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Save Baseball

George Burquest, Staff Reporter

Disagreeing over issues ranging from the playoff structure to the luxury tax, the MLB and the MLBPA are diametrically opposed at the moment.

All fans want out of both the MLB and the Players Association is for baseball to be played, yet it doesn't seem like any progress is on the horizon. The MLB and the MLBPA had their first deadline March 1 to come to a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and failed. This resulted in the cancellation of some regular season games for the first time since the 1994-95 players' strike.

In reference to this meeting on the first, after nine days of negotiations, the MLB presented their final offer for the new CBA. The union rejected it, and as soon as the deadline passed, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred held a news conference where he announced that the first two series of the regular season will be canceled.

To put this in perspective for non-MLB fans, the cancellations have resulted in at least 90 games no longer happening. Manfred came out and stressed that each side is trying very hard to reach an agreement.

"I want to assure our fans that our failure to reach an agreement was not due to a lack of effort by either party," Manfred said.

Yet fans are left twiddling their thumbs asking, what are they supposed to think?

It should be remembered that Manfred can be quoted as saying, "I see missing games as a disastrous outcome for this industry, and we're committed to making an agreement in an effort to avoid that."

In the latest talks dating March 6, there have been surprising concessions from the players' side. With the new proposal, a key development is their willingness to give Manfred and the MLB the ability to implement three on-field changes: installing a pitch clock, larger bases and shift restrictions.

All three of these changes came as a surprise. While no implementation would take place until 2023, they stand to make significant changes to the pace and strategy of the game.

The primary issues still being discussed are between billionaires, and guys who get paid—at a minimum \$570,500 a year—to play baseball. Areas of controversy are reported to be: league minimum salaries, a new bonus pool created to reward young players not yet eligible for salary arbitration and the luxury tax system.

Breaking these issues down, the league minimum salary is something that can be applied directly to other professional leagues. The standard to remember for the MLB is \$575,500. In the MLS, the minimum salary for an admittedly much smaller league is \$65,500. This number is extremely low compared to the MLB and other major sports leagues; the NFL is \$705,000, and the NBA is \$925,258.



These numbers show that there is merit behind the players argument, especially given the 162-game regular season they normally play through. However, as fans, all of these numbers are high, and the revenue of clubs and owners is exponentially higher but not public information.

The new bonus pool proposed to help reward young players who can't yet arbitrate for their salaries can best be explained as a way to help the young stars of the league who see lots of playing time with little return comparatively. In the latest talks, the union lowered its request on the pre-arbitration bonus pool, from \$85 million to \$80 million, yet the owners previously proposed a \$30 million central fund. The gap between the two remains at a sizable \$50 million.

It is the luxury tax that is the largest issue still up for debate. The gist of the tax in the first place is that teams are penalized if their average annual value of player contracts exceeds the tax line. The further over the threshold a team finds themselves in results in an even steeper fine. Only six franchises have ever exceeded this competitive balance tax multiple times.

The newly proposed terms by the players would request for the Competitive Balance Tax to begin at \$238 million and grow to \$263 million. The league has countered with a threshold that starts at \$220 million and slowly climbs to \$230 million. The main disparity between the groups can be seen as the players wanting to be paid more, while the owners wanting to have to pay less.

What this lockout is constantly reminding fans is that players, franchises and the MLB are all interested in making money, more so than playing baseball.

This is a harsh light to shine on players and the league, but it seems like there is no other way to look at the current situation. In coming back from each meeting, each side has consistently expressed their dismay at the latest offer. MLB spokesman Glen Caplin hoped that the players would be more reasonable with their proposal and focus on getting something done.

"We were hoping to see movement in our direction to give us additional flexibility and get a deal done quickly," Caplin said on behalf of the MLB. "The players' association chose to come back to us with a proposal that was worse than Monday night and was not designed to move the process forward. On some issues, they even went backwards. Simply put, we are deadlocked."

This is just about the very last thing fans want to hear. Supposedly, there has been no progress. Hopes are still alive for a 2022 season, but as every negotiation passes with no reported progress, those hopes become fleeting.

One thing is for sure: if a season does happen, major changes will be made to the game of baseball both on and off the field.