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Introduction

The Game in the Box

In an end-of-the-millennium feature on "The Top 100 Things That Impacted Baseball in the 20th Century," *Baseball Weekly* listed television as second only to Jackie Robinson's signing. Television was cited for exposing Major League Baseball (MLB) to a much larger audience, generating a financial windfall for owners, increasing the value of franchises exponentially, and, with the development of cable, changing "the way Americans followed the game."[1]

We agree with *Baseball Weekly*'s analysis. And today, a few years into the twenty-first century, television's impact on each of these elements—team revenue enhancement, franchise values, and ways we follow the game—has become even more prominent. More importantly, Major League Baseball owners finally may have learned how to partner with, rather than fight, television, making the game's dysfunctional "marriage" to television more harmonious.

Perhaps the greatest impact of television on Major League Baseball was to make MLB a common synonym for "baseball." Although the big league game had a privileged position before the video medium, the U.S. television industry has focused most of the nation's attention on the MLB version of the game. Nightly ESPN *Sportscenter* highlights record nearly every significant MLB "dinger," "punch-out," and defensive "web gem," while only the most extraordinary moments from the minor leagues, college or high school baseball, or international competition receive any exposure. In the United States, virtually every MLB game is telecast over some combination of broadcast, cable, satellite, or Internet. But minor league games are rarely telecast, college games are cablecast during the College World Series, and international games come to prominence only during the MLB player–dominated World Baseball Classic. Though television has magnified both the best and worst that Major League Baseball has to offer, it has offered only a distant glimpse of much of the rest of the sport.

Despite the intense coverage the medium gives MLB, baseball's relationship with television has been more difficult than that of any major

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sport.[2] The 2005 and 2006 World Series set new records for all-time lowest ratings (11.1 in 2005; 10.1 in 2006).[3] The 2005 result was particularly disturbing because the two competitors—the Chicago White Sox and the Houston Astros—represented two of the nation's top ten television markets. However, the rating for the 2006 All-Star Game (9.3) was up 15 percent from 2005.[4] Despite mixed results, Fox Sports renewed its multibillion-dollar contract with MLB, maintaining its exclusive coverage of the World Series and All-Star Games in addition to one of the two League Championship Series (LCS) through 2013. In renewing the contract, Fox affirmed that postseason games are an "invaluable promotional platform—for both our new series and returning hits such as *House*, 24, *Prison Break*, *Bones*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy*."[5]

Analysts have offered several explanations for the relative decline of MLB as a national television attraction, including aesthetic, marketing, economic, and historic reasons. On the aesthetic level, baseball's playing field, characterized by wide dispersion of players, makes it a difficult sport to televise because the cameras cannot follow all of the action. Curt Smith, a popular historian of baseball and broadcasting, argues that baseball is perhaps the worst sport for television because the breaks in the action are boring for viewers. However, for viewers at the stadium, the same breaks are welcomed, giving fans opportunities to hash over questionable calls, go to the restroom, or buy brats and beer.[6]

MLB owners have been blamed justifiably for misunderstanding modern-day marketing, particularly integrated marketing, which is the coordinated combination of advertising, promotion, and public relations.[7] Critics lament that baseball has not developed a strong fan base among the young or among African Americans of any age, and has not effectively promoted its stars.[8]

Although aesthetics and marketing are concerns, MLB's status as a national television attraction has also been influenced by primary structural problems that are economic and historical. Baseball has always been the sport with the most games (product) to sell. Baseball offers 162 regular-season games per team compared to 16 for the National Football League (NFL) and 82 for the National Basketball Association (NBA) and the National Hockey League (NHL). The abundance of product reduces

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the national network ratings for the game, excepting once-a-year events such as the All-Star Game and the World Series. And even these long-standing ratings successes are in decline.

