



Let the Umps Watch the Plays, Not the Replays

The good news for tradition-minded sports fans is that Commissioner of Baseball Bud Selig has indicated he is not going to overrule the call by umpire Jim Joyce that cost Detroit pitcher Armando Gallaraga a perfect game Wednesday night. Calls for just such a fiat have come from an undetermined number of baseball fans, a category that may or may not include Sen. Debbie Stabenow and Rep. John Dingell, both of Michigan. Stabenow has called for an executive override of the umpire in the field and Dingell said he would introduce a resolution in the House of Representatives calling for the same. Perhaps that is their idea of constituent service. Or maybe there's a shortage of problems confronting the Congress of the United States.



Let's hope Selig stands firm. It's unfortunate that Gallaraga lost his perfect game. It is too bad that Joyce blew the call and admirable of him to admit it. But awarding the pitcher a perfect game retroactively is not a good solution. Baseball records are a reflection of what happened on the field and the umpire's calls are part of it. Baseball doesn't need a revisionist history.

But Selig also said he would review baseball's use of instant replay and the possibility of expanding it. That is the bad news, or at least the potential for it. Baseball last year began limited use of the replay to give umpires the opportunity to review disputed home run and fan interference calls: Did the ball pass to the left or right of the fouls pole? Did it hit above or below a yellow line that separates a home run from a ball in play? Did it clear the wall before a fan reached out and caught it? That sort of thing.

Now both fans and occasional observers of the game are calling for a greater use of the replay so that the kind of errant call that robbed Gallaraga of his perfect game may be reviewed and overturned. But the possible uses are almost endless. If a close play at first is to be reviewed by umpires studying a TV monitor, why not one at second or third or, most importantly, home plate? Even the most avid supporters of video review would likely agree that using it for ball and strike calls would be too much. But what about a phantom tag or a play in the field when the question of whether an outfielder caught or trapped the ball is in dispute?

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Obviously, if every close call were subject to review a Friday night baseball game might end on Sunday morning. Already games are too long, thanks largely to hitters who readjust their batting gloves after every pitch and pitchers who appear to be practicing transcendental meditation between the time they get the catcher's sign and the time they actually pitch the ball. There has been talk of giving each team one opportunity per game to demand a review of a play in controversy. But suppose a manager uses his option in the fourth inning and it turns out that a questionable call in the eighth or ninth is the one that



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costs his team the game. How does that bring us any closer to preventing the kind of injustice done to Gallaraga?

That injustice should not be, as it already has been, overstated. Bad as it was, the "safe" call by umpire Joyce did not cost the Tigers or Gallaraga a victory. It did not even ruin the shutout. Gallaraga, to his credit, took the mishap in stride and calmly retired the next batter to end the game. It was far from being what it has frequently been called: "the worst blown call in baseball history" — or in the last 75 years or 50 or the last 25 years. Just ask St. Louis Cardinal fans.

In October of 1985, the Cardinals, up three games to two, were on the verge of clinching the championship of baseball's first all-Missouri World Series when they took a one-run lead into the bottom of the ninth inning of Game 6 against the Royals in Kansas City. But in a play eerily like Wednesday night's mishap in Detroit, leadoff hitter Jorge Orta of the Royals hit a slow roller to Cardinal first baseman Jack Clark, who fielded the ball cleanly and tossed it to pitcher Todd Worrell covering first. Though Worrell caught the ball with his foot on the bag before Orta arrived, umpire Don Denkinger called the runner safe. The Cardinals argued vehemently, but the game went on, as TV viewers watched repeated replays clearly showing the runner was out.

The disputed "base hit" started a rally for the Royals, albeit one aided by subsequent error by Clark and a passed ball by catcher Darrell Porter. The Royals scored twice to win the game, then went on to win Game 7 the following night. But for Denkinger's blown call, the Cardinals might well have wrapped it up in Game 6.

Going back a bit further in time, there was umpire Larry Barnett's non-call in the 1975 World Series when Cincinnati's Ed Armbrister bunted a ball in front of home plate, then ran into Red Sox catcher Carlton Fisk as Fisk sprung out from behind the plate to field the ball and throw to second to nail the lead runner. The collision caused Fisk to throw the ball wide of the bag and into center field putting runners on second and third. The Red Sox demanded, but did not get, an interference call from Barnett.

"What were you watching?" the irate Sox manager Darrell Johnson demanded of the beleaguered umpire. "I wanna know, what were you watching?"

One thing he was not watching was an instant replay, which may or may not have been conclusive. I freely admit my bias as a Red Sox fan, but I still agree with what Sox pitcher Bill Lee said at the time, that the block Armbrister put on Fisk was as good as any you'll see in the National Football League. And I was booing Barnett at Fenway Park well into the 1990s.

There are other examples, of course. An upper deck denizen named Jeffrey Maier became a hero in Yankees lore when he reached out over the field of play and caught a fly ball that was ruled a home run for Derek Jeter in a postseason game against the Orioles. Sure a replay showed it should have been called fan interference. But the umpire was standing right there looking at it as it happened. And when four umpires on the field, or the six used in postseason play, can't get a call right, maybe some bad calls are just incurable.

The point is that the umpires — and their gaffes, which we hope are rare — are part of the game and are as much a part of baseball as those of the hitters and fielders. Fans now calling for a wider use of the instant replay may have second thoughts when they find themselves watching the umpires watching the last play on television instead of a live game in progress,

It is the umpire's job to "call 'em as they see 'em," as they happen, when the difference between "safe" and "out" can be measured in the smallest fractions of a second. Let's not make them "call 'em as they



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watch 'em on TV."



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