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New season, but same abyss for baseball's Bud Selig

David Carter

With another Major League Baseball (MLB) season getting started, Commissioner Bud Selig finds himself in the same unenviable position as the Montreal Expos. Neither has a legitimate shot at winning their respective battles in the boardroom or on the baseball diamond. And both have been bogged down for years in an abyss marked by waning credibility and competitiveness.

It is both unfortunate and unfair to lay all of baseball's problems at Selig's door. In poker terms, he's been dealt a challenging hand. His cards include a unified and exceedingly strong players' association, a constituency made up of owners with competing and conflicting agendas, and a power base weakened over time by MLB's history and culture. In short, Selig wouldn't have the necessary "pairs or better" required to open.

Unfortunately, Selig has compounded this tough hand by dealing himself two more detrimental cards -- one known as cronyism and the other as conflict of interest.

But don't blame Selig completely for this poorly dealt and subsequently misplayed hand.

Much of it is reflective of the circumstances that envelop the sport -- circumstances that have gone unaddressed for years and that are now being manifested in the form of threatened franchise elimination and relocation. When Selig became commissioner in 1998, no one expected him to single-handedly turn around a sport mired in an economic mess made more pronounced through MLB's collective attempts at correcting it. He was selected, in part, due to his willingness to perpetuate the status quo, a strategy welcomed by many owners who believed sweeping changes would compromise their short-term franchise values.

Relative to the NFL and NBA, the commissioner's office in MLB lacks the authority to effect meaningful change. Selig simply doesn't have the charter or the standing adeptly demonstrated by Paul Tagliabue and David Stern of the NFL and NBA, respectively. Tagliabue and Stern have both the power and influence to advance their agendas, while MLB commissioners have always seemed to lack it. Importantly, both the NFL and NBA view their relationships with their owners and players as partnerships; MLB, however, all too frequently treats these entities as adversaries. Further, since Selig maintains a strong connection to the Brewers, a team currently operated by his daughter, he does not enjoy the same standing as an arm's-length advocate between owners and players as the NFL's Tagliabue or NBA's Stern.

Adding to its historical, systemic, and all too often confrontational approach to management, MLB now finds itself with a commissioner whose business dealings have led many in the sports business industry to question his objectivity.

Ranging from accepting a loan from an existing team owner when Selig owned the Milwaukee Brewers, to being accused of orchestrating the sale of the Boston Red Sox to a group he apparently favored, Selig's role as a commissioner charged with protecting and extending the best interests of the game has been called into question.

Many of Selig's actions, and in some cases inaction, have threatened interest in the game.

But until the sport admits that it needs a visionary leader and extraordinary brand manager who is empowered to represent and improve the standing of all industry stakeholders, MLB will perpetually find itself struggling to cobble together a winning hand.

So rather than try to bluff his way through a losing hand, maybe Selig should just fold his and walk away from the table. But he cares too much about the game of baseball and remains committed to finding a way to make the sport work. Let's just hope he and MLB don't gamble away America's pastime in the process.

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