agency, and pension funds. That belonged to the technical, economic side of the game that did not involve them.¹³ The fans were soon to find out that the Curt Flood episode was just the first of many that would bring traditionally behind-the-scenes issues to the forefront of baseball, for as sports columnist Ed Rumill observed in 1972, while "few fans showed an interest in the owners' right to show a profit...only the most naive among the public could still think of big-league baseball as just a sport, beloved by all true Americans."¹⁴

After the 1971 season, negotiations began for a new player pension fund agreement. The Association requested a seventeen percent increase in owner contributions, which they viewed as exceedingly fair given it more or less corresponded to the inflation of the last few years, as well as other relatively inexpensive inclusions such as increased health care, increased dependents' allowances, and retribution to players who had retired before becoming eligible for benefits. The union soon found itself shocked at the refusal of the owners to negotiate; in fact, many were openly hostile to their requests. This caused players to seriously consider whether this resistance would become a regular occurrence and would extend to the reserve system, which led to the "first industry-wide work stoppage in American Professional sports."¹⁵ It delayed Opening Day 1972 by thirteen days and cancelled eighty-six games. The compromise in the pension plan

¹² Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass*, 7.

¹³ Costas, foreword to *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, ix-x.

¹⁴ Ed Rumill, "Baseball May Find it has Struck Out with Fans," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 5, 1972.

¹⁵ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 105-108.

reached by Miller and John Gaherin, the owners' representative, ultimately resembled the union's original proposal.

For Miller and the MLBPA, the strike was an opportunity to show the owners that, after the Flood loss, the fight for more players' rights would continue and that disputes like that one were effective in uniting the players and strengthening their resolve to challenge perceived injustices in their profession.¹⁶ Miller remarked that "when a settlement was reached, I told the press, 'All fans should be proud of the players. They showed courage and hung together against terrible odds. They made the owners understand that they must be treated as equals.'"¹⁷ But pride didn't seem to be the first emotion expressed by the fans after the episode. Wally Phillips, a DJ in Chicago, conducted a poll among two hundred of his callers and one hundred eighty, or exactly ninety percent of them, "voiced their support of the team owner against the players."¹⁸

Undoubtedly, as some historians claim, this reaction was influenced by the perception that players were unnecessarily greedy when they were already being paid to live out boyhood dreams as careers, and fans voiced their displeasure by decreasing attendance numbers to begin the season, an example being the 17, 401 seats out of 37, 702 sold at Wrigley Field for the Chicago Cubs' home opener.¹⁹ However, it is precipitous to affirm that the 1972 players' strike significantly altered the fans' willingness to support and appreciate the game. In fact, many newspapers concluded that "baseball fans have not turned away from the sport because of the first general strike in its history" - attendance actually increased, on average, by 1.6 percent from

¹⁶ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 105, 114-115; Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass*, 61-62.

¹⁷ Marvin Miller, *A Whole Different Ballgame: The Inside Story of the Baseball Revolution* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1991), 222.

¹⁸ Shirley Povich, "Baseball Fans Offer Little Support for Players," *Washington Post*, April 6, 1972.

¹⁹ Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass*, 62.

1971.²⁰ Even if public opinion began to turn against players for their more pronounced willingness to assert their rights, attendance records certainly did not reflect it yet.

