

Baseball: if it ain't broke . . .

I said it once and I'll say it again. Attention Major League Baseball: Do not follow the footsteps of other professional sports. Do not conform to a new playoff system.



MATTHEW J. RUSH
Columnist

I think we all would agree that baseball has been a stable factor in the lives of many Americans over the past century. The game has brought together father and son and people with their country, and has brought escape from life's everyday stresses. More over, baseball has been the one constant throughout America's turbulent history. Throughout presidential assassinations, the Depression and World Wars, baseball has provided the world with joyous memories and magic moments.

When the proposal to expand the number of playoff teams in baseball was submitted in February at a Major League owners meeting in Phoenix, it appeared as though it would be a tough sell. Unfortunately, the proposal has now become a sad realization and, barring a God-sent miracle, the new system will be implemented in 1994.

The newly proposed playoff system would select from the two division winners and two wild-card teams (two division runners-up with the best records) from each league.

Originally, the proposal was also to call for the expansion of the two league's divisions. That is, to split the two current divisions into three for a total of six divisions. The split would have created two divisions having five teams while the remaining four teams would have been the newly created third division.

The playoff system would then have drawn the three division winners and a wild-card (the team with the next best record). However, it appears

that this proposal, if Major League owners don't change their minds, will not pass successfully.

Baseball has been a unique game from its birth. The NBA, NHL and NFL have all adopted similar playoff systems within the last five years to satisfy economic expectancies. But Baseball has plenty of money to support itself without this new playoff system. Besides, if they wanted to save some money, they could decrease the enormous payroll, largest of all professional sports.

Economics aside, some of baseball's most memorable moments have come on the last day of regular season play. Bobby Thompson's "shot heard 'round the world," the Carlton Fisk arm-waved-fair home run and, after finishing the 1987 regular season deadlocked, the Detroit Tigers earned a dramatic entry to the Fall Classic by defeating the Blue Jays.

If this playoff system is officially adopted, this style of play may not be seen again. The "Miracle Mets of 1969" would not have been as dramatic a story if they only had to finish in second place to earn a birth into the post-season. Teams will no longer fight it out until the second or third day in November, because they will already know where they stand long before that. The goals of a team will become like that of the other professional sports, simply to make the playoffs.

Baseball is an all or nothing game. There are no tie games, there are no Co-Champions and there are only four teams worthy of entry into the post-season. In baseball you win or wait 'til next year.

Why change a game that has meant so much to its fans and players alike. Why change a constant that has provided many people with rich moments of heroics, great battles, dynasty teams and a deep lore that traces back to the mid 1870s?

To Major League baseball I have only one simple message: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.

Heavyweight boxer arraigned for bribery

Mercer pleads not guilty to charge

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Ray Mercer, knocked out of a rich heavyweight title fight by Jesse Ferguson, was hooked by the long arm of the law Tuesday on a charge he tried to bribe Ferguson to lose.

"Not guilty," Mercer said. And that's all the 1988 Olympic gold medalist said. At least within earshot of reporters during and after his arraignment in Criminal Court of New York. He was released on his own recognizance.

District Attorney Robert M. Morgenthau announced at a news conference that Mercer was arrested Sunday in Indianapolis after being indicted by a grand jury in the County of New York on a charge of offering Ferguson \$100,000 to lose during their fight Feb. 6 at Madison Square Garden.

Mercer lost a 10-round unanimous decision to Ferguson. He also lost a \$2.5 million payday against heavyweight champion Riddick Bowe, who stopped Michael Dokes in the first round on the Garden card. Ferguson got \$500,000 to challenge Bowe, and he was stopped 17 seconds into the second round May 22 at Washington.

Mercer got about \$50,000 to fight the 36-year-old Ferguson, who got \$10,000.

A tape of the fight revealed the 32-year-old Mercer first offered the bribe in the third round, according to Morgenthau, who also said "it was repeated numerous times after the third round."

HBO taped the fight, but did not televise it.

