

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

WITH A NEW FOREWORD

MAKING THE PLAY

HOW TO GET THE BEST OF BASEBALL BACK

DAVE WINFIELD

WITH MICHAEL LEVIN

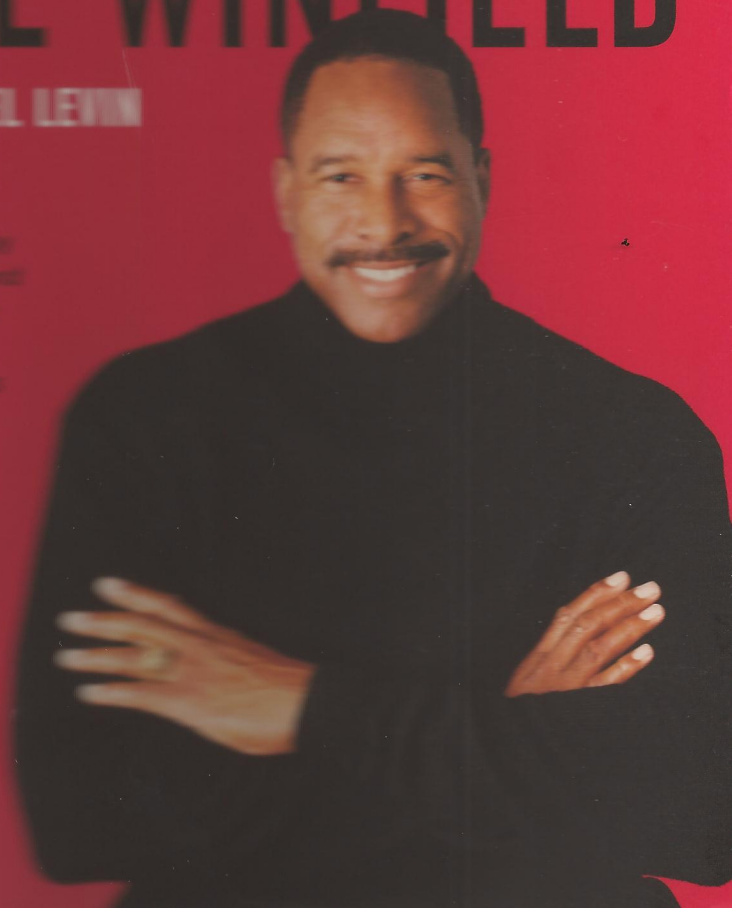
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Dave Winfield's play
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so, it turns out, are
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(PLAYING MAGAZINE)

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PREVIOUS TITLES:
DROPPING THE BALL



CHAPTER 1

Major League Baseball

I am constantly asking my friends inside Major League Baseball and the Players Association the same question little kids ask their parents during a long car trip: "Are we there yet?" Have we reached an amicable working relationship between those on the field and those in the front office? So far, the best answer I've received is, "It has definitely improved, but we are still not there yet."

If the game of baseball is to regain its position as the national pastime, if Baseball United is ever to get off the ground, the impetus for change has to come from the commissioner and Major League Baseball. That's because most of the power and money to fuel such change reside with the commissioner's office. But it has to be accomplished through a partnership, and the commissioner's partner has to be the Major League Baseball Players Association and the individual players. Neither side can do it alone. While I hope that every team, every player, every youth baseball coach, every fan, every town and city, and every media resource and corporation will ultimately become involved in the initiative, baseball is simply too big an entity to be transformed from the ground up.

Some changes may take place at the grassroots level, but if baseball is serious about ensuring its future, then direction,

motivation, and leadership have to come from the top. And when it comes to Major League Baseball, the buck stops with the commissioner.

The most important thing that the baseball commissioner can do is to restore a sense of trust between owners and players. Baseball's labor history over the past forty years has been anything but smooth. Until Curt Flood challenged the reserve clause in the late 1960s, baseball teams essentially owned a player for the life of his major league career. In legal terms, the relationship of a team owner to an individual player in those days could have been described as *adhesion*: One side (the owners) had virtually all the bargaining power, while the other side (the players) was stuck with whatever the owners might offer. It's important to remember that the Curt Flood case created the schism between players and owners. However, it's naïve to assume that labor and management have only been at odds for the past twenty years. It goes back much further than that.

Baseball history is replete with accounts of players who came off championship years only to find themselves confronted with take-it-or-leave-it contracts that offered a minimum raise, no raise at all, or even a *reduction* in salary from the previous year. Until thirty years ago, there was no such thing as a player's agent. Before the 1970s, a player "negotiated" his contract by appearing at the office of the wealthy, imperious team owner, who handed him a pen and a contract with a number typed in. The player's options were to sign the contract or to risk demotion, either to the minor leagues or to some awful competing team. In other words, players had no leverage at all.

In 1966, Los Angeles Dodgers pitchers Don Drysdale and Sandy Koufax made baseball history with a joint holdout that led to salary breakthroughs for both of them. But even these two pitchers, commonly ranked among baseball's best ever, could not be certain that their holdout would lead to any financial benefits at all. They had no idea whether the Dodgers would give

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them more money, or inform them that their services were no longer required. Since their contracts contained the reserve clause, which bound players to teams for life, Koufax and Drysdale could not have put in their time and waited to become free agents. The concept of free agency was still a decade away. The legal term *adhesion* comes from the same root from which we derive the word *adhesive*, and it has exactly the same meaning. Even two of the greatest pitchers of their era—or any era—were stuck.

Things changed when Curt Flood told the St. Louis Cardinals that he would not accept a trade to Philadelphia. His refusal to report to the Phillies set in motion a chain of events that eventually led to the United States Supreme Court ruling on his case. It took four long years from the moment when Flood first vetoed the trade until his right—and the rights of all baseball players—to refuse trades and have a say in his career were granted. In that time, Flood's baseball career suffered enormously. He was the target of vituperative hate mail and was looked upon as a renegade by the media and by fans. Nonetheless, Flood was a groundbreaker, paving the way for all baseball players—and perhaps even all professional athletes—to economic freedom.