The Lineup Card

We have written this book to interest baseball fans, scholars of baseball and the media, and anyone curious about the twentieth-century history of these two significant bulwarks of American culture. Our purpose is to provide for the first time in one volume:

1. A history of MLB's nearly seventy-year relationship with television, emphasizing how a pretelevision entity like baseball deals with the most powerful of all media.
2. An analysis of the business dealings between MLB and television entities from the 1940s to the present. We focus particularly on the changing symbiotic relationship of sports and television, how and under what circumstances the mutually beneficial relationship has shifted over time.
3. A consideration of how the game has changed for television viewers. How did television adapt its production limitations to a game that has often been described as "unfriendly" to television? How has the baseball announcer adjusted to the demands of the medium?
4. A look at how the MLB and television relationship is evolving. How is MLB leveraging what it calls "Advanced Media"? Will the rise of the Internet, satellite radio, and broadband high-definition television create more revenue imbalance in the game, therefore widening the economic gap between large- and small-market teams? Or, does the posttelevision era offer MLB a way to build and share more prosperity?

We have divided the book into five thematic sections that include chapters exploring the most important issues in the baseball-television relationship.

The Local Game

Part I will explore the earliest days of baseball on television. Here we will present a prehistory of the MLB-television relationship. In this period (1939–52), baseball was the indisputable national pastime and thus one

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of the first sports to be covered extensively by the new medium. During this era, television evolved from an experimental medium reaching only a few hundred receivers to a national phenomenon in millions of households. Since no one could foresee the impact of television, baseball owners' reactions to the new medium were mixed, ranging from fear that the "box" posed dangerous box-office competition, to a belief that television would be the greatest boon ever for the game.

The emphasis of this section of the book is on local telecasting of games. National television networks did not develop until the late 1940s, and could not deliver a live coast-to-coast signal until 1951. There was no coherent MLB-wide national television policy for regular-season games until 1966. Excepting the World Series and the All-Star Game, each owner determined his team's television policy. As the television industry diffused into almost all U.S. households during the 1950s, the medium presented different challenges and opportunities in different markets. Though some of these differences were based on geography, many reflected decisions made by individual teams, controlled by owners who either embraced the new medium or disdained it.

The National Game

Part II will consider the national television arrangements that MLB has made over nearly sixty years, focusing particularly upon the World Series. Despite declining ratings, the Fall Classic remains the "crown jewel" of the game, justifying impressive rights fees that seem to be out of line with the Series' audience appeal. The World Series and, to a lesser degree, the All-Star Game are events that draw casual fans to the televised game. These "big ticket" games also stimulated networks to introduce innovations in production techniques or announcing configurations.

Regular-season MLB games first came to national network television in 1953 with ABC's *Game of the Week*. These weekend games lifted Dizzy Dean and Leo Durocher to national prominence. For millions of Americans, the colorful commentary by "The Lip" and "Ole Diz" was their initiation into televised baseball.

By the time NBC became the first truly national home of the game of the week in 1966 much had changed. Slick, professional Curt Gowdy

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became NBC's national voice of the game. But by this time, the NFL was replacing baseball in the hearts and minds of the majority of American sports fans. Beginning in the mid-1970s, NBC and ABC attempted to raise the profile and popularity of the game through prime-time telecasts. Though baseball's prime-time telecasts never matched the popularity of the NFL's, they demonstrated that broadcast networks still valued MLB, even as many individual owners began their long and counterproductive "war" against the newly empowered players.

The birth of the cable era enhanced the value of baseball's television rights. Technological, regulatory, and judicial changes in the 1970s allowed cable television to connect to an increasing number of U.S. households and become a serious competitor for the dominant broadcast television industry. Cable was hungry for popular first-run programming, and baseball was a major contributor. Although inequitable distribution of cable revenues increased the gap between "have" and "have-not" teams, it provided MLB with a substantial new source of revenue and marketing opportunities.

Television and Baseball's Dysfunctional Marriage

What has television done to baseball? What has television done for baseball? These are the questions we will explore in part III. Unlike many earlier commentators, we do not believe that television has harmed baseball.

Over the past fifty years, television has been blamed for a range of baseball's problems, including the retraction of the minor leagues and the relocation of two of New York City's two National League teams to the West Coast in 1958. As traumatic as these events were to minor league teams and to the supporters of the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants, it is simplistic and erroneous to attribute these changes solely to the effects of television.

Television had a large impact on baseball, as it did on all existing media and on television's business partners. The owners' "television-enhanced" revenues altered irrevocably the economics of the game. As baseball became a more lucrative business, the players demanded a fairer share of industry revenues. Owners found it increasingly difficult

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to deny basic labor rights to the players as they and the public watched television money swell club profits. Television publicized the labor/management dispute more emphatically than radio or the tradition-bound print media had ever done.