The crown jewel of the MLBPA was its victory in "the Messersmith case" in late 1975, which effectively abolished the reserve system and established free agency. It involved two pitchers, Dave McNally and Andy Messersmith, who, after being unwillingly traded, contested a team's unequivocal right to trade its players at any time and its right to renew their contracts in perpetuity. Thus, the main focus of the dispute was Clause 10(a) in the standard player's contract, which stipulated that a club had the right to renew a player's contract for one year under the same terms. Miller and the owners interpreted "one year" very differently. The first "never made a secret of [his] contention from the beginning, that Paragraph 10(a)...clearly stated that the owners had a right to renew an unsigned player for *one year, and one year only*," while the owners claimed that a renewal of the contract also meant a renewal of the one-year renewal clause - "simply stated, the claim was that a club had the right to renew a player's contract *forever*."²¹ Arbitrator Peter Seitz sided with the plaintiffs and MLBPA, effectively making Messersmith a free agent and profoundly affecting the course of all baseball labor negotiations from that point forward.²² The players, realizing that that free agency represented a radical change in the system and, if implemented freely, could be detrimental to the game as a whole, compromised on a new, four-year 1976 Agreement. It stipulated that free agency would be granted to players with six years of Major League experience, and that teams would receive compensation for losing free agents.

²⁰ "Baseball strike fails to deter fans from attending games, survey shows," *Baltimore Sun*, June 15, 1972.

²¹ Miller, *A Whole Different Ballgame*, 238-239.

²² Roger I. Abrams, "Arbitrator Seitz Sets the Players Free," *Baseball Research Journal* 38, no. 2 (2009).

The owners, however, saw this significant change in the free agent system as something that needed immediate modification.²³ In 1980, when it came time to negotiate a new Basic Agreement, many of the owners wished to completely alter the 1976 Agreement, while others - such as Ed Fitzgerald, chairman of the board of the Milwaukee Brewers - were more moderate in seeing that these rights, having already been achieved by the players, could not be completely reversed. Instead, some modifications had to be made in order for the Agreement to serve the best interests of everyone involved. They proposed the implementation of a "giveback" system, whereby a team who lost a "ranking" free agent - that is, a free agent who qualified for the top fifty percent of that year's class based on a mixture of playing time and draft placement - would receive a Major League player as compensation from the club who signed the departing free agent.²⁴ The players vehemently opposed this plan, arguing that the value of free agents would significantly decrease because teams would be more selective of whom they'd sign and for how much if they had to give up a Major-Leaguer as part of the transaction. As negotiations stalled, eight exhibition games were cancelled. The players agreed to begin playing the regular season, but would begin a strike on May 23 if an agreement were not reached until then. On the morning of May 23, both sides agreed on a Basic Agreement that resolved every issue except free agent compensation. Thus, a strike was very narrowly avoided in 1980. It was decided that a four-man player-executive committee would discuss this question. If the committee could not form a compromise, negotiations would resume, and if negotiations again failed, the owners could implement their proposed rule change in 1981 and the players could choose to strike.²⁵

²³ Murray Chass, "Baseball Owners, Players Grid for Showdown in 1980," *New York Times*, May 7, 1978.

²⁴ Kaplan, "No Games Today," June 22, 1981.

²⁵ "Chronology of the Baseball Strike," *New York Times*, August 1, 1981.

The negotiations did ultimately fail, and on Friday, June 12, 1981, six hundred and fifty Major Leaguers refused to continue playing. In all, the strike lasted fifty days, cancelled seven hundred and twelve games, and cost \$146 million in total revenue. The settlement finally reached established guidelines for free agent compensation that stipulated that teams who signed free agents could "protect" twenty-four players on their roster, and those who did not could protect twenty-six (out of the standard forty total players on an MLB team roster). The "unprotected" players of all teams would form a pool from which teams that lost a premium free agent could choose as compensation, selecting one player for each departing free agent.²⁶

The strike of 1981 was the third time in nine years that a work stoppage occurred. While the strike of 1972 only cost the first thirteen days of the season and the strike of 1980 only a few exhibition games, this one turned out to be lasting and damaging.²⁷ Although a \$50 million strike insurance policy kicked in on June 24, the owners lost, on average, five dollars per ticket for all cancelled games and certainly did not collect all of the \$41.5 million of the national TV package. Big market teams lost out, too: the Angels, for example, had pre-sold ninety thousand dollars worth of tickets for a weekend series against the Red Sox and expected to make a total of six hundred thousand dollars, including additional ballpark revenue, all of which was lost.²⁸ Players, of course, were also affected, losing significant salary wages waiting out the strike.