"They were practicing for the bigger fight," said Daniel J. Castleman, chief of the Investigation Division of the New York Frauds Bureau. "They used four

tracking systems, and we were able to get into those systems."

"The tapes confirmed that Mercer repeatedly attempted to persuade Ferguson to let Mercer win," Morgenthau said. "I don't think I want to comment on what Ferguson said."

When asked if Ferguson would be charged for not reporting a bribe, the district attorney said, "We're not considering charging him with anything."

"We're not going to comment on what his status is," Castleman said. "He is not being charged."

Ferguson, reached at his home in Philadelphia, referred all questions to his attorney, James Binns, of Philadelphia. Binns was not immediately available for comment.

"He has categorically denied his guilt," attorney Dominick Amorosa of New York said at Mercer's arraignment.

Poor old Navratilova

Aged athlete outplaying younger competition

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WIMBLEDON, England — Pity poor old Martina Navratilova. Creaky in the morning, joints sore, muscles slow to warm up when she straggles out on court.

Offer her sympathy, but save some for the kids she keeps trouncing in her 21st Wimbledon as she bids for her 10th title.

"Yes, I'm a cripple and I'm still beating up on them," Navratilova said Tuesday after reaching the semifinals Tuesday by beating Natalia Zvereva 6-3, 6-1. "I guess they're really lousy players."

"I'm playing as good tennis as I ever have in my career," she said. "It's just hard to get out of bed in the morning, but once I get going I'm OK."

"I beat Monica, who was No. 1 in the world, three months ago, and she was playing well. So I think you should give me credit rather than take it away from the

rest of the women. I'm just playing good tennis, period. Forget my age; it doesn't count."

Navratilova, 36, has won every set while dropping a mere 16 games in five matches.

Top-seeded Steffi Graf is winning rather efficiently, too, as she goes for a fifth title.

On Tuesday, Graf got through her toughest match, beating Jennifer Capriati 7-6 (7-3), 6-1.

On Thursday, Navratilova, seeded No. 2, will play No. 8 Jana Novotna, who upset No. 4 Gabriela Sabatini 6-4, 6-3. Graf plays No. 6 Conchita Martinez, a 6-1, 6-4 winner over No. 15 Helena Sukova.

Martinez is the first Spanish woman to reach the Wimbledon semifinals since Lili de Alvarez in 1928.

Zvereva, 22, played well but looked lost out there against Navratilova, who sprinted along the net without regard for the right ankle she sprained in early March.



Scoreboard

American League

Texas	4	Kansas City	3
New York	4	Detroit	3
Milwaukee	7	Boston	6
Cleveland	8	Chicago	2
Toronto	2	Baltimore	1
Minnesota	7	Seattle	5

National League

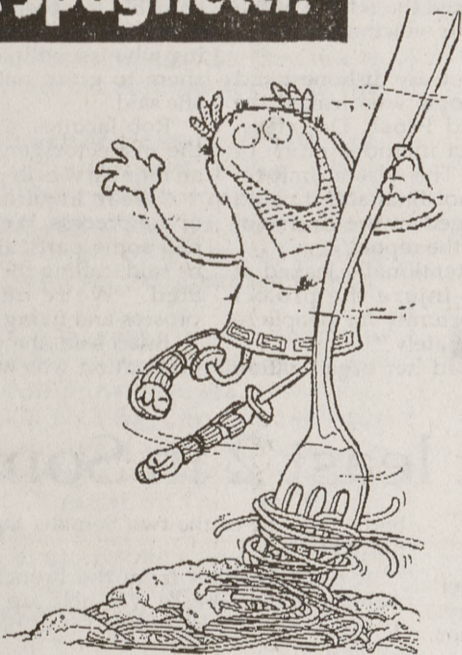
New York	10	Florida	9
San Fran	3	Los Angeles	1
Chicago	10	San Diego	5
Philadelphia	13	St. Louis	10
Cincinnati	3	Houston	0
Atlanta	6	Colorado	4
Montreal	9	Pittsburgh	2

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