

The Stroller

Baseball: Stars go from rags to riches

By G. EDGAR

It wasn't too surprising to hear a group of old-time baseball fans who gathered for the Tigers' opening game expressed deep concern over the great changes that have taken place in dealings between club owners and players.

They had just read in the public prints that Rick Leach, the star quarterback of the University of Michigan football team and hard-hitting outfielder on the Wolverines' baseball team, admitted he was waiting to see how much any major league team offered him before deciding whether to give up his senior year of eligibility.

"Can you imagine a young fellow who hasn't finished college making a statement like that?" frowned Frank Henderson, an old-timer who goes back to the days of Ty Cobb. "Why, he would have been laughed at. And it is just that attitude which may bring about the demise of the major leagues as we know them today."

While allowing his emotion to run a bit rampant, Old Frank pointed out that the Tigers paid only \$700 for Cobb, and he is still considered the greatest player who ever lived.

AS OLD FRANK spoke, several listeners, including The Stroller, recalled many cases where the young players were so eager to get a trial in the major leagues that they would walk miles to get it.

The Stroller recalled that Jimmy Fox, one of the greats on Connie Mack's Philadelphia Athletics, walked from Easton, Md. to Philadelphia and never asked a penny. He just wanted to show Connie he could play.

And don't forget that Babe Ruth came out of an orphan's home in Baltimore and the Boston Red Sox got him for little or nothing.

The same with Lou Gehrig, the famous "Iron Man" of the New York Yankees who played 2,130 consecutive games until he finally took himself out of the lineup right here in Detroit in 1939.

"And the salaries they are paying these fellows are almost unbelievable," Old Frank went on. "When I read that some of the players are demanding salaries that run into the millions and then they get paid on a deferred scale over a 10-year period, I just can't believe it. Why, I remember Cobb holding out for what I was told was \$27,000 and we thought it was outrageous that he got it."

"I honestly believe that unless the owners pull in their horns, some will go bankrupt. If that happened, then away goes major league baseball. In fact, I hear there are six teams on the verge now, with the season just beginning."

FRANK'S REMARKS brought to mind several cases The Stroller had seen when he was a regular denizen of the press box at Tiger Stadium.

There was Hal Newhouse, the great southpaw hurler, who signed with the Tigers one night and regretted it the next—will because of a shiny new automobile.

For years, "Wish" Egan, the lovable Tiger scout, had watched Hal on the high school diamonds and sandlots. Then came an evening in the Newhouse home when he got the consent of Hal's parents to have their son sign a Tiger contract.

All went fine. Hal was going to pitch right at home. Then the following evening, another scout, this one from Cleveland, pulled up in front of the Newhouse home in a fine looking automobile.

"That's a great looking car you have," young Hal is supposed to have said. The scout looked at him and countered: "That's not my car. That will be yours if you sign this Cleveland contract."

No Hal was more disappointed than young Hal that he couldn't sign because he was committed to the Tigers. And no one knows what he received for signing—if anything.

A YEAR OR two later, when Hal was reaching stardom, the Tigers, at the insistence of Walter O. Briggs, then the owner, signed Dick Wakefield, a star on the University of Michigan team and paid him a bonus of \$52,000. It was the first such bonus the Tigers had ever paid.

Came an afternoon when, with Newhouse on the mound, Dick misjudged a fly ball and allowed the winning run to score. As the players walked dejectedly into the dressing room, New-

house, an emotional player at all times, picked up a chair and fired it against the wall, screaming, "That's your \$52,000 bonus baby."

AS THE STROLLER read of the fabulous salaries now being demanded and paid with the players having agents to represent them, he vividly recalled how Harry Heilmann, the Tiger rightfielder, dealt with Frank J. Navin, the Tiger owner back in the '20s.

Harry won the batting title three

times in alternate years. He was a prize player. At the time, he lived in California in the off-season but returned to Detroit during Christmas holidays.

During these visits, he always called on Navin to wish him a merry Christmas. Then he'd ask, "Are the con-

tracts ready?" "Just got them from the printer," Navin told him, and placed one on the desk for him to read. Heilmann didn't bother reading it. He just signed it in blank and, smiling, wished the Tiger owner a happy holiday season. And he always got a raise.

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