

Notes, Commentaries, Essays

Australian Baseball's Second Unsuccessful Attempt to Establish a Players' Association

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On 11 October 1994 Australian baseballers held a meeting which brought into being the formation of the Australian Baseball Players' Association.¹ It affiliated as an autonomous section of the Professional Sports Branch of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. Both the Rugby League Players' Union and the Australian Soccer Players' Association had affiliated to the Professional Sports Branch of the Media Alliance, in 1993. Despite its access to logistical support by the Media Alliance, the Australian Baseball Players' Association never established itself as a viable organisation. It encountered two major problems.

First, neither baseballers nor the Media Alliance were able to produce persons capable of performing the necessary functions of leadership. Initial activists found themselves too busy to attend to the needs of the players' association; and the Media Alliance lacked resources to make available one of its operatives to attend to the problems of organisation. Second players were apathetic, and balked at paying membership fees of \$25 to join and \$50 per annum. At the end of the 1995-96 season the players' association helped players of the Hunter Eagles receive monies owed to them by their club—approximately \$500 per player — after a threatened strike.² Other than for this episode, it is difficult to point to any other activity, let alone achievement of this dormant players' body.

In 1997 there was a second attempt to establish a players' association amongst Australian baseballers. Like the previous 1994-96 attempt it proved to be abortive — foundering on the apathy of players. This 1997 attempt was associated with an Adelaide lawyer, Timothy Charles White, an associate with Tindall Gask Bentley. The following account is based on File Notes kindly supplied by White.

On 20 January 1997 White met with a player of the Adelaide Giants concerning Tindall Gask Bentley representing him and other players in contract negotiations with the Giants.³ For the 1996-97 season the

Australian Baseball League operated team salary caps of \$50 000 to be shared by 26 Australian players. Teams operate a 30-player roster, four of whom are American-based players.⁴ A player from the Sydney Blues (now the Storm) informed White that more than 50 per cent of players in the League earned less than \$1000 per season⁵ (which in 1996-97 ran from mid-October to mid-February). Apparently, the Adelaide Giants had not paid players prior to the 1995-96 season. Payments were made available in that season following representations from eight or nine players who said they would not play if they were not paid.⁶

The discussion between White and the Giants' player mainly centred on problems associated with standard player contracts and obligations imposed on players by clubs and the Australian Baseball League.⁷ They also talked about the possibility of establishing a players' association, and mention was made of Mark Shipley and David Hynes, a leading activist and President respectively, of the now defunct Australian Baseball Players' Association.⁸

Discussion with a Sydney Blues player revealed that players in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne would probably be supportive of the establishment of a players' association.⁹ White briefly examined operations of the Australian Soccer Players' Association and the Australian Football League Players' Association. The former had utilised the services of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, while the latter's 1995-98 Collective Bargaining Agreement precluded it from seeking an award.¹⁰

In April 1997 White sent letters to various players canvassing the formation of a players' association. He stated that 'The fact that Australian Rules Football, soccer, cricket, rugby (both Union and League) and netball all have established Players' Association[s] ... highlights the importance that such organisation can play'. He went on to outline ten major benefits that a players' association could offer players: to obtain funding for health insurance cover for which players were individually responsible, to enter into regular negotiations with the Australian Baseball League over the level of the salary cap, to attack clauses in the standard player contract which precluded players for promotion and sponsorship deals, to terminate payments for players 'cut' during the life of their contract, to introduce revenue sharing with the Australian Baseball League and Australian Baseball Federation, to establish a player welfare advisory service, to introduce relocation expenses, to abolish the option clause in standard player contracts, to initiate sanctions on clubs who defaulted on

player payments and to introduce of free agency. White went on to say that 'Obviously if a Players' Association is to be successful it is necessary to have a determined team who is 100 per cent behind the idea'. He hoped to hold a meeting with player representatives in the near future.¹¹

Unfortunately for White he was unable to organise such a meeting with players spread across Australia.¹² More significantly, individual players felt disinclined to meet with him when he made interstate trips.¹³ Despite the fact that several players expressed interest in forming a players' association in discussions over the phone, when push came to shove they were unprepared to become involved, and/or devote any time or energy to its foundation. By the second half of 1997 White decided that he could no longer justify spending time on a project that was going nowhere. He subsequently observed that 'the attempt to establish a players' association barely got off the ground'.¹⁴

NOTES:

- 1 For examination of the formation of the Australian Baseball Players' Association and the organisation, operation and labour market rules of Australian baseball see Braham Dabscheck, 'Australian Baseballers Form a Team of Their Own', *Sporting Traditions*, Nov. 1995, pp. 61-101.
- 2 See Braham Dabscheck, 'Playing the Team Game: Unions in Australian Professional Team Sports', *Journal of Industrial Relations*, Dec. 1996, p. 618.
- 3 The Giants apparently refused to deal with White when he sought to negotiate on behalf of players. Telephone interview, 15 Dec. 1997.
- 4 For details of labour market rules operating in baseball see Dabscheck, 'Australian Baseballers', pp. 77-87.
- 5 File Note, 24 Feb. 1997.
- 6 File Note, 23 Jan. 1997.
- 7 See Note 4 above.
- 8 File note, 23 Jan. 1997. For discussion of Shipley and Hynes's roles in the Australian Baseball Players' Association see Dabscheck, 'Australian Baseballers', pp. 87-94.
- 9 File note, 24 Feb. 1997.
- 10 File note, 25 Feb. 1997. For details concerning the Australian Soccer Players' Association use of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission see Braham Dabscheck, 'Assaults on Soccer's Compensation System', *Sporting Traditions*, Nov. 1996, pp. 93-100; and Dabscheck, 'Playing the Team Game', pp. 622-4. For details concerning Australian Rules football see Australian Football League — Australian Football League Players' Association 1995-98 Collective Bargaining Agreement, Clause 5; and Dabscheck, 'Playing the Team Game', pp. 618-21. It is interesting to note that no attempt was made to revamp the 'old' Australian Baseball Players' Association
- 11 Letter, Timothy White to player, 22 Apr. 1997.
- 12 The low income of players and the 'tyranny of distance' — a small number of players spread across the Australian continent — are major factors which have historically dogged the operation of player associations in Australia. For further details concerning problems confronting Australian player associations see

- Dabscheck, 'Playing the Team Game', pp. 608-15.
- 13 Telephone interview, 15 Dec. 1997.
 - 14 Letter, Timothy White to author, 13 Feb. 1998.