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Impact of The Players' Association on the MLB

For over 150 years, Baseball has been a sport loved and appreciated by many Americans across the country. From Babe Ruth to Mike Trout, Baseball is the only sport with the same set of core rules and very unlike the three other major sports in the United States. The game has gone from small fields in Manhattan to thousands of fans at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles with millions watching at home. A part of Major League Baseball that is constantly overlooked and unappreciated is the Major League Baseball Players' Association led by the former first baseman, Tony Clark. Formed in 1953, the MLBPA made player's rights more prominent than before, most notably removing the reserve clause among countless other issues that have been resolved over many years (Dabscheck). In 1965, the MLBPA appointed known industrial relations professional, Marvin Miller, as its first full-time executive director changing baseball history forever. Miller brought a new attitude toward the MLBPA and entire baseball world by teaching players their worth in ways they have never heard prior to his appointment. The quiet-mannered Marvin Miller was known for listening to the players to use their thoughts toward making the game better for them. Miller's first major accomplishment came in 1968 when he negotiated the first MLB collective bargaining agreement (Dabscheck). The agreement raised minimum wage as well as removed power from the commissioner by having player-owner grievances resolved by an arbitrator. Miller increased player minimum wage juristically, as *The Washington Post* sportswriter Shirley

Povich wrote in April of 1980 “, since negotiated by Miller: their average wage when he took the job was \$16,000-their average salary today is \$126,000” (Povich). Many baseball historians believe that the three most influential people toward baseball were Babe Ruth, Curt Flood, and Marvin Miller. The three all impacted the game in different ways making it more popular and fairer to the players. The creation of the Major League Baseball Players Association has given the players the right to unionize, the right to arbitration, and free agency making the game better on and off the field.

Professional baseball players tried to unionize five times before finally being successful in forming the Major League Baseball Players’ Association in 1953, the first of the four major American sports to do so. Braham Dabscheck, the author of *The Routledge History of American Sport* details, “All of these attempts failed because of the concerted opposition of the owners, lukewarm support from players, and an inability to find leaders with the skills to build the internal cohesiveness necessary for the successful operation of a players’ organization, and the competitive edge to take on owners in collective bargaining negotiations” (Dabscheck). In 1946, as the possibility of a union forming began to become more real the owners adopted the representative system in which owners met with representatives of their team to discuss employment issues and attempt to destroy the possibility of unionization (Dabscheck). The players unionized in 1953 mainly because of concern over the establishment of the players’ pension plan. The Players’ Association present day generally fights for rule changes as well as having the revenue shared between the players. Through endorsement and television deals, the owners make more money off the popularity of the players without giving the players enough of their share of the revenue. During the 2020 suspended season due to COVID-19, the MLB and MLBPA’s relationship

was noticeably fractured as the two sides couldn't come to an agreement on return to play rules, mainly concerning player compensation for a shortened season. Both the MLB and MLBPA released information about their discussions to the public for each side to feel pressured by the players and fans to agree. In June, Commissioner Rob Manfred used his power to enforce a 60-game season without agreeing. With the Collective Bargaining Agreement expiring on December 1st of this year, it is much anticipated that there will be a lockout with a very real possibility of a delay to the season. Before the union, the players would have been forced to play without the opportunity for a mutual agreement and it may lead to its first strike since 1994 which caused the 1995 season to start with replacement players and not the headline players turning many fans off the sport. During the 2021 All-Star Game, Peter Abraham of the *Boston Globe* wrote, "The national buzz baseball has built up with Shohei Ohtani and exciting young players such as Rafael Devers, Fernando Tatis Jr., and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. can vanish overnight and turn baseball into a sport far closer to the NHL in terms of relevance than the NBA or NFL" (Abraham). Being the first sport to form a union, the Players' Association gave players rights they never thought was possible of receiving.