A few years before Flood's case began to wend its way slowly through the courts, a new figure emerged on the baseball labor relations scene. In 1966, Marvin Miller, a former negotiator for the steel workers' union, became the leader of the newly formed Major League Players Association, and took his message of players' rights from team to team during the 1968 spring training. Though soft-spoken, Miller was articulate and effective in organizing and galvanizing this group of men to speak up and ask for their rights. In fact, Miller was tough, feisty, and, to the owners' way of thinking, a cancer on the game of baseball. Players quickly came around to Miller's way of thinking: that they were entitled to the same kind of economic rights for which he had fought so hard for his steelworkers.

Miller's leadership and strength were formidable, and he chal-

lenged baseball's prevailing ethos, which gave all of the power and rights to the owners. By the time he stepped down in 1983 (much to the relief of the owners, no doubt), baseball players enjoyed unprecedented freedom and were making record amounts of money. I was there through every bit of it—the smoke-filled collective-bargaining sessions, with both sides displaying frayed nerves and not-so-subtle contempt for each other. In a matter of years, the power had shifted.

That shift did not come without a cost, however. From 1972 until 1995, baseball endured no fewer than eight strikes or lock-outs, the last of which wiped away the last few months of 1995 and that year's World Series. Few people remember that Ken Griffey Jr. had been on a tear that season to break Roger Maris's then-prevailing single-season home-run record (and without the aid of andro or other performance-enhancing substances, legal or otherwise). As Griffey ruefully remarked, "I picked a bad year to have a good year."

Baseball's labor strife hurt more than Griffey—it hurt the game itself. Fans, who had watched with increasing wariness as the major league players' agreement expired every three or four years, deserted the game in droves after the debacle of a canceled postseason, returning to the game only in 1998, when a friendly rivalry between Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa over who would break Maris's record first drew interest back to baseball. A dozen years after that canceled World Series, baseball's popularity has returned, due in no small part to the Sosa-McGwire home-run derby and the many new beautiful, family-friendly ballparks that have sprung up around the country.

Other innovations have increased the game's popularity, most notably the multitiered playoff system. It might be anathema to baseball purists, but having three divisions and a wild-card winner in each league means that more teams—and thus more fans—remain involved in pennant races, often right down to the last week of the season. Baseball playoffs are well attended and

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capture the attention of a large national viewing audience. The reduction in the length of games, the introduction of the World Baseball Classic, new ballparks, and extraordinary TV contracts have renewed public interest in baseball. So the game is definitely doing a lot of things right, despite its repeated missteps year after year after year.

That brings us to the present day. The memories of almost forty years of labor unrest, strikes, collusion, lockouts, and congressional drug hearings—all of which received extensive media coverage—have left the game with a bitter legacy of mistrust between the owners on one side, the Players Association on the other, and the office of the commissioner in the middle.

Yes, it's vital for the commissioner to be up-front on the many issues that confront the game today, most notably illegal drugs, the marketing of baseball around the world, and other pressing issues. But the most important thing the commissioner can do is establish a level of trust that leads to a true working relationship between the owners and the players. There is absolutely nothing more important for the future of the game. To paraphrase Abraham Lincoln, "A house divided cannot stand." Although both camps are strong, I say unequivocally, *the game cannot be all it can be until both sides work together*—in joint marketing, joint advertising, and joint business ventures. An industry with such a volatile labor-management relationship will have a very difficult time competing with other sports entertainment industries, and that is exactly the fate that has befallen baseball over the last few decades. As I write, the players and owners have taken the first step toward concluding collective bargaining before the deadline, and have done so without launching public volleys at each other.

It's no coincidence that as labor unrest and mistrust between owners and players has risen, fan interest in the game has diminished. From my behind-the-scenes discussions with executives in both camps, things have gotten better, but they are far from where they need to be. There's no other major sport where

owners and players find themselves at loggerheads so much of the time, with such a deep reservoir of mistrust between them. (The only possible exception is hockey, a sad comparison, indeed, given the severity of that sport's problems.) Think about it: The NFL and the NBA, for all their imperfections, have a remarkable record of labor peace. And when was the last time you ever heard of the PGA locking out Tiger Woods from the U.S. Open?

It rarely happens in those other sports, and yet it happens in baseball, year after year. It's easy to say that the game is doing fine—records are being set every day, and not just on the playing field. Every year, teams reach new records in terms of their overall value, with some teams and ancillary businesses topping the billion-dollar mark. Television revenue continues to set new records. Advertising and sponsorship revenues are soaring over \$5 billion, and growing. Success often breeds complacency, a sense that if it isn't broke, why fix it?

And yet, for years the overwhelming majority of Major League Baseball teams have been crying that they are losing money. They haven't opened their books to the public, so fans have no way of verifying their claims of destitution and corporate poverty. But if the teams really are that broke, wouldn't it make sense for somebody to step in and try to fix something?

I hope that the commissioner's office will embrace the Baseball United campaign this book advocates for Major League Baseball. Without cooperative support from MLB management and the players, the campaign is doomed to failure, no matter how many enlightened, forward-thinking individuals line up behind it. Support for any major shift in the way baseball thinks about itself, markets itself, and looks to its own future can only succeed if those who hold the reins want it to succeed.

Therefore, without the commissioner solidly behind a campaign for change in MLB, nothing will happen. The media would see the whole initiative as little more than baseless wishful thinking, or smoke and mirrors—the fond hope of one retired

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Hall of Famer. So maximum support from the commissioner's office is the fundamental prerequisite for this plan to catch fire and make a difference. And yet, what will happen if the commissioner attempts to launch Baseball United without the full support and commitment, involvement, and, above all, trust of the players? It won't work.

Without the full support of the Players Association and the players themselves, the campaign would still be doomed to failure. Unless the commissioner's office first works to regain the trust of the players and establishes a mutually beneficial, cooperative platform, it's unthinkable that the players would embrace a plan they might well see as a force-fed public relations move.

