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Baseball and Television Origins: The Case of the Cubs

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NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture

University of Nebraska Press

Volume 10, Number 1, Fall 2001

pp. 31-45

10.1353/nin.2001.0045

ARTICLE

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Baseball and Television Origins The Case of the Cubs

Robert V. Bellamy Jr. (bio) and James R. Walker (bio)

The purpose of this paper is to continue our analysis of the long and

often troubled relationship between television and Major League Baseball (MLB). Central to our analysis will be MLB's economic problems, including the revenue disparity among teams caused by the dramatic differences in local and regional television rights fees. We will argue that baseball's problems with television are best understood through local and regional models of team-media relations. We will introduce three local/regional models: (1) the Pinned-In Model used by teams unable to expand their market due to proximity to other clubs (for example, Milwaukee and Pittsburgh); (2) the Hinterlands Model, which featured the development of a strong regional radio and then television network that extended a small-market team's fan base (for example, Cincinnati and St. Louis); and (3) the Embracers Model used by teams that viewed television as a force that would build fan interest, increasing box office receipts. The Chicago Cubs best exemplify this model.

The importance of television to MLB and most all sports is difficult to overstate. There is no exaggeration in saying that through television, sports truly became a vital part of the national culture. *Baseball Weekly* recently listed television as second only to Jackie Robinson's signing in its feature on the "Top 100 Things That Impacted Baseball in the 20th Century." Television was cited for exposing MLB to a much larger audience, generating a financial windfall for owners, increasing the value of franchises exponentially and, with the development of cable, "chang[ing] the way Americans followed the game."¹

Zimbalist argues that to understand the economic condition of MLB one must look at the "ongoing technological revolution in telecommunications and the ever more concentrated and interlocked structure of the broadcast industry."² We would add that even in a time of rapid change in the global telecommunications and entertainment industries, in many instances history continues to matter just as much as the "ongoing revolution." **[End Page 31]**

Major League Baseball's Trouble With Television

Baseball has had the most difficult and interesting relationship with

television of any major sport.³ In 1998, MLB, fueled by the McGwire-Sosa home run record chase, had increased regular season national ratings. This is quite an accomplishment in an era of so much television choice. However, the 1998 World Series received its all-time lowest ratings despite the presence of a record-setting Yankees team from the largest U.S. television market. World Series ratings were up a healthy 13 percent in 1999, reflecting the national following of both the Yankees and the Braves and the strength of NBC's ability to reach more of the country with a strong signal than Fox could. Regular season ratings were stable in 1999, and All-Star Game ratings were down 10 percent.⁴ These mixed results indicate a relationship that can be described as dysfunctional.

Several explanations have been advanced for the relative decline of MLB as a national television attraction. These explanations can be grouped into the overlapping structural categories of *aesthetic*, *marketing*, *economic*, and *historic*. On the aesthetic level, the large playing field with a wide dispersion of players makes baseball a difficult sport to televise because the cameras have difficulty following all the action. One popular historian of baseball and broadcasting, Curt Smith, argues that baseball is perhaps the worst sport for television because the breaks in the action are boring for viewers. However, the same breaks, when used by fans at the game, are seen as opportunities to engage in interpersonal communication, go to the bathroom, or buy concessions.⁵

Major League Baseball owners have been accurately accused of not understanding modern-day marketing and particularly the concept of *integrated marketing*: the coordinated combination of advertising, promotion, and public relations.⁶ Baseball has also been criticized for not developing a fan base among the young and among African-Americans and for not promoting its star players effectively.⁷

Although aesthetics and marketing are concerns, MLB's primary structural problems are economic and historical. Baseball has always been...

Baseball and Television Origins

The Case of the Cubs

ROBERT V. BELLAMY JR. AND JAMES R. WALKER

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