Keeping Baseball Competitive

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Professional baseball has taken a dive in the last decade. It went from being America's pastime to a game played by greedy athletes controlled by overpowering owners. The strike of 1994, the third baseball strike and arguably the most devastating because it caused the cancellation of that year's World Series, marked the end of baseball as a sport and the beginning of baseball as a business. As Major League Baseball becomes more business oriented, it also becomes competitive between fewer teams. Between 1995 and 2005, only thirteen different teams played in the World Series. To make major league baseball competitive once again, the league needs to develop a better system of revenue sharing.

When most people think of baseball they automatically think of the Yankees, the Red Sox, or some other well-known franchise that is among the league's perennial winners. The problem is that there are increasingly fewer of these winning teams. Here's what happens: A team begins to win, attracting fans, who buy tickets and other merchandise. Ticket and merchandise sales pay for television time, which fuels more revenue, which is spent on talented, high-priced athletes. Talented players drive a team's success, triggering more revenue. Over time, the team accumulates talent. This cycle leaves a drought of talented players for other teams. Think of the Yankees and the Montreal Expos. The Yankees' broadcast and ticket revenues for 1999 were more than $100 million more than the Expos' (Costas 72). This in the long run makes it impossible for smaller teams such as the Expos to compete with monster teams like the Yankees. Organizations that don't have the money to buy talented players and crafty coaches simply cannot compete with those that do.

Source: *Marriage 101 and Other Student Essays* (an online companion reader to *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing*)

This issue was part of both the strike in 1994 and the threat of a strike in 2002. Although there are other issues involved in these strikes, the revenue gap is one that can be easily fixed. The solution is a plan of revenue sharing, in which teams with large amounts of money such as the Yankees, Red Sox, Mets, and Dodgers give a portion of their earnings to lower-revenue clubs such as the Brewers, Marlins, and Devil Rays. The plan is simple: it is a "Robin Hood scheme that takes from the rich and gives to the poor" (Costas 64). Such a "Robin Hood scheme" would even the playing field by allowing lower-revenue teams to purchase more expensive and more talented players. Now games are frequently between a team with a line-up of all-stars and another with a line-up of wannabes and has-beens. This can cause fans not to watch when they know their team is going to lose. If each team has two or three good players, competition between all teams will be more even, making for better baseball.

A revenue-sharing plan would also help low-market teams retain the talented players that they develop over the years. The Montreal Expos have developed some of the league's premier players, including Cy Young winners Randy Johnson and Pedro Martinez, but the Expos didn't have the money to keep them. Mike Piazza, catcher for the San Diego Padres, has said that revenue sharing gives low-revenue teams "the resources to retain some of the players they have developed and maybe add a piece here or there" (Heath A1).

Many people object to the revenue-sharing solution for several reasons. The owners of the high-revenue franchises object to giving away money that their teams have earned. However, if the sport does not stay competitive, fans will no longer want to watch or attend games—even "up-market fans have been deserting, driven away by clapped-out ballparks and lackluster games" (*Economist*). This lack of attendance affects not only the organizations themselves but also the advertisers who support them. Big-market owners must "understand that increasing revenue sharing is as crucial to them in the long run as it is to small-market teams in the short term" (Costas 70). Revenue sharing may hurt big teams at first, but in the end every team will benefit from increased profit due to the revival of competitive games.

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Another objection to revenue sharing by high-revenue organizations is that the lower-revenue teams may use the money they receive as they please. With the revenue-sharing that is in effect today, teams are not using the shared money to sign starting players to improve their rosters. Some teams such as the Expos, Reds, and A's have actually lowered their payrolls by getting rid of their starting players, which causes them to be out of the pennant race by Labor Day (Badenhausen 112). Instead, the teams may use shared revenue on maintaining and improving ballparks, leaving owners like George Steinbrenner of the New York Yankees to ask, "Why should [I] fork over more Yankee dough to them?" (Badenhausen 112). The solution to this problem would be to create a binding agreement on how the money shared with lower-revenue teams must be used.

An additional issue that can arise from revenue sharing is that it encourages high-revenue teams to try to generate even more money so they can overpower the teams they give their money to. This directly affects the fans: in the 2003 season the Red Sox raised their ticket prices by about seven percent (Hohler E1). The inflation in ticket prices is due to revenue sharing. To stay financially competitive the Red Sox must pass the cost of revenue sharing on to their fans. If the team does not generate even more money to offset the shared revenue, it becomes less competitive on the field and eventually loses money.

Although there are other problems in baseball that are related to its lack of competitiveness, revenue sharing could correct a large part of the current player dissatisfaction that initiates strikes. These changes alone "wouldn't eliminate the revenue gap, but they'd give the smaller markets a fighting chance" (Costas 72). For this to work, Major League Baseball teams must cooperate with one another. Baltimore Orioles manager Peter Angelos has said that "Baseball is a contest, a game, there has to be competition. If there isn't [fans] lose interest." Revenue sharing is a large part of the solution to the unbalanced playing field that baseball has created; it "go[es] a long way toward bringing baseball closer to the true meritocracy that any other sports league should be" (Costas 79). Revenue sharing has worked in professional football. Teams in the National Football League share revenue generated by ticket sales and television broadcasts. Now every new year starts fresh, and any team can be dangerous. The same can happen in professional baseball. It is time for the sport to be reborn into a bloodthirsty battle between new teams and old rivals. If baseball can reignite the drive to win, the sport will be saved.

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