We live in an era where everyone is incredibly media savvy, from the youngest fan to the most veteran member of the sports media, from the players in the dugout to the owners in their luxury boxes. They know what's real and they know what's a publicity stunt. There's no fooling anyone in today's information-saturated environment. Unless the commissioner can truly enlist the cooperation of the Players Association and the players themselves, there's no future for any of the plans I mention in this book. And there's no possibility of the baseball establishment taking a program from the commissioner's office seriously unless the fundamental issue of trust between MLB owners and the players is addressed. There has to be a bridge and a solid platform upon which to work.

I'm not talking about reestablishing a bond that became tarnished over time. I'm talking about creating something that has never existed in modern baseball. The commissioner is charged with representing the best interests of baseball, and yet historically the commissioner and his office have stood up more readily for the best interests of the owners than those of the players.

We're talking about a major paradigm shift, not a return to imaginary halcyon days when everybody in the baseball industry got along just fine. Let's not tell lies—they never did get along just

fine. Not now, not when I was playing, and not fifty years before that, when Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis was banishing members of the "Black Sox" for their role in throwing the 1919 World Series. Before 1947, blacks were not allowed to play, and Latinos had to have light skin to slip in. The owners and the players have never "gotten along." This does not mean, however, that they cannot recognize their common interest in a future where everyone thrives and wins, and forge a new path together in this new century.

In late October 2006, we saw that both sides recognized what was at stake, and resolved their monetary issues even before the deadline without issuing negative commentary. Progress is indeed being made. Now that they are married, how will the honeymoon and living arrangements work out?

Baseball simply has too much to lose. The experience of the NHL's lost 2004–2005 season ought to be a cautionary tale to both sides. Stubbornness, egotism, and perhaps even downright foolishness on the part of hockey's owners and players resulted in the loss of an entire season, hundreds of millions of dollars of revenue, and a considerable part of the fan base that may never be coaxed back to the game. That's sports management shortsightedness at its worst. As I was writing this chapter it was not unthinkable, given the current level of mistrust between players and owners, that instead of a new collective-bargaining agreement, we might have ended up with a collective suicide pact that knocks the game down so hard, it can't get up. You could have argued that baseball has too much at stake to let something like that happen, but you could have made the same argument about hockey in the weeks before its lost season finally slipped away. As the limbo singers used to ask, "How low can you go?"

I hope that baseball never has to discover the answer to that question. I have a great deal of personal regard for Bud Selig, the commissioner of Major League Baseball, and I wouldn't want anything in this book to detract from my respect for him or

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from the respect I have for the Players Association's Don Fehr, for that matter. The problem is that Commissioner Selig operates in a media environment that thrives on scandal and disunity. There is a sense of endless crisis befalling the game today, whether the headlines involve yet another ballplayer suspended for steroid use or any of the other ills that plague the game. On this front, Commissioner Selig will have to be proactive with Don Fehr to build that bridge to higher ground.

I think the commissioner does an admirable job of handling the steady flow of crises with which he is forced to deal. And yet, there's more to dealing with the media than simply fending off crisis after crisis. When I was playing for the Yankees and living in the harsh glare of the attention of the New York media, I learned that dealing with the media is a lot like boxing. There was offense, defense, and there was counterpunching. The defensive side of dealing with the media has to do with handling what comes at you, coping with allegations and scandals as best you can while recognizing that the public is sick and tired of downbeat news, despite the media's endless appetite for stories that cast the game in a negative light. Baseball needs to take the offensive, not just fend off those blows and get in the occasional counterpunch at the media. To my mind, taking the offense with the media means presenting a new leadership approach—what I'm talking about with regard to Baseball United.

In a perfect world, the commissioner's office, with the assistance and support of the Players Association, would use the Baseball United program as a fulcrum for shaping media and fan perceptions of the sport and for changing the way baseball addresses its in-house business. You can't sell the media hype, and you can't get them to run public relations stories as news. And yet, there are so many ways that Baseball United can generate hard news that casts baseball in a positive light. The best interests of baseball require us not only to defend and counterpunch, but to take the offensive in the war for the public's attention.

It wasn't too many years ago that stock car racing was ridiculed as the proprietary interest of beer-guzzling good ol' boys in remote pockets of the South. Now, NASCAR routinely fills its tracks with crowds of one hundred fifty thousand or more. In early 2006, a televised *rainout* of a NASCAR race outdrew a nationally televised, late-season NBA contest between the Los Angeles Lakers and the Cleveland Cavaliers, featuring the marquee matchup of Kobe Bryant versus LeBron James. A rain-out—those cars weren't even moving around the track! And yet more people tuned in to watch the rain fall on Talladega than to watch Kobe and LeBron work their magic on the court.

Take a guess what the fastest-growing sport in America is today. It's not what you think. It's not baseball, that's for sure. It's not even football or basketball or auto racing.

It's bull riding.

Think I'm joking? I'm not. Bull riding, although small in comparison, packs arenas from Las Vegas to Madison Square Garden. Corporate sponsorship is going through the roof. So is TV exposure. Bull riding, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, is the fastest-growing sport in America. And that's no bull!

The point of all this is that in the world of sports, as in every other aspect of life, nothing remains stagnant. A few generations ago, baseball was the king of sports. Even the powerful NBA, which rose to preeminence with stars like Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, and Larry Bird, finds itself taking a backseat to stock car racing. That's why I am trying to make the point that even though the game of baseball today is successful, the base of its success is hollowed out and getting smaller every year, while more media-savvy sports and entertainment events are leaching fans' mind share—and revenue—away from the once-proud national pastime.

Twenty years ago, President Ronald Reagan stood before the Berlin Wall and issued a challenge to the leader of the Soviet Union. "President Gorbachev," he famously said, "tear down

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that wall!" Commissioner Selig, I urge you and Don Fehr to do nothing less. The future of the game depends on it, and it just makes good business sense.

As we discussed in the prologue, some of the key issues facing baseball have to do with race and economics. If the commissioner's office is truly in charge of the game of baseball, then surely the commissioner must recognize the fact that the number of African American ballplayers is continuing to diminish. There are several reasons for this decline, some of which (i.e., diversity in business relationships and human resources) the commissioner has the power to do something about.

