

SPORTS

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# Costas Is Baseball's Potential Voice Of Reason

By Steve Mirantz

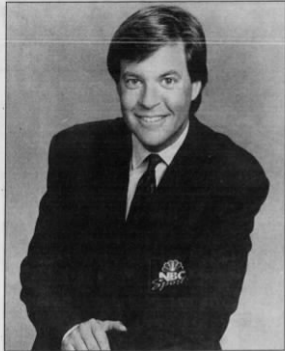
**The Sporting News**

Some men are born to play baseball. Bob Costas was born to say it. Nobody says "baseball" like Costas. The word rolls off his tongue in a fine, plump dulcet tone. It comes across with a 23-year RCA Victor sensibility, in a quadruplicate, digitally mastered package.

He practically croons it. The sound is in once soothing and provocative, evoking romance, grit and the best part of America's star-crossed passion. Baseball is a tricky word. When Don Pate says "baseball," it sounds vaguely menacing, as if he means to use you. When Bud Selig says it, you get an urge to roll your eyes. But when Costas says "baseball," you want to do one of two things: pop a beer and turn on the Game of the Week, or pass the Grey Poupon and turn on Ken Burns' documentary.

"Baseball" is Costas' best word. It might have to do with the alignment of his thumbs or the design of his Adam's apple. More likely, it has to do with his love of the game. In Costas, nature seems to have created the perfect confluence of baseball appreciation and voice box.

Costas professes to disdain the romantic "trachea dripping over baseball." Yet, he can't seem to stop poetry and profundity from coming out of his mouth. There's a comedic aspect to his struggle. Bob talks. Bob slips himself for sounding cloy. Bob talks. Bob slips himself for sounding cloy. Bob talks. Bob slips himself for sounding cloy. Bob talks. Bob slips himself for sounding cloy.



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has simple engaging pleasures. Sure, you do get to the All-Star Game or the seventh game of the World Series. Those are highlight moments. But those moments are created out of hundreds and hundreds of individual days, where it isn't that big of a deal. It's not a laser show when they introduce the starting lineup. It's not a battle of helmets crashing. It's not a spectacle. It's just tonight's game.

That's baseball according to Costas. But because this spring it is different, because baseball's poetry has become the equivalent of Alan Ginsberg's 1950s poem, "Howl," Costas is angry. He is angry at what he deems the weak and short-sighted stewardship of the owners; angry at the self-righteous and narrow self-interest of the players. He is angry

anchored the All-Star Game in July, his first network baseball telecast in five years.

He is known for more than baseball. He currently anchors NBA telecasts and has a Sunday-night radio show, *Costas to Coast*, on 200 markets. For years he hosted NFL Live. In 1992, he anchored NBC's Summer Olympic coverage from Barcelona and is slated to do the 1996 Games in Atlanta.

But it is Costas' non-sports work that elevates him above other sportscasters as a public figure. For six years he was the host of *Late with Bob Costas*, a talk show featuring guests from politics, broadcasting, business and entertainment as well as sports. He carries out non-sports assignments for NBC's prime-time news magazine, interviewing luminaries such as Ray Charles and Woody Allen.

Costas has a semi-retired broadcast persona, beyond a vacuum. Task McNamara stereotype. While his range may be limited to celebrity broadcast journalism, it is sought for a particular type of celebrity. It was not surprising, then, that when the strike started he was sought for commentary, by news shows such as "Meet The Press" and "48 Hours."

He marked himself as a guy who can step beyond the parameters of sports, says Vince Denis, ESPN's assistant managing editor and news director. "You're looking for somebody who can talk about the culture of sport, sociology and the standing of sport today. In that regard he's the pre-eminent spokesman."

This has only been in the last year or so, Costas says. These issues of realignment and the strike have come up. There is the Burns film and two other ESPN baseball specials for which I was asked to sit. I am primarily in the position of a baseball commentator, which is fine, if it's part of a larger thing. I'm also a baseball play-by-play guy, a fan, a guy who can give you scores and a guy who can be a nonbeliever. My personality is not so serious as to

**"Baseball is an interesting game. It's fun to sit in the sun, fun to talk about something you have in common."**

BOB COSTAS

tion of his rights, as if it's dirty pool.

"The players' association talks endlessly about principle. I didn't see all those players who equate a salary cap with the overthrow of America standing up for the principle of competitive integrity of the game races. Basically, what the players' association said was, 'Yeah, it's more money for us, another round of pay-off, so we approve.'"

If Costas was born to say baseball, then he quite possibly also was born to lead it.

The game, grievously wounded, needs a healer in the vacant commissioner's office. Acting commissioner Bud Selig, though well-intentioned, carries too much baggage. The next commissioner cannot be aligned with either warring side, because the office requires independence and objectivity. The person should have political skills, but not be a career politician, because politicians arouse suspicion.

