The Designated Hitter, 40 Years of Controversy

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The designated hitter, the DH, the extra hitter, has been an on-going controversy for over 40 years. Not many things in the world of Major League Baseball have been contested so passionately, not even the 1919 Chicago White Sox who intentionally lost the World Series, better known as the Black Sox scandal. Professional baseball has a long and storied history with volumes of books, stories and articles written on the subject. In the movie *Bull Durham*, our hero, Crash Davis, played by Kevin Costner, gives a lengthy rant, but in the middle, takes a jab at the designated hitter, “…I believe there ought to be a constitutional amendment outlawing Astroturf and the designated hitter…” (Shelton, 1988)

In 1972, attendance, poor run production (offense), and the waning popularity of baseball over football put the owners of teams in a situation to rethink their strategies. They needed to come up with a way to put fans in the seats. Enter Oakland A’s owner, Charlie Finley. Ever the visionary, he proposed to remove the pitcher from the batting order because historically, pitchers are not good hitters. He proposed that in the pitcher’s place there should be a hitter that can produce results, a tenth man. (Gasper, 2013) In December 1972, at Major League Baseball’s winter meetings, Mr. Finley was able to convince a majority vote of 8-4 to use a designated hitter in a “three year experiment” in the 1973 baseball season. (Simpson, 2012; Schlossberg, 2013) Thus was born, rule 6.10(b) (1) which reads:

A hitter may be designated to bat for the starting pitcher and all subsequent pitchers in any game without otherwise affecting the status of the pitcher(s) in the game. A Designated Hitter for the pitcher, if any, must be selected prior to the game and must be included in the lineup cards presented to the Umpire-in-Chief. If a manager lists 10 players in his team’s lineup card, but fails to indicate one as a Designated Hitter, and an umpire or either manager (or designee of either manager who presents his team’s lineup card) notices the error before the Umpire-in-Chief calls “Play” to start the game, the Umpire-in-Chief shall direct the manager who had made the omission to designate which of the nine players, other than the pitcher, will be the Designated Hitter. (Major League Baseball, 2013, p.57-58)

April 6, 1973, New York Yankee, Ron Blomberg, stepped into the batter’s box and made history as the first designated hitter. He faced Luis Tiant, pitcher of the Boston Red Sox and drew a bases loaded walk also earning him the distinction of the first designated hitter with a run batted in. (Schlossberg, 2013; Gasper, 2013) The “three year experiment” has now found a 40 year home in the American League with no end in sight.

In Baumann’s (2013) article, “*An Emotional Diatribe against the Designated Hitter in the National League”*, he explains his disgust for the designated hitter. It is quite emotional to him as he is a National League fan. Baumann (2013) explains that the American and National League as a “house divided”, citing an excerpt from Abraham Lincoln’s famous debate with Stephen A. Douglas in 1858. He even goes onto compare the difference of the designated hitter to reading a book (National League) and then watching the movie (American League). Baumann (2013) states, “… you get more details and nuance… sometimes it drags… though sometimes having the storyline visualized… takes the fun out of it.” Baumann (2013) boasts all the reasons the National League and baseball in general should not have a designated hitter, but provides a shred of validity to using one by going into how it saves a pitcher from injuries while batting. Baumann (2013) goes onto compare pitchers to place kickers in football, citing they are, “specialists whose skills in one area excuse them from being required to participate in other aspects of the game.” Baumann (2013) finally concludes his tirade by saying he “hates” the designated hitter and that it “…represents everything that is wrong with baseball…”

In comparison, Jake Simpson, a sports columnist for *The Atlantic,* sees the designated hitter as a must for both leagues. Simpson, unlike Baumann, does not get caught up in rhetoric when explaining the need for the designated hitter. He introduces a plan for the need and then explains why it is necessary. In his article, “*Why Every Team in Baseball Should Use the Designated Hitter*”, Simpson (2012) explains that, with the realignment of leagues, interleague play will occur throughout the season instead of how was in the past when they would meet for a few weeks in the middle of the summer. Simpson (2012) asserts, “…bring the NL into the 21st century, put the DH in both leagues and let pitchers go back to spitting sunflower seeds on the bench when their team is up to bat.” Simpson (2012) declares that the designated hitter in both leagues will give aging hitters an opportunity in both leagues, a chance to further their careers.

An interesting column in *The Daily Illini* pits two student sports writers against one another in a point-counterpoint argument. In the article, not in favor of the designated hitter, there is sophomore Alex Roux. Roux (2013) calls into question that the designated hitter provides the American League a “competitive advantage” over the National League. Roux (2013) argues that the designated hitter affords the American League the luxury of claiming “high value players” like Albert Pujols from the National League and locking them into lengthy contracts that for all intents and purposes prohibit the player from ever going back to the National League.

In the counterpoint argument from junior sports columnist Sam Sherman (2013) declares that:

Baseball is one of the most unique sports that it is in between two leagues. There is one rule that is different, however. It provides each league its own personality, so to speak, and when teams from different leagues do play each other, it forces managers and players to adapt to a different style of play.

Sherman lends his view as more of a baseball enthusiast rather than a purist like Roux. Sherman (2013) states that when pitchers come to the plate in the National League, it is a safe bet to assume they are either going to sacrifice bunt or strike out. Finally, Sherman (2013) argues that the home run is typically one of the most exciting plays in baseball.

 In the last line of Bull Durham, our heroine, Annie Savoy says, “Walt Whitman once said, ‘I see great things in baseball. It’s our game, the American game. It will repair our losses and be a blessing to us.’ You could look it up.” (Shelton, 1988) Like so many other things in this great game of baseball, there is dispute as to whether Whitman actually wrote this passage or not, but in the end, it is our game. When those glorious boys of summer suit up and take the field, all feels right in the world. Like it or hate it, the designated hitter is here to stay. Home runs are an exciting part of the game, and it is fun to see a slugger step up to the plate and hit a fastball 450 feet over the fence, off of the opposing pitcher. The fans want to see the home run, they want offense and that is what puts fans in the seats. Although the designated hitter is a 40 year old controversial concept, it is still a large part of America’s past time. No one playing the game today knows anything except the designated hitter rule. The pitcher is a specialist in his craft and is well suited for that position. Besides, who wants to see a pitcher hit?

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