BackTalk

Baseball Could Learn a Few Things From Australia

By JUSTIN WOLFERS
and ANDREW LEIGH

With the threatened baseball strike averted in the bottom of the ninth, fans are relieved but somewhat disillusioned with the national pastime. Is the fierce competition that we enjoy in the ballpark likely to always spill over to negotiations over pay? Or is it simply a reflection of players paying more attention to dollars than sense?

A major sports scandal in Australia last week provides an interesting benchmark against which to judge the motivations of American baseball players.

Rugby league fans Down Under also had a gut-wrenching week, following revelations that the Sydney-based Bulldogs, a team picked by many to win this year's rugby league championship, had systematically violated the salary cap. The team had funneled player payments through third-party entities and club boosters. It emerged that the club spent nearly a fifth more on player payments than the system allows.

The players appear to know nothing about these violations, and there is no suggestion of impropriety beyond the team's management. Yet "Doggiegate," as the Australians are calling it, has resulted in the Bulldogs' being stripped of any credit for their successful season to date, and they have been relegated to the bottom of the league. With the finals series only two weeks away, this has also robbed the Bulldogs of any chance of postseason glory.

The reaction of Australia's rugby league players stands in stark contrast to the position adopted by Major League Baseball players. Bulldogs players, led by their captain, Steve Price, pleaded to take a pay cut to comply with the salary cap, in the hope that it offers them a chance to compete in the postseason.

"It's a shock to us like it is to everybody else," Price said on Aug. 21, claiming ignorance of the player-pay scandal. "Players will take pay cuts if we have to."

The 21-year-old Mark O'Meley agreed. "I just love footy," he said. "I'd be devastated not to play in the finals." He added, "I'd be prepared to take a pay cut to play in the finals."

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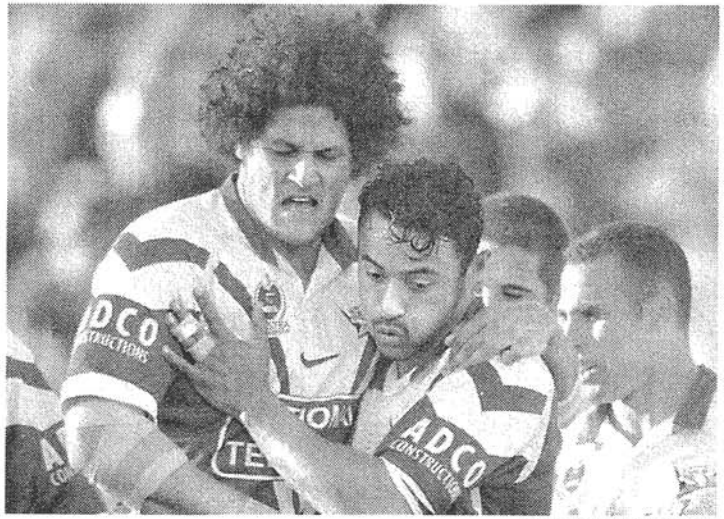
By contrast, the threatened baseball strike was intended by the players union to maximize only their bargaining power. By waiting until the pennant races and ultimately the World Series were on the line, the players managed to boost their bargaining power at the possible expense of the postseason.

In effect, baseball's stars bet that their fans, who ultimately provide the owners with their profits, care more about the postseason than they do. Having forced the abandonment of the 1994 World Series, we all knew this was no empty threat. And the fact that the owners worked furiously to resolve this dispute by Friday shows that they also understood this.

The response from sports fans in Australia and the United States reveals the very different effects that the two scandals — player overpayments and the threatened strike — have had on supporters of the two sports. Bulldogs fans are clearly shocked at the way in which the team's management behaved, but it says something about the innate sense of fair play among Australians that an online poll at the club's Web site found that nearly half of Bulldogs fans surveyed believed that the punishment meted out to the club was fair.



Mark Nolan/Getty Images

Members of the Sydney-based Bulldogs pleaded to take a pay cut after revelations that the team had violated the salary cap.

By contrast, baseball's work stoppages seem to have wearied American baseball fans, and although there was a small anti-stoppage protest movement, fans seem resigned to the possibility of further labor strife, and regarded its resolution as an unexpected surprise. While the overpayment scandal led the Bulldogs board to resign en masse, both Bud Selig and Donald Fehr, the two main protagonists from the 1994 baseball strike, continue to lead their respective organizations.

The current Australian scandal also raises some very practical issues for baseball's negotiators.

A primary stumbling block in the baseball negotiations has been the issue of the so-called luxury tax. This tax is in many respects similar to the rugby league salary cap, except that rather than simply banning spending above a certain level, these higher payments are to be taxed so that rich clubs can buy less talent for their dollar.

The overpayment scandal in Australia points to the likelihood of similar infractions in baseball's future. The tough question for those who propose to regulate payments to baseball players is: How would a luxury tax in baseball be enforced? Will Bud Selig be willing to go as far as Australian rugby league officials and ban transgressors from the postseason? Would the players union support his decision, or could enforcing the rules potentially lead to more labor strife?

Even in its darkest hour, Australian rugby league players are showing the sort of sporting passion that American baseball fans yearn for. As Bulldogs Coach Steve Folkes said of his team: "They want to play football. It's not about money. It's about success."

For all its "Field of Dreams" mythology, the mighty dollar remains central to much of modern baseball.

Few have echoed the recent sentiment of one sportsman: "The money, I can deal without. Baseball, I can't." The player? Baseball's $252 million dollar man, Alex Rodriguez.