With regard to players in Major League Baseball, Commissioner Selig can do something about the disparity of opportunities among three groups of prospects: inner-city African Americans, Latin American ballplayers, and white American kids from comfortable backgrounds. The top one hundred Latin ballplayers last year earned more than half a billion dollars in salary, a large portion of which goes back into the communities. I begrudge no one his success, but what does that mean for inner-city communities in the United States—the very places that used to be hotbeds for fresh talent? Organized baseball is spending millions and millions of dollars developing talent in Latin America, Japan, and even Australia. But how much is organized baseball really doing back home, and is organized baseball providing enough support for adequate baseball fields, equipment, and coaching for the next generation of urban and/or African American players?

A simple look around any inner-city neighborhood would tell you that the answer is no. Surely there is much more that the commissioner's office could be doing to ensure that young people, even those from economically deprived backgrounds, have an equal opportunity to fall in love with the game of baseball, and learn what it takes to compete in the game at the highest levels.

In addition, even though they perform better than the NFL and

NBA, the commissioner's office and MLB could use more diversity in their management ranks—not just of color, but also of age and gender, so as to be more in touch with the game and its fans. Input from youth at this juncture is critical. The key advisors and decision makers tend to be attorneys and older individuals, mostly from the same socioeconomic stratum who are not as in tune with youth culture, music, and entertainment.

Another thought: Why not have special made-for-TV events, like the ESPYs or the Heisman Trophy award ceremony, for baseball's most important honors and events—the June draft, and the Cy Young, Rookie of the Year, and Most Valuable Player awards? This would be a great way to have the focus remain on baseball even after the season has ended. The ESPYs now have a golf tournament, special banquets, and a multitude of other made-for-media events. What does baseball do to announce its MVPs and Cy Young winners? It just sends out a press release. Where's the red carpet? Where are the klieg lights? Where are the players? More important, where are the fans? All of these elements remain on the sidelines until there is a better working relationship.

I have no illusions that the commissioner of baseball and the head of the Players Association will suddenly embrace Baseball United or each other. I was even approached by a colleague who expressed concern that I would be attacked in the media or marginalized for voicing my ideas. I'm not afraid of that. If not me, who? If not now, when?

Revenue sharing is working but the players want MLB teams to ensure they will spend some of the money and not just take profits without investing in the team. In his recent book *In the Best Interests of Baseball? The Revolutionary Reign of Bud Selig*, sports economist Andrew Zimbalist points out that practically everything the commissioner of baseball does comes back to affect the players in some way. Take the issue of revenue sharing. Under this practice, large-market teams agree to bestow some financial

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largesse on their less well-to-do brethren. The idea is to ensure, or at least create the possibility for, competitive balance. You can only go so far in terms of keeping your allegiance of fans if some market teams are all but shut out of the postseason for decades at a time, and that's certainly been the case. From a player's point of view, what could be wrong with revenue sharing, since it theoretically permits all teams—and therefore all players—a shot at World Series glory?

The answer is subtle but powerful. Zimbalist gives the example of a player who might be worth \$20 million to a team over the course of a season. That's because more people would buy season tickets, individual tickets, jerseys, beer, programs, parking, you name it—and it adds up to \$20 million in revenue for the team. The economic value of that player to his team becomes a key factor in determining just how much the team can offer him in salary. It works out, on average, that teams pay their players approximately 50 percent of the revenue they generate. So an individual who earns a team \$20 million will likely end up with a salary of approximately \$10 million.

You don't have to have a good year on the field to have a good year at the bank. Don Fehr was quoted in an AP story that posted on Yahoo! Sports on February 9, 2006, as saying, "There are teams in Major League Baseball that receive more money from central baseball from the national television contract and revenue sharing than they spend on payrolls." That's before they sell a ticket, or a hot dog, or a beer, or a parking space. We have to be concerned about the incentives of this system.

A team that makes \$20 million in revenue because it has a particular star player is now obliged to share some of its wealth with other teams, including those that cannot or will not pay more money to put stars in their lineups. Let's say that the team that did hire that superstar ends up with \$20 million worth of revenue, just as expected. Under revenue sharing, that team will now have to take \$10 million and ship it off to a small-market team. Well, if a

player can bring in \$20 million but half of that will be transferred to another franchise, then the real economic value of the player to his team is just \$10 million, the amount left after revenue sharing is deducted. If the team is only going to pay about half of his value as salary, how much would the team be willing to pay him? Five million dollars.

So even the decision to institute revenue sharing ends up hurting the players. If a player is worth less to a franchise because of revenue sharing, count on the fact that the team is going to offer him less in salary.

Makes me glad they didn't have revenue sharing when I was playing!

Despite this imperfection, I believe revenue sharing is a positive step toward creating competitive balance. It could only have taken place under a commissioner like Bud Selig, who has the ear of all thirty team owners because of his generally likable nature, his consensus-building capabilities, and his desire to work with the teams to make baseball succeed.

Zimbalist also points out that the commissioner's office was created as a reaction to the infamous Black Sox scandal of 1919, in which players on the Chicago White Sox threw the World Series in order to receive payment from gamblers. The integrity of the game was on the line, so the owners acted to create a commissioner who could restore confidence in the game. For decades, thanks to baseball's antitrust exemption and limited competition from other sports, baseball was pretty much the only game in town.

It wasn't until 1958 that pro football first became a factor in American society. The NBA really didn't take off until the eighties, with the advent of the rivalry between Magic Johnson and Larry Bird, the ascendancy of one Michael Jordan, and the marketing genius of NBA commissioner David Stern. Since baseball had the American appetite for sports all but locked up for the first sixty years of the twentieth century, the commissioner of baseball did not need to think like a businessman. He simply needed to be

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the symbol of integrity, the guarantor of public trust in the game. He did not need to represent the players at all. He was simply responsible for making sure that fans thought the game was on the level.

