

A Nightmare in Fantasyland; Strike Cripples Rotisserie Leaguers, but Doesn't Hurt Everyone



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Paige Forrest had grown accustomed to it - the covert calls to score lines, the subtle glances at the TV during important conversations, the constant channel surfing. But when it came time to plan her wedding to Charles Beall, she decided her honeymoon would be fantasy baseball-free.

"I love baseball, but I had to get away from it," Forrest said. "I understand it's a hobby for him and that he enjoys it, but sometimes, he and his friends are a bit obsessed with the baseball thing."

Quebec City was considered. Beall suggested taking in an Expos game. That slip-up led to Quebec City's rejection.

Finally, they settled on London, where Big Ben is best known as a clock and not a certain 6-foot-7 Orioles pitcher. It didn't hurt that American baseball would be nearly impossible to track down overseas. "I think that was one of the criteria," joked Beall, who like Forrest is a lawyer in Arlington.

But little did Forrest know her honeymoon would start early, as major league baseball players walked off the job on Aug. 12, eight days before the couple walked down the aisle.

"Now maybe he can come back to reality and realize there's more to the summer than baseball," Forrest said.

For the many thousands like Beall who exist in baseball's fantasy subculture - watching ESPN SportsCenter religiously and gobbling up box scores in the morning paper for breakfast - the strike also has put their games on hiatus.

These days, baseball is played not only on fields, but on game boards, computer bulletin boards and over telephone lines.

Fantasy ball - to the chagrin of many baseball purists, who see it as a bastardization of America's grand old game - is played by an estimated 500,000 to 1 million fans nationwide. It has created a world where a fan can root loudly for his favorite team while pulling quietly for his fantasy team, a world where a solo homer in the ninth inning of a blowout suddenly means something to someone.

In fantasy baseball - also known as Rotisserie baseball - fans draft major league players and use their actual statistics to compete against other "owners" in leagues, usually for cash prizes. Its participants are diverse enough to include national security adviser Anthony Lake and rock star Meat Loaf.

Anticipation of the strike sent life spinning out of control for many fantasy players. Phone bills plummeted; trade talks slowed

to a crawl. After the strike arrived, fantasy players had even less to do.

"Normally, I would be miserable," Beall said. "But since my team is so pathetic, I probably won't miss it as much."

"One section of my morning agenda will be gone," said Rick Mostyn, chief financial officer at Bozzuto & Associates, a Greenbelt-based real estate firm and owner in the Baltimore-based High Rollers League. "Usually, I go right to the box scores and I either have a good morning or a bad start to the day."

Keith Olbermann, who as anchor of ESPN's SportsCenter is the nightly bearer of important news to many a fantasy owner, is an avid player. He says the strike goes a long way in explaining the rise of fantasy baseball.

"Rotisserie is a form of protest," he said. "The fans are saying 'We love the raw product, and we hate what {the players and owners have} done to it.'"

For others, the loss of baseball hurts financially more than emotionally. The explosion of fantasy-related games has been a profitable one for many, especially for companies that tabulate statistics for fantasy leagues and for operators of 900 numbers that provide inning-by-inning score updates. Those businesses may stand to lose the most should the strike put an end to the 1994 season.

Bob Repta, owner of the Champaign, Ill.-based Custom Stat Service, said if the strike ends the season it "wipes me out." But should the season resume at any point, the strike will cost him nothing since refunds will not be necessary.

"If they're out for the season it would have a lot of effect on what we do," said John Wallwork, owner of Roti-Stats, a Laguna Hills, Calif.-based stat service. The company, one of the largest of its kind in the country, serves approximately 5,000 individual owners, each of whom pay between \$40 and \$100 per season.

Said Repta: "Everybody who works here is part-time, so it's not the end of the world for them. No one's family depends on {the business} except mine."

While this is a time of mourning for many fantasy baseball owners, those who play the board games APBA and Strat-O-Matic can now add a what-if element to their games since, unlike fantasy ball, those games are not dependent on major league play.

For the 43-year-old APBA and the 33-year-old Strat-O-Matic - which use dice and playing cards featuring individual player statistics - a walkout could enhance the thrill of the game. If the strike does wipe out the postseason, the first expanded playoffs will be played out this winter not in ballparks, but in basements and living rooms around the country.

Wonder what would have happened if the Yankees and White Sox were to meet in the American League Championship Series? Or the Expos and Reds in the National League? And could the Rangers, a team 10 games under .500, not only get into the playoffs but actually advance to the World Series? The only answers may come when people like Ross Klavan of Germantown and his 14-year-old son Justin play Strat-O-Matic in the coming months.

"The motivation will be two-fold," said Klavan, a 39-year old accountant who has played since he was 12. "Who will win and are there any sacred records that will be broken?"

Would Matt Williams, Ken Griffey Jr. or Frank Thomas have topped Roger Maris's home run record? Would Tony Gwynn have been the first player since Ted Williams in 1941 to hit .400?

The game makers are unsure if the strike will affect sales.

Fritz Light, owner of APBA Game Company, said the 50-day 1981 strike had a negative impact on sales, as fans turned away from anything associated with baseball. "We're fearful that will happen again," he said.

Hal Richman - creator of Strat-O-Matic Baseball, whose more famous players include sportscaster Bob Costas and filmmaker Spike Lee - said the '81 strike brought his company publicity and boosted short-term sales. But the following year, sales dropped

20 percent. He hopes the dynamic offensive performances of the 1994 season will help overcome strike bitterness and make next year's set of game cards a big seller.

"I would imagine the lack of baseball would enhance Strat-O-Matic," Klavan said. "The Rotisserie people, I imagine, would commit mass suicide."

While that hasn't happened yet, the possibility of an abbreviated season did force fantasy owners to think ahead. The focus was to be in first place on Aug. 12, not on Oct. 2, since most leagues decided to award first-place money to whoever led when the strike began - assuming, of course, the season never resumes.

Some leagues took a different approach. Some crowned winners at the all-star break. Others pushed prize money into next year's till.

There are outlets for those suffering from fantasy withdrawal. Stats, Inc. - which compiles statistics for major league teams - will play simulated games for any fantasy league that would like to continue, in a sense creating a fantasy fantasy league. Olbermann already has made plans to participate in a simulated historical fantasy league, using players from past eras.

"Now I can turn on my computer and find out how Willie Mays did for me," Olbermann said. "Or when Don Newcombe gets hit by a line drive, I can decide whether to bring in Harvey Haddix or Don Gullett."

Still others can take refuge in the glut of baseball games on the market for video-game systems such as Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis. Or play simulated games on a home computer.

If that's not enough, don't fear. There's always fantasy football.

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