In the battle over the reserve clause, Executive Director of the MLBPA Marvin Miller helped create a right to arbitration for players still under their rookie contracts. Players with two years' service time use their performance to increase their pay each year until they become free agents. This process became arbitration in which both sides determine an amount they believe the player is worth and come to an agreement, but if there is not an agreement both the team and player go to an independent arbitrator. In 1987, writer for the *Law Labor Journal* Glenn M. Wong explained the role of an arbitrator in baseball, "the role of an independent arbitrator in MLB centers on interpreting ambiguous language in the game's

governing documents: the collective bargaining agreement, the uniform player contract, and Major League rules” (Wong). Hall of Fame players such as Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams were paid the same salary every year unless given a rare and small raise. These players enshrined in Cooperstown, N.Y. along with countless others before arbitration were underpaid their entire career with many of the players becoming broke after they retire. Though many young superstars such as Juan Soto and Vladimir Guerrero Jr. still don’t get paid what they are worth early in their careers without arbitration they would make the same low salary for the first six years. This idea has also been adopted by the NHL but used in a differently than hockey players are free agents earlier in their careers than baseball players. Before the 2020 season, Red Sox outfielder Mookie Betts set the record for the largest arbitration deal, \$27 million before being traded to the Los Angeles Dodgers and signing a long-term extension (Arbraham).

Before labor discussions and board room meetings, owners treated the players as if they were property and could be bought and sold. Starting in 1879, the reserve system was the most prominent issue in the players and owners’ relationship until it was dissolved in 1976 (Dabscheck). Braham Dabscheck explains the reserve clause stating, “The reserve system denied players the ability to test the market and left them at the mercy of their respective clubs” (Dabscheck). This reserve system prohibited now known as free agency which is after a certain amount of service time a player is allowed to go to the open market to choose the best team. Players were forced to pay for their own uniforms, traveling and medical expenses as well being subject to unfair fines such as a poor play fine. Braham Dabscheck gives the example of future Hall of Famer Ralph Kiner, “The Pirates had had a bad year and finished at the bottom of the league. Rickey offered him a new contract with a 25 percent pay cut, the

maximum then allowed under MLB's employment rules" (Dabscheck). Even though they may be playing better than their salary, organizations paid players the same salary every year unless they agreed to a raise. Also, they were sold to other teams, most famously Hall of Fame outfielder and pitcher Babe Ruth being sold by the Boston Red Sox to their rival New York Yankees for \$125,000, equivalent to about \$1.6 million today. Still, one major issue remained the reserve system, which was brought to a head by outfielder Curt Flood who was traded from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies and refused to play because he felt he was being treated as a piece of property. Marvin Miller and Curt Flood decided to challenge Major League Baseball as they believed it was a violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act which baseball was exempt from since the Supreme Court ruling in 1922. On Christmas Eve of 1969, Curt Flood wrote a letter as a declaration of war against the MLB changing sports forever. Flood and Miller's challenge went up to the Supreme Court where he lost to a vote of 5-3 in favor of the reserve system. As Nicolas Mills' article on Curt Flood describes, "The pressure from players on team owners to come up with a system less plantation-like only grew in the wake of Flood's legal defeat" (Mills). In July of 1976, Major League Baseball and the Players' Association came to a Basic Agreement on a player becoming a free agent after six years of service time.

Athletes in all sports were given little to no rights before unionizing by creating a Players' Association. The first sport to do so was baseball as they hired an executive director who changed the history of baseball in many influential ways during his long tenure with the Major League Baseball Players' Association. Before the MLBPA, players were treated as property that can be bought or sold giving much of the power to the owners of each baseball club. The Players' Association led by Marvin Miller changed that as he helped create free agency, the

arbitration process, and countless other rights by teaching players their worth to help pressure the owners to do the right thing. Along the way, many heroes arose, as former outfielder Curt Flood challenged the long-standing reserve clause after a trade from the St. Louis Cardinals to the Philadelphia Phillies. Now led by former player Tony Clark, the Major League Players' Association changed the history of baseball both on and off the field.