Miller and many others felt that the magnitude of the 1981 strike was wholly preventable, and resulted out of the unreasonable unwillingness on the part of the owners to negotiate in the slightest, causing issues that were easily resolvable to balloon into a catastrophic strike.²⁹ Even though the owners publicly bemoaned the exorbitant rise in player prices since free agency, they

²⁶ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 221.

²⁷ Kaplan, "No Games Today," June 22, 1981.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

were willing to spend large sums of money on free agents in the years following 1976. More importantly, contrary to the owners' affirmations of free agency's affront to the sanctity of the game, the newly implemented free agent system actually led to attendance records in the last years of the 1970s and led to a renewed increase in baseball's popularity. Players understood that free agency would actually help baseball because the owners wouldn't lose any money by paying more to free agents, but would actually make it all back and more in increased revenue.³⁰ The fans, despite demonstrating some hostility towards the players, perhaps out of ignorance regarding the issues that led to the changes of the late 1970s, were attending ballgames at record rates and enjoying the lowest average ticket prices in major sports (\$4.53).

The developments of the late 1970s did not, as is widely affirmed, significantly alter the relationships between fans and the game of baseball. Even though eighty percent of eligible players switched teams in the first three years after the implementation of free agency, fan loyalty rested overwhelmingly with a club, not an individual player.³¹ Attendance records climbed to record highs - total Major League Baseball attendance in 1975 was 29,789,949, which increased to 31,318,331 in 1976. Attendance for 1977, the first year after free agency was implemented, soared to an unbelievable 38,709,779, and the numbers continued to climb as the decade came to a close: 40,636,887 in 1978; 43,550,395 in 1979; and 43,014,136 in 1980.³² In a survey conducted by Business Week, fifty four percent of a sample of 1,254 adults approved of the free agent rule in baseball, while 58% of a group of 1,252 adults believed that the players were entitled to raises because of revenue from TV broadcasts and increased attendance.^{33 34} In

³⁰ Murray Chass, "Free Agents Prosper in '79 Baseball Pacts," *New York Times*, January 6, 1980.

³¹ Murray Chass, "A World of Change in the Money Game," *New York Times*, December 30, 1979.

³² "1970-1979 Attendance," 1970-79 Ballpark Attendance Figures, Ballparks of Baseball.

³³ Business Week/Harris Poll, "In general, do you approve or disapprove of the free agent rule in professional baseball?" [*Business Week*], July 1985.

other words, as a fan named Art Hill eloquently stated, "the simple fact of baseball's appeal to millions of people is beyond argument...it is the best game there is."³⁵ If some fans were displeased at the exorbitant increase in player salaries following free agency, they certainly weren't demonstrating it by boycotting the ballpark.

While increased player mobility and earning power did not steer fans away from baseball, the 1981 strike drove many away from the sport. The fundamental difference between the implementation of the free agent system and a prolonged strike was that the latter interfered with the fans' ability to enjoy the national pastime. While the fact that men were being paid extremely high salaries to play a game might have bothered the fans, it did not directly affect them in any way - baseball continued to be played and attendance costs remained remarkably low. The 1981 strike, however, deprived the fans of seven hundred and twelve games of baseball. It was the first time that no baseball was played on the Fourth of July. To the fans, the inability to enjoy the most American pastime on the most American day was an affront of the worst kind. Fan outrage could soon be found in scores of newspapers and magazines. "Those ballplayers better talk to some auto workers and steelworkers," a fan named Martha Cummings wrote to *The Houston Post*. "Good Japanese ballplayers can be imported, too."³⁶ This recommendation that the players should get a dose of reality by talking to ordinary workers, and a passive-aggressive reminder that they weren't irreplaceable, could be found in a major newspaper merely ten days after the strike began. The fans had already accepted that ballplayers earned copious amounts of money, but to stop play over an issue as seemingly petty as free agent compensation when they had gained so much already was a step too far. Disenchantment with both players and owners was

³⁴ Harris Survey, "Players are entitled to get a real financial reward in return for their talent," [Louis Harris and Associates], July 1981.