Television also stimulated more scrutiny of baseball by lawmakers. Protecting the "national pastime" proved a popular pastime for members of Congress. Minor league contraction, the shift of franchises, and the threat of baseball moving from "free" to pay television have all provided plenty of fodder for legislative and judicial posturing. Although baseball has maintained its Supreme Court–granted antitrust exemption, the franchise owners and their commissioner are no longer treated with the deference they enjoyed before the rise of television.

Television has redefined baseball and all other major sports. Baseball is no longer regarded as a national trust. It has become just another business. Many "purist" fans lament the loss of baseball's innocence and status as the "national pastime." However, baseball purists are not likely to rein in the forces of an advanced capitalist economy. Major League Baseball is a large and growing business.

Like all businesses, baseball seeks to maximize revenue and profits. It has become more than a sport; it is now a media commodity and media partner. This relationship is complex, dynamic, and symbiotic. In the past sixty years, MLB has become a major provider of sports product valued by broadcast and cable networks, and essential to regional sports networks (RSNs) on cable and satellite systems.

One of the major buzz phrases of the 1990s and into this decade has been "synergy." Jointly, industries with synergy would become a more powerful economic and cultural force than they could have become separately. In the sports-media world, synergy applied to the contractual relationships between media companies and sports teams, including occasional co-ownership. In part III, we examine MLB's unique synergistic partnerships with television industry.

How the Game Was Covered

Part IV explores what viewers actually saw or heard on their television sets. Though radio announcers have been the subject of considerable

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attention in many biographies, the challenges faced by the television announcer in adapting to the medium have received less discussion. We examine how baseball announcers, schooled in the radio era, prospered in the new medium. We also introduce a "MAT" (medium, announcer, and team) theory of announcing that helps explain why some announcers became legends while others labored in relative obscurity. Finally, we document announcers' struggle for control of the telecast as their words competed with images for the viewers' attention.

As many biographies attest, the public recognizes and applauds its favorite announcers. But they are not the most important members of the television crew. Anonymous directors of the baseball telecast control the important visual dimension of the telecast. As a problematic television sport, baseball has always been a challenge for the director. The large and asymmetrical size of the field, the small size of the ball, and the shifts of action from and within the infield and outfield have all bedeviled television production of baseball. No previous study has documented how directors and their crews have met these challenges since the first televised games. We examine the evolution of production practices from the two-camera setups with hand-lettered graphics in the 1940s to today's productions featuring a multitude of cameras, digital replay, and "FoxBox" graphics.

Epilogue: Baseball in the Advanced Media Age

We conclude our book by examining the rapidly changing world of new media. Though television has changed baseball, the medium also has changed. Thirty years ago, a viewer had only two venues for televised baseball: the local team on a nearby broadcast station or a game featuring out-of-market teams on a national Saturday afternoon or Monday night telecast. If they are willing to pay, today's fans can also watch most or all of their home-team games on their RSN available on cable or satellite. They also can watch several games a week on ESPN, ESPN2, and, beginning in 2008, TBS and TNT. For more money, fans with DirecTV satellite or cable service can watch hundreds of out-of-market games on MLB's "Extra Innings" package, or they can receive the out-of-market games via the MLB.com web site. MLB.com also includes archived

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The Experimental Years

Although NBC's May 17, 1939, telecast of a college game between Columbia and Princeton from Baker Field in New York is widely considered the first televised baseball game, there are several other claims to the title. As with many "firsts" in history, the prize goes to the event that was "first" in publicity rather than the chronological first. The NBC telecast was announced in advance and publicized in New York.[1] Earlier experiments and demonstrations received little or no exposure.

Before the Beginning

Illustrations showing fans watching baseball on television appeared regularly in the popular press in the 1920s and '30s. As baseball was America's most popular sport, baseball telecasts exemplified the promise of television, and the medium's promoters jumped on it. In one 1922 image from *Science and Invention*, a professorial looking man stares intently through his monocle at a television a few inches away, as two colleagues in the background look on. A 1935 *Radio-Craft* cover features an illustration of three men, fists clenched, watching a receiver designed to improve upon the small picture size of early television by providing a private screen for each viewer. Illustrations were easy to create, but covering actual games was very difficult given the low-resolution mechanical systems of the era.