The key dilemma presented by the commissioner's office is that the position was created by the owners to serve "the best interests of baseball"—but only as defined by the owners. Neither the players nor the fans had any say in the selection of the commissioner, and the commissioner could be fired by the owners at any time if he incurred their wrath. He was always the owners' man, plain and simple.

So Commissioner Selig inherited this heralded position laden with the distrust of the players, since many commissioners of baseball in fact saw themselves as the representative of the owners and were often outspoken about this perceived role.

Many times in the last twenty years, events have made the relationship between the players and the owners/commissioner contentious and acrimonious. These challenges have included baseball's experience with collusion in the 1980s, when the teams essentially agreed not to offer large salaries to the best players available on the free-agent market. The attempted imposition of a drug-testing policy without the consent of the Players Association was another such flash point.

Improving the relationship between owners and players will be no small task. But if anyone can do it, Bud Selig and Don Fehr can. They both recognize that the interests of baseball are not served when its major constituencies are deeply at odds. They both recognize the importance of the "league think" attitude—the idea of putting the league's interests ahead of individual interests—that the NFL mastered under Commissioners Burt Bell, Pete Rozelle, and Paul Tagliabue. Baseball has made its joint financial contributions to the 9/11 fund, and to a degree to the Katrina disaster. Their most successful partnership was the World Baseball Classic in 2006.

Dave Winfield

It's time for the historic animosity between baseball's labor and management to end. This requires more than just labor peace. It's time to view baseball as a unique entity in which cooperation rather than competition or collusion is the rule. It's time to establish a commitment toward an issue that brings baseball back to the fans and once again captures their love and respect—this is what I am talking about. And a transformation like this has to come from the top.

CHAPTER 2

The Owners

They call them the “Lords of Baseball” because they answer to almost no one but themselves. Much has been written in recent years about baseball owners’ attempts to milk the maximum amount of revenues while crying abject poverty at the same time. Is it fair for a team like the Tampa Bay Devil Rays or the Pittsburgh Pirates to minimize its payroll, putting a barely major league-level team on the field while charging major league prices for tickets, concessions, and parking, and still collect luxury-tax money from wealthier teams? For a long time, the ownership of the Minnesota Twins, my home team growing up, was notorious for paying its ballplayers as little as possible. Should teams today be permitted to put a second-rate team on the field so as to maximize revenues? What should the owners be required to do in order to remain competitive, and in order to keep the faith of their teams’ fan bases?

At the opposite extreme is George Steinbrenner, who commonly “sets the market” for free agents, and for signing players at all levels, by lavishing cash on the ballplayers he covets. The Yankees are still number one in overall team payroll. Is “Steinbrenner money” creating disparities between the haves and have-nots? How far can a small-market team really go when it has to

compete against free-spending teams like the Yankees, Red Sox, and other pennant-winning teams of the last decade?

Then there is the question of who is watching those players perform. Major League Baseball has documented a steady and severe decline in the number of African American spectators. And yet, baseball has done almost nothing about it to this point. The sport appears to be kissing off an entire generation of black fans, leaving a lot of money on the table and disaffecting the parents of some potentially great players of the future. People question the attitude of baseball's owners and the commissioner's office, an attitude that seems to be, "Why bother marketing to African Americans? We've got plenty of other fans."

Even as I write, there actually is movement and action—it's just been slow in coming, and it hasn't been inclusive or comprehensive. This is unacceptable. In my role as vice president and senior advisor of the San Diego Padres, I have introduced a marketing plan to promote baseball to the urban and African American communities, and to increase baseball's connections to the minority business community, with concessions participation and employment. *We are nowhere close to where we want to be or should be.* I can see that people are afraid to break out of their comfort zone, but they need to. Every team should be taking similar steps. Otherwise, we will lose a generation of urban and African American parents and children.

Because of my experiences in Major League Baseball, I can give a view of the top from both camps—the owners and the Players Association. There are risks attached to being a Major League Baseball team owner anywhere outside of New York, Boston, or Chicago. Think about it: A team owner is a business person who works his entire life to build a fortune, in the process becoming a legend in his industry, if not a household name. After leaping all the hurdles to get to this position, he now finds himself blamed for everything from the high cost of player salaries to steroids, not to mention the cost of a beer at the stadium.

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In some ways, he can do no right. If he fails to sign expensive free agents, either because he does not believe they are worth the salaries they command or because he has a strategy of utilizing homegrown talent, he is vilified by the local media and the fans for being a tightwad. If, on the other hand, he spends a small fortune on the salary of a few free agents who fail to perform at Hall of Fame levels, he gets criticized yet again, this time for selecting poorly. Even if his picks do perform well, he still comes under the microscope because he has to raise the price of tickets, food, and drink at the ballpark in order to pay for those big free-agent salaries.

He is truly damned if he does and damned if he doesn't.

He comes under intense suspicion from fellow team owners for every move he makes. If he is spending a lot of money on free agents, the other owners criticize him for "failing to hold the line," a line they themselves hold only when it is convenient for them. When he does not spend much money on his team, his fellow owners accuse him of pocketing revenue-sharing money instead of using it for its true purpose, to help create competitive balance on the field.

It's not as though all baseball owners rush to embrace the new guys. In point of fact, owners are far more divided than many fans realize, along big-market/small-market lines and with regard to other philosophical and business differences. For the commissioner of baseball, riding herd on these unruly millionaires and billionaires is a lot like herding cats.

At the same time, the owners cannot be said to have played their roles as guardians of the game in a perfect manner. Who can forget collusion, when, in the mid-1980s, the owners decided unilaterally not to hire any free agents, so as to eliminate the bargaining power of the players? The strategy backfired and caused deep, festering wounds. The Players Association certainly can't forget that episode no matter who's in charge of the union.