Abraham, Peter. "Problem-Solving Needs Collective Effort: Players Union, MLB Need to Work Together on New Contract." *Boston Globe*, Jul 14, 2021. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/problem-solving-needs-collective-effort/docview/2550988177/se-2?accountid=13793>. Accessed 28 Oct 2021

Peter Abraham, current sportswriter for the Boston Globe gives an inside look at the start of the new collective bargaining agreement debates. After the 2021 season, the CBA will expire as the MLB and MLBPA will need to find an agreement before the start of the 2022 season. The article recognizes the bad relationship built between the two sides over the past two years. This article will be useful to me because it shows how the rules Marvin Miller helped put in place years ago still stand today. The article gives a more modern example to the audience about the Players Association's role in collective bargaining.

By Shirley Povich Special to The, Washington Post. "What Miller Wants is Usually what Players Get: Whatever Marvin Miller Wants is Usually what Players Get." *The Washington Post* (1974-), Apr 13, 1980, pp. 2. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/what-miller-wants-is-usually-players-get/docview/147250318/se-2?accountid=13793>. Accessed 28 Oct 2021

Shirley Povich, writer for *The Washington Post* for 50 years, explains in his 1980 article, MLBPA president Marvin Miller's drive to always get what he wants. Povich helps explain the significance of Marvin Miller's work for the Player's Association for the 15 years prior to the article being published. The publication gives a great appreciation and reflection of Miller's work before retiring from the Player's Association.

This article is useful to me because it shows the commitment to his work from the union president, Marvin Miller. *The Washington Post* article gives a great interpretation of Miller's work over his first 15 years as head of the MLBPA.

Dabscheck, Braham. "Commercialized Sport, Entrepreneurs, and Unions in Major League Baseball." *The Routledge History of American Sport*, edited by Linda J. Borish, et al., Routledge, 1st edition, 2017. *Credo Reference*, https://go.openathens.net/redirector/shu.edu?url=https%3A%2F%2Fsearch.credoreference.com%2Fcontent%2Fentry%2Froutpbe%2Fcommercialized_sport_entrepreneurs_and_unions_in_major_league_baseball%2F0%3FinstitutionId%3D441. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021

Braham Dabscheck, the author of *The Routledge History of American Sport*, gives a detailed description of the history of Major League baseball owners and players with changes they've made since they unionized. The article starts with the first attempts to unionize by players as it continues to explain the impact the MLBPA has made over the years. The source gives an in-depth background of the Players Association, showing significant past events.

This source is useful to me because Dabscheck depicts a detailed interpretation of the baseball owners and players history. The source explains the history more than current issues as the author concludes the troubling past of the MLBPA.

Mills, Nicolaus. "The Christmas Eve when Curt Flood Changed Baseball Forever: In 1969, Star Cardinals Center Fielder Curt Flood Wrote the Commissioner of Major League Baseball to Bitterly Protest the Reserve Clause. it Opened the Door to Free Agency." *ProQuest*, Dec 23, 2017,

<https://www.proquest.com/blogs-podcasts-websites/christmas-eve-when-curt-flood-changed-baseball/docview/1979877758/se-2?accountid=13793>. Accessed 28 Oct. 2021

Nicolaus Mills, a writer for *The Daily Beast* in New York depicts the legacy of former outfielder Curt Flood. Mills explains how Flood challenged the MLB's reserve clause without help from other players and lost. The article gives a detailed background on one of its most influential people in the sport.

This article is useful to me because the history of the MLBPA cannot be told without Curt Flood, who help make baseball the way it is now. This source helps explain the impact Flood had on the baseball world as it shows his courage to challenge the MLB.

Wong, Glenn M. "Major League Baseball's Grievance Arbitration System: A Comparison with Nonsport Industry." *Labor Law Journal*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1987, pp. 84. *ProQuest*, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/major-league-baseballs-grievance-arbitration/docview/1290648468/se-2?accountid=13793>. Accessed 28 Oct 2021

Glenn M. Wong, writer for the *Labor Law Journal* illustrates the effect of the arbitration process on Major League Baseball. In this 1987 article, Wong explains the arbitration process after being put into place 20 years prior to when the article was published. The article provides detail into each step of the arbitration process.

This article is useful to me because the arbitration process is one of the most important parts of the union. This source gives in-depth detail on how this process works and how it was implemented.

