



The Voice of Reason

Mike Gastineau

Up the Pace!

SEATTLE baseball fans who advocate a quicker-paced game (like myself) were given a fresh batch of ammunition on the second night of the 1998 season.

Almost 25,000 fans watched the M's and Indians plod through a 3 hour and 40 minute snoozefest. Since the game was the back half of a Wednesday night national telecast it didn't start until 7:35 P.M. The 7th inning stretch came around 10:20 P.M. (When we're out there singing that we don't care if we ever get back, we mean it figuratively, not literally.) It was a game that could be used as evidence of why Major League Baseball should consider adopting measures to speed up the game. It was a game that made you wistfully consider the joys of the summer of 1968.

1968—The Year of the Pitcher

The pitching numbers from 1968 are startling. That was the summer Cleveland's Sam McDowell finished with 15 wins and a 1.81 ERA. That was good for second place statistically - on his own team! Luis Tiant won 21 games and led the Tribe with a sparkling 1.60 ERA. And that was good for second place in the majors, since Cardinals' star Bob Gibson won 22 games and finished up with an ERA of 1.12, third best in baseball history.

Eight starting pitchers that summer finished with ERAs under 2.00. Mariner fans who have unfortunately gotten used to seeing 4 digit ERAs would have found themselves in pitching heaven.

1968 was more than just low ERA's. Denny McLain was baseball's last 30 game winner that year. That was also the summer Don Drysdale set a then-Major League Baseball record with 58 and 2/3 consecutive scoreless innings pitched.

In September San Francisco's Gaylord Perry and St Louis hurler Ray Washburn fired no-hitters on consecu-

tive days against each other's teams at Candlestick Park.

The National League won the All-Star Game. 1 to 0.

This is not to say that every game in 1968 was played at a quick pace. On April 15th of that year the Astros and Mets played a game that lasted 6 hours and 6 minutes. The Astros won it. 1 to 0. In 24 innings.

THIS is hardly meant to advocate a return to baseball as we knew it in 1968. But if Interim Commissioner for Life Bud Selig and his cronies were serious about shaving a few minutes off the average game time they'd seriously consider giving a little bit back to the pitchers.

We're living in the Golden Offensive Age of baseball. Hitters are stronger, faster, and better trained. The technology of videotape allows them to study pitchers during games, perhaps picking up a tip from an at-bat in the 2nd inning that will help them in the 5th. And while hitters have that option of in-game study, pitcher simply rest between innings.

It's time for Major League Baseball to tip the scales back towards the pitchers. Just a little. Raise the mound. Maybe even allow pitchers the psychological edge of going to their mouth on the mound. And for crying out loud, please start calling the high strike.

These moves would immediately pick up the pace of baseball games. And they'd do so without harming the natural pace that is so necessary in the pitcher vs. hitter battle.

Many within baseball see no need for faster games. They point to rising attendance and proudly state that the fans like offense.

What they won't tell you is that Major League Baseball owners want long games. They know the longer the game

is the longer fans will stay in their brand new parks. Buying food and drinks and T-shirts and caps. They're afraid that speeding up the game will hurt their bottom line.

I don't have the economic evidence to argue that point. And I won't dispute that baseball attendance is rising in many places.

I will say this: On April 1st approximately 25,000 fans wandered into the Kingdome to see the M's and the Indians play. By the time 10:30 rolled around (and with the game still stuck in the 7th inning) at least half those fans had gone home. If you stayed until the bitter end you didn't leave the Dome until almost 11:20. Figure 15 minutes to your car, at least a half-hour to get home, and you're talking about walking in the door after midnight.

There is simply no argument to be made that a baseball game that begins at 7:35 and doesn't end until 11:20 which gets fans home after midnight is good for baseball.

The solution is simple. Bring the pitcher back into the game. Give him back a few advantages that have been systematically taken away over the past quarter century. If hitters know the high strike will be called they'll be more likely to swing. If pitchers know this they'll be more likely to challenge hitters.

We don't need a clock to time pitchers. We don't need "automatic" intentional walks. We don't need less time between innings (something that will never happen since that's when commercial money is generated for the clubs' broadcast).

Raise the mound. Call the high strike.

Baseball's owners are willing to spend months considering radical realignment. They'll cancel a World Series. They'll force replacement players on us. Why won't they consider two minor adjustments that might make the game better? ☹

You can hear the Gasman every weekday afternoon on Sportsradio 950 KJR-AM