Once you get away from Boston and the two New York teams,

the rest of the league operates on a relatively tight budget. The Padres this year, for example, have to compete on a budget of \$70+ million for player payroll and now a mortgage on a great new ballpark. They simply can't afford to wave the checkbook, Steinbrenner-style, at every free agent who comes along (as much as we would like to). There are also imposed guidelines from Major League Baseball regarding EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest, Tax and Debt Amortization) and debt reduction that teams are governed by as well. Of course, the fans love Steinbrenner and there are more New York Yankee fans than for any other ball club in Major League Baseball, but the rest of the country would like to see a more level playing field, where more teams can compete for the championship each year. This policy seems to be working, as the range of teams that have won the World Series in the past years is wider. Baseball can now claim the playing field is more level than in other major sports.

The owners also receive a great deal of criticism and blame for the fact that baseball lacked a comprehensive drug policy for so many years. Many believe that the owners should have known what was going on in their clubhouses—which players were getting big and strong practically overnight, which players had “personal trainers” of questionable morality, and so on. The reasoning is that since the owners viewed their best players as the financial foundation of their franchises, they were not about to question the inflated performances of their players. Therefore, the question that remains is whether baseball owners were willing to violate the integrity of the game in exchange for the possibility of one or more winning seasons.

I don't think it's entirely fair to single out the owners for the fact that baseball lacked a comprehensive drug policy for so many years. Even if all the owners had wanted such a program, the players' union remained adamantly against it, claiming that the mere existence of a drug-testing program was an unconstitutional violation of privacy and also a presumption of guilt on their part.

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It's hard to know which owners would have demanded a drug-treatment policy if the Players Association had been more open to one, and it's hard to know which owners might not have cared.

I think everyone in Major League Baseball, owners and players alike, wishes they could have the last ten years back, with regard to the effects of steroids, HGH, and amphetamines on the game. Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. If the owners knew then what we know now, they would have been much more aggressive about policing even their superstars. If they knew what was being done in the dark, they would have forbidden the proliferation of drug culture in the sport. It's not just the integrity of the game, that all-important intangible, that has been sullied as a result of the drug mess. The bodies of the superstars themselves, and the bodies of many a marginal player, were pretty much destroyed by the very drugs that gave them a real or perceived power boost.

I haven't read Jose Canseco's book *Juiced* because I honestly just don't want to, but I understand that he says something to the effect that drugs are here to stay and that they will actually enhance the quality of the game for players and fans. I just laughed when I heard that. I don't see that at all. There's always a bell curve of players—some who will take drugs no matter what, some who won't no matter what, and the broad swath of players in the middle who aren't quite sure what's best for them, their bodies, or their careers. I hope that those players in the middle refuse to listen to Mr. Canseco and eschew unnatural means of increasing their musculature, their playing statistics, or their contracts and risk their long-term health and freedom.

Older people have "assisted living." I think today we've been witnessing the era of the "assisted home run." It's never a completely clean fit to take statistics from one decade and compare them with statistics of players of another decade, but this whole business of steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs throws all of baseball's statistics out of whack. And we've now heard that baseball statistics are history. We've sullied our connec-

tion to history and our past. This is why the game has fallen off its pedestal.

When I was playing, drugs were much more “under the radar.” Players were taking amphetamines or “greenies” in order to keep their energy up, not in order to transform their physiques or gain extraordinary power. They were taking stimulants not unlike an office worker drinking that extra cup of coffee to get through the afternoon. I’m not condoning drug use, not by a long shot. I never took drugs myself. I never felt I needed to. I can proudly say that I accomplished all my feats of excellence cleanly, and entered the Hall of Fame unblemished.

The owners know that it’s the stars who hit the home runs who bring the fans out to the ballparks. What owner would knowingly settle for a couple of years of extra production from a star, realizing that the price was the star’s future health, as well as the heated public debate of all those interested in baseball—the media backlash, the embarrassment of congressional and national scrutiny? Yes, there’s no doubt in my mind that if the owners could have the last ten years back, they would be much more aggressive in policing baseball, and even their own locker rooms.

The good news today is that just about everyone in baseball recognizes the damage that drugs have caused, and everybody from the Players Association to the owners to the commissioner’s office now seems to be on the same page about the importance of tackling the drug problem. A firm drug policy (one of the strongest in professional sports) is now up there with mom, the flag, and Chevrolet—it’s something that everybody’s for, and that’s a good thing. My point is that it’s not fair to blame the owners alone for a situation that everyone in baseball tolerated and used for their own success, each for their own reasons.

As long as we’re talking about performance-enhancing drugs, I’ll share with you very briefly what I would have done had I played in such an era: I wouldn’t have taken them, pure and simple. I’ve been out in front on the drug issue for twenty years, ever

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since 1987, when I published *Turn It Around: There's No Room Here for Drugs*, my book on youth drug abuse and prevention strategies. My career was based on faith in my own abilities, to be good or bad on my own—they call that “naked.” Back in my day, we weren't talking about performance-enhancing drugs. Instead, the issue was marijuana and cocaine, which could accurately be described as performance-detracting drugs. There were a few guys who “blew up” over the winter, looking buff with ten more pounds of muscle, but they weren't the top players in the game and it didn't sway people in MLB. If I didn't get involved with those drugs, I certainly would not have gotten involved with anything as risky and unproven as steroids. Instead, I would have been angry—if not outspoken—about players having a monstrous advantage by cheating—using illegal performance-enhancing drugs—affecting my ability to obtain a good contract because my drug-free performance didn't stack up to their inflated statistics.

Sometimes people ask me what I would have done had I known that a team member was “on the juice.” As a player, I occasionally had the opportunity to act as confidant and discuss the issue with a teammate who had some sort of drug problem. On some of the teams for whom I played, there were guys with histories of substance abuse. My message to them was always the same: “You've got to take care of yourself. It's your life. You've got family. You can get confidential help. They are looking to bust users and high-profile players. We're trying to win over here.” I can't say whether my individual interest in them or my intervention helped. It is certainly more effective to have a broad top-down policy in place to eradicate and prevent drug use.

Now that performance-enhancing drugs—at least the detectable ones—are on the decline in both the majors and minors (the testing policy was first imposed in the minor leagues), and once the George Mitchell investigation is completed, the conversation about what owners can do to improve the game of

baseball can move beyond the question of illegal drugs. For instance, with their players and ballparks, there are many ways that owners can contribute to Baseball United.

