
LEIFER, ERIC M. *Making the Majors: The Transformation of Team Sports in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. Pp. 378. Price: \$49.95.

Running through *Making the Majors* is a conundrum. Why have habitually losing teams in our modern leagues stopped dying out at about the same time

that winning became the “only thing” in those same modern major leagues? Wait a minute! Wasn’t winning *always* the “only thing”? Not according to part-historian, part-sociologist, part-economist Eric Leifer. In an age of increasing specialization in the world of modern sport, Leifer is a refreshing throwback to a simpler time when academics were at home in more than one discipline. He is also out to chronicle what he presumes will soon be seen as a simpler time in the history of organized sport.

Leifer asks, how was it that a grand total of four losses managed to destroy baseball’s 1869-70 Cincinnati Red Stockings not long after they had amassed 76 consecutive victories? And, for that matter, why is it that the perpetually hapless Minnesota Timberwolves and Tampa Bay Bucs, who seem to be in a league of futility all their own, do not have the common decency to simply expire. The secret resides in the gerund in the book’s title. Leifer transforms “making” into a creative act, but he does not see it as necessarily liberating, especially not if liberation includes a right to die with a modicum of dignity.

And in Leifer’s multipurpose hands, “making the majors” has nothing at all to do with the liberation of players. At issue is neither what professional athletes have done to free themselves from their teams nor what they have accomplished on the fields, courts, diamonds, or rinks of this sports-saturated world of ours. Instead, Leifer is interested in the stratagems and decisions of the “organizers” of the modern major leagues. Secondly, he is concerned with the “enthusiasts” (fans) as they fit into the organizers’ endless chess games, which is to say as they are forever placed in the unenviable role of being manipulated by the organizers who need them even as they use them. “Making the majors,” therefore, refers to the machinations of those temporarily visionary “organizers” who have knitted individual teams into entire leagues.

Leifer’s compelling, if endlessly repeated, thesis that when it has come to “making the majors” success invariably contains the seeds of future setbacks for entire leagues, even as individual teams continue to live and lose another day. Witness the pioneer (major league baseball) in the art of constructing leagues to sustain interest (and losers) giving way to the next set of innovators (football and basketball) among the currently far-sighted “organizers” of our professional games.

In Leifer’s cerebral world passion has been created by contrived competitions. And at the root of those competitions is something quite dispassionate, namely routine and regularity, sameness and repetition. The first “organizers” to discover the secret of creating passionate attachments to sports teams, or of what Leifer calls “mobilizing publics,” were the founding fathers of baseball’s National League. It was their stroke of genius to realize that teams had to be attached first to cities and then to one another through a league. Only then would *losing* become acceptable. Only then would all teams actually bother to play out their entire schedules. Only then would passions be understandable and sustainable, for only then could winning truly matter—without becoming a matter of any franchise’s life or death.

For the half century between 1903 and 1953, major league baseball maintained two generally successful leagues before, during, and after the two World Wars

and the Great Depression. It dominated professional sports by keeping exactly the same teams in exactly the same locations. It tolerated the interminable successes of the “damn Yankees” and the nearly endless failures of nearly everybody else. Then came something called television and something else called the National Football League (NFL).

With the arrival of televised sports (and the near-simultaneous discovery that football was the perfect sport for television), the attachment of teams to cities suddenly became “more of a liability than an asset.” And almost as suddenly, the Goliath that was Major League Baseball found itself in a badly weakened position from which to take advantage of this thing called television. The key now was less local “publics” than regional, even national “publics,” waiting to be “mobilized” by the next set of innovative “organizers.” Never mind that football and television have always been a much better fit than baseball and television.

Still, the achievements of the NFL and the National Basketball Association, if not yet the National Hockey League, have been considerable—even if they, too, will not prove to be permanently sustainable. For in Leifer’s continuously cruel, almost strangely Darwinian, world of professional sports, individual franchises seem to have multiple lives, but entire leagues die never to be heard from again. The heart of this book chronicles the collective successes of some leagues, even as its conclusion anticipates their eventual decline and fall.

The first budding failures (owners of individual baseball teams) were foolishly bent on “gathering crowds” as opposed to “creating publics.” The second set of potential failures were the creators of those very “publics” among the next generation of baseball’s organizers. At the same time, the unknowing failures among those moguls built leagues, which served a dual purpose: They became centers of fan loyalty *and* “vehicles for controlling player movement.” After all, it did not require a budding genius, let alone a budding failure, to discover that the “constant flux of players hindered the development of strong fan attachments.”

Curiously, Leifer’s argument rests on a dual, even contradictory, assumption. On the one hand, those loyalties have been passionate enough to produce powerful attachments to terrible teams. On the other hand, those loyalties *are* apparently capable of being untethered, even severed.

Leifer, the social scientist, offers graph upon graph in order to demonstrate that local “publics” (that word again) can positively affect home team (football and basketball) performance. But Leifer, the futurist, is far from convinced that local or regional or even national “publics” can prevent those interchangeable “organizers” from working their will on their “enthusiast” victims.

At this historical moment, there is no regularized, much less regulated, international “public” for internationalized major leagues. It is Leifer’s considered judgment that, at the present time, the “major leagues are no further along in exploiting the world market than the 1869 Cincinnati Red Stockings were in exploiting the potential” of the American market. To be sure, efforts to “involve international publics” have been attempted, but they have been “tentative at best.”

Still, Leifer believes that major league sport is on the verge of “a fundamental reorganization.” He is convinced that “international publics” are waiting to be

“cultivated.” The trick will be to “somehow” establish teams outside the United States without having those teams “attached” to any “particular location.”

In the name of chipping away at the “somehow,” Leifer declares that it is time to recognize that all major leagues have “outgrown their original format of teams attached to locales in any form.” He suggests that perhaps multinational corporations will become the vehicle for the international professional sport of the future. Teams representing such entities will migrate across the globe during seasons, and seasons will extend throughout the year.

Leifer soothingly tells us that in many ways his “strange new world” will simply be a continuation of the past 125 years, as new sets of organizers seek to extend “repetition across time and sameness across teams.” But he fails to suggest another highly plausible scenario.

Nearly 40 years ago, an angry sportswriter named Dick Young snarled “to hell with the Los Angeles Dodgers” in a feature article in *Sport* magazine. One guesses he was not alone. But one also guesses that Dodger fans gradually adopted other teams. Yes, to hell with the Los Angeles Dodgers (It still doesn’t sound right) and the Minnesota Timberwolves (But, please, not the Twins). Bring on the future. Or, better yet, let’s head back to it.

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