

# The hypocrites of summer



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**M**artin Luther King Jr.'s birthday is observed as a national holiday this month. The great man died nearly 27 years ago fighting for the right of African Americans to live equally and peacefully under the law.

But King's spirit lives on in the striking Major League Baseball Players Association. Its members are baseball's Freedom Riders. Although King fought to throw off the shackles of racism, baseball's Freedom Riders are striving mightily to cast off the yoke of economic oppression, i.e., average salaries of \$1.2 million.

Like King, the players have a dream: freedom. Unfortunately, the resemblance between King and the players' union stops there. King's crusade was built on justice and fairness. The players' crusade is built on hypocrisy.

Here's why. The players say they want a "free" labor market that allows them to play for whom they please, when they please, with no predetermined limit on their earnings. They say money is not the point of their dream. Freedom is the point. Everything else — money, the game's cultural and historical fabric, fan sensibility — is secondary.

The players oppose a salary cap because it limits the amount of money the clubs can spend on salaries and provides the existing clubs of some players the right to match offers from opposing clubs. It circumscribes the choice and movement players would have in their ideal "free" labor market.

But the players are hypocrites. The freedom they are seeking is not truly freedom. It is a limited freedom that allows them to manipulate the labor market.

University of Chicago sports economist Allen Sanderson explains it this way: "Suppose the owners said, 'We'll drop the salary cap and drop everything else. You can have as much money as the market can give you. But we want you to give up one thing. We want to bargain individually, not with a union.'

"That's freedom, but the players couldn't denounce that fast enough. They would shout, 'Exploitation!' But that's perfect freedom. George Steinbrenner could talk to any of 700 players individually. But of course, the players would not allow that to happen. They know it's the union that gives them power."

Union leader Don Fehr dismisses Sanderson's contention: "He's talking philos-

ophy. In order to have perfect freedom, you'd have to have no draft, no trade rules, no minor league reserve system. We come from a different perspective. Total freedom in the abstract is destructive of everything desirable. We're realistic. Our goal is to negotiate minimum standards that allows you to then get whatever freedom you can. It affects relatively few players. No minor leaguers and only major leaguers with six years."

Precisely. The players obsess about the clubs' monopoly over franchises. But what about the union's monopoly over the labor market? The Major League Baseball Players Association is solely empowered to negotiate collectively for players.

This labor monopoly works to the benefit of the top 700 players, while badly penalizing the next 700, in the minor leagues. The union never has tried to represent minor leaguers. Why? Because if minor league salaries — in the \$20,000 range — were raised, there would be less money to lavish upon the chosen 700.

And even as the union complains about the clubs' monopoly, it has not taken the ultimate step to break it: involvement in electoral politics. There's a reason.

"The reason we have one league and 28 teams is not because of economy of scale or because there's not enough player talent," Sanderson says. "It's because 28 owners and 700 players can benefit handsomely from restricting the market."

"The owners have a monopoly over franchises. The union has a monopoly over the labor market. This is an intrafamily squabble over who gets monopoly profits. The players share in those monopoly profits. They make substantially more money than they would in a competitive market."

If the Freedom Riders attain perfect freedom, here's what should happen:

- The clubs will lose their antitrust exemption.
- The MLBPA will lose its monopoly over labor.
- Baseball will expand, into new areas, with new leagues.
- Salaries will plummet so fast the Freedom Riders won't have a chance to say, "Wait a minute, maybe this wasn't a good idea."
- Fans will get more baseball at cheaper



**Tunnel vision:** Fehr, with Richard Ravitch last year, says the union "comes from a different perspective." It's the inability on both sides to grasp the opposing point of view that's killing baseball.

prices. Quality of play may dilute, but because quality is relative, lay fans won't notice.

As you might guess, this is not what the Freedom Riders have in mind. When players talk about freedom, they really mean freedom to manipulate the market in their

favor. In their ideal world, the union retains its monopoly over labor, the clubs retain their monopoly over franchises, and each, by controlling supply, artificially drives up demand. The public foots the bill.

Let's be clear. I am not advocating the players' union be dissolved, because that would unleash the clubs' worst instincts. I am saying that the union shouldn't negotiate out of both sides of its mouth. It ought not to hang itself on a superficial nostrum.

This is just one reason the strike is losing public support.

Fans grasp the weakness of the "freedom" argument. Another reason is that the players are out of touch with the fans.

Baseball writers commonly hear a union leader or player say, "You're free to work wherever you want. We just want the same rights you have. We just want the same rights every American has."

Earth to players: In the real world, a "free market" for jobs consists of perusing the help-wanted section for a job that pays less than your last job.

Sure, you can change jobs. If you've got more than a two-week cushion to pay for groceries and gas. If you can sell your house without a loss and uproot your spouse and kids. If you don't mind that your credit rating is jeopardized. If a medical condition isn't locking you into your current health plan. If your skills are not obsolete, you are not over 40 and you do not fit an unfashionable gender-race category. If your spirit has not been broken by low pay and drudgery.

If the Freedom Riders seem naive — a polite euphemism — then it probably is explained by years of reading bonus clauses instead of discount coupons.

Face it, most players' contact with fans consists mainly of sitting in shopping malls and taking \$10 for an autograph.

Their lack of rapport with the public explains why, if next season opens with replacement players, fans will return to the ballparks. Nor should the Freedom Riders be surprised if career minor leaguers cross lines. Many have been waiting for an opportunity to stick it to the union, because the union sticks it to them.

"I have a lot of friends on big league teams calling me saying, 'Please don't go. We need to unite,'" Mike Twadorski, a 30-year-old player with Triple-A Pawtucket, tells the Boston Globe. "For the past five years, we've been trying to talk to the big leaguers about getting a better pension and more money. All we heard was, 'You're not with the big leagues.' Now they want us to unite? I'm saying, 'Where were you five years ago?'"

The Freedom Riders already have squandered most of their leverage, but it still is not too late to negotiate within the salary-cap framework and attain concessions. Curb the lawyers. Get back in touch with the fans.

Janis Joplin had it right, as far as the striking players are concerned. Freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. ♦

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