The argument between the players and owners has changed. It used to be a plea on the part of the players for the owners to act with transparency, to open their books. Today, those numbers are known and shared. The size of the TV contracts, the sponsorship franchise values, and all the other critical facts and figures on the owners' balance sheets are available to the Players Association. Instead, the question has transformed into this one: "How can we find common ground? How can we work together to make baseball attractive and alluring to our fans, and more profitable for everyone?" If the owners are promoting the game one way and the players are going about it a different way, it simply doesn't work. Again, I don't want to hold up the NFL and the NBA as models of perfection. They've got their fair share of player personalities, troubles, and issues. But at the same time, they are much better at promoting their sports in a unified manner, instead of the piecemeal way that baseball does it.

Baseball teams are almost entirely owned by privately held partnerships and corporations, which means that they do not have to submit the kind of financial accounting statements that are required of publicly held corporations.

What if there hadn't been a Mark McGwire and a Sammy Sosa making joint baseball history with their buzzworthy home-run derby in 1998? What if there hadn't been a Cal Ripken Jr. breaking Lou Gehrig's record for continuous games played, demonstrating a dedication to the sport that resounded deeply with millions upon millions of hardworking Americans who show up at their jobs every day? If these individuals had not existed, would baseball have recovered from the 1994 strike year? Would the game have recovered as quickly? Hard to say, but my guess is no.

Baseball was very fortunate to have this confluence of events—

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the Ripken Ironman record and the McGwire/Sosa home-run chase—to help fans move past their bitterness and disappointment over a canceled pennant race and playoffs. In the fall of 2006, baseball didn't take a chance on yet another breakdown in labor relations that could have led to another strike, but can they count on another Ripken, another McGwire/Sosa pairing to rescue the game yet again? I don't think so. That's too big a risk, and too long to wait to catch lightning in a bottle again. If there's one thing that baseball owners are capable of doing, it's measuring business risk in an intelligent fashion. I cannot think there's a single individual among them who would be willing to risk the future of the game for any one-upmanship or short-term gains. So I recommend they find a more surefire strategic method of moving forward together.

I implore the owners to act with more transparency in their financial dealings with the players and fans, and to put behind them their own internal difficulties and negativity in their dealings with the players' union. The single most important thing the owners can do to improve the standing of baseball in the minds of Americans is to reshape their relationship with the Players Association. They could even promote players and incorporate them into their marketing, contributing also to community relations in their towns. There's nothing more pressing if the game is to succeed.

Again, consider the "league think" that Pete Rozelle instilled in the minds of the owners in the NFL, or the amazing efforts that David Stern has made in his tenure as NBA commissioner to have all the owners on the same page. Not easy tasks, yet these men succeeded. Baseball needs that same sense of league think. The alternative for the industry and their fans is just too dreary to contemplate.

Another initiative in which the owners can take a lead role is making more baseball available in their communities. Owners, mark your territories! I'm sure you know that other sports have

been encroaching on your most important fan base: kids. Kids today will often tell you that baseball is too slow, too boring, too hard to follow, even though more of them go to MLB games than to NFL, NBA, tennis, or soccer games. That's because it's so much easier for them to find and play games like basketball, whether it be at their local park or on TV. From October to March, it's practically impossible to turn on a TV and *not* find a basketball game being played somewhere, either live, on tape, or on a highlight show like *SportsCenter*.

Today, baseball, football, and NASCAR are ubiquitous, and soccer has proliferated as well. (And let's not forget bull riding!) If kids aren't playing those sports, they're watching them, and if they aren't involved in those sports, then they're skateboarding or playing electronic games. Baseball owners have to look beyond the rosy statistics showing how many kids are coming to the games and get a better grasp instead on the declining percentage of "mind share" that baseball possesses with young people. Baseball is not even on a lot of kids' radar. This makes no sense when you think about it, because owner after owner has spent hundreds of millions of dollars creating beautiful new ballparks, only to have MLB drop the ball when it comes to marketing initiatives, especially to the young, black, and urban communities.

Shifting all of the World Series games to nighttime greatly boosted the game's economic growth, but the decision hurt youth interest in baseball. Rare is the child who can stay up past midnight to watch the end of a World Series game, even if his parents permitted him to do so. We've taken our crown jewel, the World Series, and put it out of reach for young people. The cost of going to a game, while not quite at the stratospheric level of an NFL or NBA game, is not necessarily within the reach of every American family, especially when you consider the add-ons: parking, hot dogs, pretzels, souvenir programs. I will say it is better than the NBA or NFL, since you rarely see kids at those championship games, but you do see them at baseball games.

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One of the most significant things the owners can do is to invest not just in the marketing of baseball in their regions but in the *playing* of baseball throughout their territory. The teams should devote a greater percentage of their time, money, facilities, and interest to ensure that baseball isn't just talked about or "sold" to people, but is also actually played and enjoyed by kids.

It's hard for businesspeople to put money into something where there isn't a clear return on investment. So it's difficult for me to convince all of the owners, beginning with San Diego, to spend tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars on partnerships with local businesses, communities, and leagues to build, rebuild, and equip youth baseball facilities, to inspire quality coaching for young people (by training coaches), to make the game more accessible, and last, to be leaders in keeping baseball alive, well, and thriving in their regions. (Teams such as the Minnesota Twins and San Francisco Giants are already leaders in this area.) We're talking about a long-term payoff that is harder to quantify, or "monetize," in business-speak. Without the long-term commitment to make baseball available in every community, young people's interest in the sport will continue to wither.

If kids aren't playing baseball today, they won't be attending baseball games tomorrow. I understand that it requires long-term thinking on the part of the owners to make such an investment, but failing to do so—whether it be as part of their community relations, marketing, or team foundation efforts—will come back to haunt the game years later. There are a thousand ways to promote baseball as a game to be played and not just as a game for which tickets can be bought. There are great local programs and grassroots initiatives throughout the United States, such as Play Ball! Minnesota. Teams need to continue to share their "best practices" for attracting young people, to build upon each other's successes, and to create a huge cadre of fans, both for the present and for the future.