The person, seeking to reestablish a lost rapport with the public, should be familiar, trusted and liked. The person should care about baseball, understand its past and articulate a vision for the future. A Harvard MBA is not required, one or two can be hired. Toughness, conviction and a diplomatic nature are required.

Cross-cultural pundit George Will floated Costas as a candidate in a column last summer.

"I think he'd be a good one, but he's disqualified because he likes baseball, which is an inexcusably eccentric notion to some owners." Will said. "He's thought deeply about the game and is connected to the American psyche. He knows the game, and he knows the broadcasting end of it, which is baseball's principal marketing tool. Baseball demographics are enormous. The fan base is getting older. Bob presents a young hip face for the game."

Costas finds the notion flattering, but not altogether unappealing.

"If the qualification is that this person should be articulate enough to command people's attention, express positions forcefully and convincingly, a person who can credibly work with the players which would lead to respect when he or she argued against some positions that have been taken for years as given. But that person would also have to be independent enough to disavow the past and present folly of the owners."

The truth is, Costas concedes, he likes his broadcasting job. It's fun, pays well and provides him a seat at the table.

Minutes before the opening of the last Orange Bowl telecast, Costas sat inside NBC's end-zone broadcast booth, rehearsing his lines. His makeup assistant, Michele O'Callahan, looked on.

"You need a couple of October afternoons with shadows over the field and bunting hanging over the railings," he said. "You need that to bring people back to what the World Series left like, to evoke what the Fall Classic is about."

Take note, weary soldiers of baseball.

## Costas Offers Proposal To Save Baseball

By Steve Mirantz

The Sporting News

The Sporting News posed this question to Bob Costas: "How would you craft a collective-bargaining agreement to end the strike?"

His response, developed over a 10-day period, addresses collective bargaining and a revised schedule-play-off format. As with his electronic commentary on the strike, Costas labored. At times he verged on embracing the salary-cap concept sought by the clubs.

"I don't think salary cap is a dirty word," Costas says. "I think players now confuse their rights with their preferences. There are many things, which in an enlightened negotiation, you give up in return for other considerations."

Ultimately, however, Costas rejects a salary cap. His plan is based, he said, on a common-sense premise that clubs and players somehow put the best interest of the institution of baseball ahead of immediate self-interest.

"You would hope that both sides have some sense of shame about the damage being done to the institution," Costas said.

The Costas Plan proposes innovations in both a collective-bargaining agreement and a schedule/playoff format.

(1) Collective-bargaining agreement proposals, in major points:

- (1) No payroll salary cap.
- (2) Elimination of salary arbitration.
- (3) Unrestricted free agency after five years.
- (4) Negotiable salaries between \$150,000 and \$1 million in years one through five.
- (5) Revenue sharing generated by splitting club broadcast revenues 50-50 between clubs and leagues and by increasing visitors' share of gate receipts to 25 percent; and (6) weighted distribution of league revenues to clubs on basis of need.

As a secondary test of potential concepts, Costas offers:

- (1) A payroll maximum, so that no team may fall below \$20 million to \$25 million.
- (2) Relocation of small-revenue clubs if they cannot demonstrate viability.
- (3) Election of a commissioner by owners, players and a panel appointed by the president.
- (4) Restoration of the commissioner's "best interest of baseball" powers.

(5) A percentage of capital gains on sales of franchises reserved for the league.

The agreement must be put in place for six years, Costas said, to allow fans a chance to regain confidence in baseball.

"With intelligent budgets in place and good baseball judgment, no team should be theoretically unable to compete," Costas said. "It's realistic and doable, without a further war of attrition."

Two possible flaws are conceded by Costas. First, his plan allows an owner of extreme wealth to run up his payroll as high as he pleases, being the best club in 10 players. Second, the burden of the plan falls most heavily on large-revenue owners.

"This is a prickly political problem—central to the current strike. Why would a large-revenue owner agree to send money to a club that will use it to bid up the substitute's cost of labor?"

"The justification is, how does Summer play six games without the rest of the American League?" Costas said.

The Costas Plan is less vulnerable on scheduling/playoff format. With expansion, he would create two

leagues of 15 teams, each league having three five-team divisions. Using a 160-game schedule, teams would play 20 games against divisional opponents and six games against the other 10 league opponents.

That leaves 20 games, which Costas proposes for unprecedented inter-league regular-season play. The 20 games would be played against one division from the other league; divisional matchups would rotate on a three-year cycle. A network TV package would be crafted out of these interleague games.

Playoffs would be open only to divisional winners. A first-round bye would be granted to the divisional winner with the best record. At least two or three World Series games, Costas proposes, should be played in the afternoon. This last idea represents the essence of Costas' vision for baseball.

"You need a couple of October afternoons with shadows over the field and bunting hanging over the railings," he said. "You need that to bring people back to what the World Series left like, to evoke what the Fall Classic is about."

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