The earliest dated reference to a televised game appears in *Television News* in December 1931. The magazine's cover announces "baseball game successfully televised," but the story inside is based on a single photograph from a Japanese magazine. The article features an artist's rendering of the photo, and "judging by the original photograph . . . the televiser utilized for picking up the baseball game was a stationary affair

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1. The anticipation of TV baseball is as old as television itself, as this 1922 image shows.

. . . focused across the home plate."[2] The image could not have been very clear since the systems at that time used only 60 scanning lines, whereas the standard U.S. television today has 525. Consequently, a shot of a player could devote only about 4 lines to reproducing the player's face. About the same time in Boston, television developer Hollis Baird reportedly used a mechanical television system to televise games played at Fenway Park. The camera was positioned on his rooftop and pointed across the street at the ballpark.[3]

In February 1937, the *Sporting News* reported that Connie Mack was asked about the upcoming season by newsman Boake Carter on Philco's experimental TV station in Philadelphia, making the seventy-four-year-old Mack television's first documented baseball interviewee. Although

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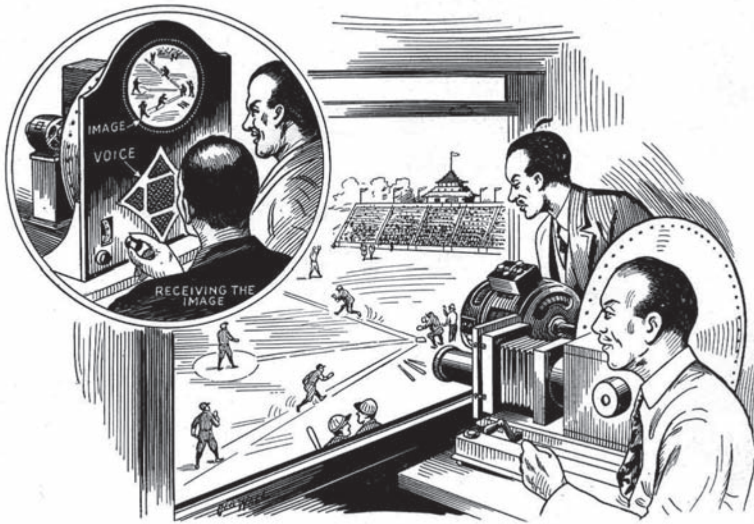

2. A 1931 illustration of a game reportedly televised in Japan.

the grand old man of baseball was not quoted about television, he did claim that radio "broadcasting of games has helped attendance, rather than hurt it, on the same basis that the newspapers stimulate baseball attendance in ratio to the space they devote to the game."[4]

In late March of 1939, Mutual Broadcast Network telecast from a Los Angeles studio an interview with the manager and several players of the Pacific Coast League's Los Angeles Angels. The *Sporting News* suggested that the studio interviews were a step in the right direction, but that "the time may be rather distant when the fan can sit at his home and not only hear an account of the games but witness the players in action as well." Less than two months later, NBC's experimental station, W2XBS, in New York would dash that prediction by airing the first televised baseball game. The *Sporting News*' photograph of the Angels' interview shows the players in white socks and dark leggings. Apparently, the players were not told to appear in street shoes instead of spikes that might damage the studio floor. Fortunately, the television camera is tilted up to hide the feet of these "Shoeless Joes."[5] These few documented events suggest that baseball was the focus of some television experimentation, making it likely that other appearances of baseball personalities, and perhaps even games, went unreported before NBC's first baseball telecast.

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NBC's First Game: "A 42nd Street Flea Circus"

Early experiments aside, the first widely publicized televising of a baseball game took place on May 17, 1939. The summer of 1939 was the time of the New York World's Fair, and the fair's theme was the "World of Tomorrow." For NBC and its parent company, RCA, the world of tomorrow would be seen on television, and "tomorrow" meant the very next day.