The most important asset of any Major League Baseball team

is not the sparkling new ballparks, because no matter how beautiful those parks may be, unless there is a winning team on the field, the fans won't come. The famous dictum from *Field of Dreams* "If you build it, he will come" is only valid for a relatively short time. The newness and excitement of a ballpark has a shockingly brief shelf life, especially when compared with the huge costs of building a park. It's not the team's home that keeps 'em coming in, it's the home team. The greatest asset of any baseball team is its players—current and retired.

It's time for owners to make greater use of these marvelous assets. Even though many of today's major leaguers play only for a short time in any given city, while they are there, these players should be outstanding ambassadors for the game. This is even more critical with former players, for whom longtime fans still feel a deep affinity. Indeed, once men reach middle age, they feel an even deeper bond to the players of their childhood than they do with current players, with whom there is often more of a cultural divide.

Players have been making far more public appearances; however, these appearances are often for an elite few, such as corporate sponsors (a trend I refer to as the "skyboxing of baseball") or the focus is on extracting the largest amount of revenue from institutions with multimillion-dollar advertising budgets by negotiating player interaction in the deals. Baseball needs to remain cognizant that the average fan will never see the inside of a luxury box or meet a player, and that while team budgets may be balanced by revenue from high-end customers like utility companies and banks, the future of the game lies with the regular Joe deciding to take his family to a baseball game on a Sunday afternoon.

Owners have to recognize the deep value of the bond between players and their fan base and of not saving all the M&M's, if you will, for the corporate fans in the luxury boxes. The fans have no idea who's in your front office, and don't care who's in your mar-

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keting department, who's in your community relations department. The only names the fans know are your players, current and former. Team owners, *make more use of these players*. Exploit these extremely valuable assets for all they are worth. Let your older fans renew their sense of connection to players of the past by bringing your retired players out for more exposure. Let younger fans have more contact with the younger players who excite them so much. This is another extremely important method by which baseball can attract and retain a fan base. *Let fans get to know and love their players*.

The team owners need to recognize that players' extraordinarily high salaries have created a wall of separation between players and fans. Players no longer live in the average community or interact with fans at the ballpark—the fans rarely see batting practices, let alone infield practices, which have virtually disappeared from the game. The only way to break that wall down is to give the fans more exposure to the players—and again, not just the superwealthy fans in the luxury boxes. Owners might respond that there's no way to force players making huge amounts of money to do public appearances. Do it this way: Let's say that a player's salary is going to be \$1.5 million. Tell the player, "We'll give you \$1.475 million. If you're willing to make ten personal appearances over the course of the season, we'll give you another \$25,000."

The player can do the math: \$2,500 an hour, just to show up and do a "grip and grin." That's a pretty good deal, and they'll take it every time. Of course, what they don't realize is that my budget for their salary was . . . \$1.5 million! Other clubs use the offer at some player appearances when negotiating sponsorship deals. Maybe I'm giving away a negotiating tactic, but the point is that I'm paying them with money they would have received anyway to do something they should be doing without any extra financial incentive. Though if money is the only incentive to participate, then by all means, use it.

However you get it done, ball clubs, get it done. If you asked every owner why they went into the game of baseball, I guarantee that a good chunk of them would say it's name recognition, power, and prestige—and contact with the athletes they admire would be high on the list as well. Team ownership is a small and unique club that few can lay claim to. Take away the bank accounts, and the fans are no different than the owners. A young person who meets a player at a ballpark or in the community is never going to forget that experience, and the dollar return on both the psychological and financial investments, while difficult to quantify, is enormous.

What is the real role of owners in Baseball United? How can MLB owners play a guiding part in this comprehensive effort to reinvigorate baseball? It's pretty straightforward. The MLB owners need to recognize that it's not only about buildings or the logo or relationships with the union that controls the personalities of the game. This country is about celebrity. And it's not even about whether they're spending or not spending on this free agent or that. The most important thing that the owners can do is to recognize that while football and basketball belong to their respective leagues, baseball has always been the people's game. Fans have traditionally felt that they possessed an ownership stake both in the game of baseball as a whole and in their team. As such, fans want to feel as though they have a "seat at the table."

Yes, the fans want to come with regularity to the beautiful new ballparks sprouting up around the league, and, yes, they want to see a winning team on the field. But more than that, they—and their kids—want to feel a sense of reciprocation for all of the time, thought, effort, and dollars they lavish on the game. They want to have a sense that baseball cares about them as much as they care about baseball. They want their kids to be playing the game and loving the game. Owners can step in and make that happen with the appropriate seeding of community money. Owners can deepen the connection between players and fans by making cur-

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rent and former players available to meet the fans. Above all, the most important thing owners can do is reach across the bargaining table and usher in a new period of unity and goodwill between MLB, players, and fans. The game cannot thrive if owners and the union still perceive each other as bitter enemies.

Thanks to Major League Baseball, there are already some programs in place through which community groups and organizations can make requests for monies to create and augment their youth baseball initiatives. (For more information on initiatives such as the Baseball Tomorrow Fund, visit www.MLB.com.) Such funds offer grants for the purpose of helping children enjoy baseball in areas where the game might not otherwise be available. The Baseball Tomorrow Fund grants, for example, build capacity, improve or expand existing programs, and promote and enhance the growth of baseball in the United States and throughout the world.

I reached out not too long ago to Yankees owner George Steinbrenner. Any baseball fan whose recollections go back to the 1980s certainly remembers the difficult relationship that he and I had after I came to the Yankees. I won't rehash that history now, but it was a painful time for me in many ways. George and I had not spoken in quite some time, although he'd privately given me his personal apologies, and then even held a Dave Winfield Day at Yankee Stadium in 2001. We've been able to interact, throw out first pitches, attend Old Timer's Game, and we've even shared plans for the new Yankee Stadium and its fan-friendly components. In essence, we have put the past behind us, collaborating in order to improve baseball. If Dave Winfield and George Steinbrenner can get along, anything in this game is possible.