³⁵ Michael Joyce, "Baseball: a game of beauty and poetry and a business of deceit and greed," *The Sun*, July 27, 1980.

³⁶ Kaplan, "No Games Today," June 22, 1981.

observed in overwhelming numbers, much larger than those following the implementation of free agency: 89% of a sample of 1,252 adults agreed that players and owners had become so greedy that they were putting their own selfish interests above their love for the game, while 76% believed that the players cared more about money than the game itself.³⁷ Fans of all ages were voicing their displeasure with the strike: Felix Winsten wrote to the *Washington Post* on July 19 that "after sixty-five years as a baseball fan...I doubt that I will attend any games from here on in," while eleven-year-old Kevin Naff wrote on July 23 that if baseball were played again that season "people should boycott the games for two weeks just to show them how we feel."³⁸ Certain fans may have felt that player salaries became excessive with the advent of free agency, but there was no generalized talk of abandoning viewership; in the end, baseball was still being played regardless of how much or how little its players were making. When a player-owner dispute directly affected the fans' consumption of the national pastime, attendance numbers began to reflect their resentment. The strike-shortened 1981 season drew merely 26,535,286 baseball fans, down from 43,014,136 in 1980. Subsequent years only saw marginal increases in fan attendance. Only three million more fans attended baseball games in 1986 than in 1982 (44 million to 47 million). Free agency might have forever altered the way the game of baseball operated, but it was a game stoppage five years later that truly affected fan perception for years to come.³⁹

It is obvious that the game of baseball underwent numerous drastic changes that led to this remarkable improvement in player work conditions between 1966 and 1981. Its "traditional"

³⁷ Harris Survey, "By offering their services to the highest bidder, players show they are more interested in money than in the game of baseball," [Louis Harris and Associates], July 1981.

³⁸ "Pay Up or Shut Up" and "What Price Baseball?" *Washington Post*, July 19, 1981; "The Fans Strike Back," *Washington Post*, July 23, 1981.

³⁹ "1980-1989 Attendance," 1980-89 Ballpark Attendance Figures, Ballparks of Baseball.

character was effectively eliminated with the abolishment of the reserve clause and subsequent establishment of free agency in 1976. For example, in 1966 the minimum Major League salary was \$6,000 (which had only increased by \$1,000 in more than a decade), and the average was \$19,000. In 1981, the minimum salary was \$32,500 and the average was \$185,651.⁴⁰ Pitcher Nolan Ryan became the first player to earn more than \$1 million annually when he signed a contract with the Houston Astros on November 19, 1979, totaling \$4.5 million over three guaranteed years with a fourth year option.⁴¹ The fans were forced to adapt, often reluctantly, to these changes as well. However, this shift did not significantly alter their relationship with the game. Millions of Americans continued to flock to ballparks in record numbers, perhaps even with a twinge of excitement at the prospect of seeing newly-minted (and duly compensated) star players put their skills on display. The fans' main concern was always enjoying their national pastime - as long as they were able to do that, player and owner salaries were inconsequential, no matter how outrageously high they seemed.⁴² The dynamic only decidedly shifted when the fans were deprived of the game, as with the strike of 1981, one of the most significant in sports at the time. This, and not any of the player gains of the past fifteen years that resulted in their enrichment, was the event that triggered fan disillusionment that would last for many years.

⁴⁰ Korr, *The End of Baseball as We Knew It*, 3.

⁴¹ Murray Chass, "Ryan Pact Reflects Splurge in Baseball," *New York Times*, November 20, 1979.

⁴² Kaplan, "No Games Today," June 22, 1981.

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