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Commentary

Baseball's beloved bad calls

By Rich Westcott

The botched umpire's call that stole a perfect game from the Detroit Tigers' Armando Galarraga last week has become - with Commissioner Bud Selig's help - an embarrassment to the game of baseball.

Umpire Jim Joyce made one of the worst calls in baseball history, denying Galarraga a pitcher's greatest possible achievement. To review the grim details, Galarraga was pitching a perfect game when, with two outs in the ninth inning, Joyce called Cleveland Indians hitter Jason Donald safe on a close play at first base. Replays showed clearly that Joyce blew the call: The runner was out by half a step.

Later, Joyce, a highly respected umpire, realized his mistake and apologized profusely to Galarraga. It was noble of Joyce to admit his blunder, and it was equally noble of Galarraga to gracefully accept Joyce's tearful apology.

In the wake of these classy reactions from those involved, baseball could have acted to rectify the situation. Instead, the commissioner made himself the real villain of the affair by ignoring a chorus of pleas to reverse the umpire's decision. Rather than make it right, Selig chose to keep it wrong.

As an old pitcher myself, I am particularly galled that Galarraga was denied his place among the stars.

So why couldn't Selig undo a great injustice - even if it was an exception to normal procedure? Overruling the call wouldn't have affected the outcome of the game. But it would have rightly legitimized the pitcher's achievement.

Blown calls are shamefully regular occurrences in baseball. Despite reasonable reservations about instant replay, it's obvious that something needs to be done.

That doesn't have to mean endless rounds of bothersome television replays or changed calls on routine plays. What baseball needs is a process for reviewing decisive plays.

But Selig and his cohorts have steadfastly rejected the use of replays, apparently preferring to keep baseball mired in the dark ages. Baseball does use instant replay to certify home runs, but that's it. No other play is allowed to undergo electronic review.

Why? Mainly because baseball clings to the ancient notion that the game must be accepted as it is, imperfections and all. The thinking seems to be that correcting errors of judgment would unacceptably compromise the game (even though it has been tampered with in many other ways): Just let whatever

happens happen, even if it means refusing to overrule a dreadful mistake that the offending party has admitted.

What nonsense. Here's a sport that prides itself on purity, and yet it passes up a chance to right a wrong when it really matters. Certainly we can all agree that a call that takes away a perfect game is far worse than the average blunder. But baseball seems to be insisting that all mistakes are equal - that you can't make an exception and correct one mistake without opening all calls to further review.

Professional football, basketball, and hockey all use replays when necessary, and an excellent example of the value of that practice came on the same night as Galarraga's misfortune. Twice during the Flyers' game against the Chicago Blackhawks, instant replay was used to determine whether or not a goal had been scored. In both cases, it was impossible for the referees to make the call on their own, so they did what all officials should do for important calls: They reviewed the video. As it turned out, both decisions - one a goal, one not - played a significant role in the outcome of the game.


Instead of floundering in a sea of excuses, baseball should employ a technique that works well for other sports.

Since the perfect-game incident, Selig has said he will explore expanding the use of instant replay. I'll believe it when I see it. But I hope the day comes when no other pitcher will have to go through life lamenting that a horrendous call - which could have been corrected - prevented him from making baseball history.

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