Throughout that summer and the next year, RCA used the remote truck of its experimental station, W2XBS, to cover outdoor events throughout New York City. The summer mobile-unit schedule included a six-day bicycle race, the arrival of the king and queen of England at the World's Fair, the Nova-Baer prizefight, a musical ride of the Canadian Northwest Mounted Police, and the Eastern Grass Court Tennis Championships. In all, W2XBS would telecast fifty-nine remote programs in what RCA called "Television's First Year."[6] Sports and other remote events, along with studio programs and films, fed W2XBS's ambitious first year of programming.

The impetus behind RCA's packed programming schedule on W2XBS was a push for its 441-line system of television. RCA hoped that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) would accept its system as the de facto standard in the United States. RCA had used the same strategy in radio two decades earlier. Ultimately, the FCC rejected RCA's standard, however, adopting the National Television System Committee's 525-line system. But from April 1939 until the approval of the NTSC standard in 1941, RCA filled the New York ether with remote programming from locations all over the city.

As the most important sport of the era, baseball had to be included, and quickly. A 1940 survey of 2,050 World's Fair visitors found that baseball was the most popular television sport, gaining 384 votes to football's 343 and boxing's 275.[7] For their second remote telecast, only three weeks after NBC first televised the opening of the World's Fair, the network therefore turned its primitive iconoscope camera to the national pastime with Bill Stern, NBC's best-known sports personality, presiding.

As a sports commentator, Stern was not the epitome of accuracy. Red Barber described how Stern would work himself out of a tight situation on the radio: "He [Stern] never admitted he made a mistake. When Stern

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would do a football game and name the wrong ball carrier, he would simply pretend the wrong man lateralled the ball to the right man. College football never had so many single and double and triple laterals as when Stern had the mike."[8] Despite his creative reporting, three things are certainly true about Bill Stern: he was one of the most popular figures in radio sports in the middle of the twentieth century, he was the announcer of the first televised baseball game, and at that first game, he had no idea of what he was doing.

Played at Columbia University's Baker Field, the first televised baseball game was the nightcap of a doubleheader won by Princeton 3 to 2 in ten innings. There were about four hundred receivers in the New York area, although most of the audience probably viewed the game at the RCA television facility in Rockefeller Center. The telecast was not "big league" in any way, and it wasn't just that the competitors were college teams. Produced by television program manager Thomas H. Hutchinson and directed by Burke Crotty at a cost of $3,000 for NBC's experimental station W2XBS, the coverage used only one low-resolution iconoscope camera on a twelve-foot platform positioned on a hill along the third base line. The camera was stationed far from the action, and its lens could provide only a distant view of the game. Every time the ball was put in play, the camera had to pan quickly to the left to follow it. The *New York Times*' radio reporter, Orrin E. Dunlap, described the dizzying view: "the lone camera sees the pitcher as he winds up on the mound and then quickly swivels to the home plate to catch the play with the batter, catcher, and umpire flashing into view. If it's a hit the camera follows it down to first base; if a home run it makes the circuit with the runner."[9]

The ball was so small that it was impossible to see it on the tiny television screens of the day. "Too often when the specklike ball was struck 'it ne'er was found.'"[10] Since the camera could not include both the pitcher's box and home plate, it "was focused on the mound for the wind-up and quickly followed the ball to the batter and catcher."[11] The camera had no long lens capable of magnifying the action so the players, in the words of the *Times*, looked like "little white flies." *Variety* suggested that without the announcer's commentary, the production would have resembled "a 42nd street flea circus."[12]

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3. A single camera captured NBC's first baseball telecast, a college game in May 1939. National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown NY.

By positioning the camera to the side of the main action—the pitcher throwing the ball and the batter swinging—the director failed to follow one of the rules of good television: action should be staged at the center of the screen with motion coming toward and away from the viewer, rather than from side to side. But this was 1939, and there were few fast rules for good television.

Although the video coverage was disappointing for both technical and artistic reasons, the announcing was even worse. Stern worked with no monitor or audio connection to the director and thus had no idea what the camera was showing at any given time. With no chance to coordinate his commentary with the video action, Stern simply called the game as though it was on radio, describing all of the action whether the audience could see it or not. The cardinal rule for today's televised baseball announcers is that their coverage should enhance the action the viewer sees rather than provide verbal repetition of the video coverage. But this

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