

Why Baseball is Dying
By: Connor Griffin
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I was scrolling through Twitter the other day, and I came across a video of an Atlanta Braves television broadcast. The Braves were facing off against the Dodgers, and the Atlanta broadcasters took much offense to Los Angeles' decorum during batting practice. Many of the players wore random t-shirts. Some players wore helmets, others wore regular ball caps. A few players even rolled their pant legs up to their knees. The bottom line was simply that there was a lack of uniformity amongst the Dodger roster, and Joe Simpson, Atlanta's color commentator, was not having it. He went on what seemed to be a ten-minute rant, in which he singled out players for not adhering to an unwritten dress code. His words were accompanied by b-roll footage from batting practice, which shows you just how angry he was about the incident; he made somebody prepare the footage to be aired *during* the game so he could address the incident hours after it happened. And that's the real kicker: This rant did not take place in the introduction to the game or in the first inning. He waited half the game—until the 5th inning, to be exact—and he still felt the need to comment on what went down during batting practice. The footage was primarily focused on Chase Utley, and Simpson did not hold back in criticizing the second baseman's attire. He saw the way Utley dressed as an embarrassment to the Dodger franchise, the fans, and the entire game of baseball. Baseball players don't dress like that, right?

Mind you, this is Chase Utley we're talking about. A 15-year veteran, 6-time All Star, 4-time Silver Slugger, and World Champion—a guy who's done nothing but put his head down and work for his entire career. He's not celebrating after home runs. He's not trying to make flashy plays on defense. He's been one of the most professional, hard-working players in the league for over a decade, yet he was used as an example of what not to be in baseball. But in reality, Joe Simpson is the example of what not to be in baseball. It's this type of thinking—this clutching onto tradition and never letting go—that is killing the game.

American sports are constantly being renovated. Basketball once added the three-pointer, and now it's the shot that's taking over the NBA. The NFL just expanded the length of an extra point three years ago, and now people aren't going to the bathroom right after a touchdown. If you were to ask the average sports fan what baseball has done in the past half century to make the game more exciting, I guarantee you they would scratch their heads. Limiting mound visits? Requiring batters to keep one foot in the box between pitches? That rule hasn't even been enforced. The only major thing the MLB has added in recent years is Instant Replay. But, of course, this has only hurt the game. The biggest complaint about baseball is that it's long and boring, so what do they do? They utilize Instant Replay, which, in turn, makes games longer and more boring. All of these subtle additions to the rulebook are ultimately ineffective because the people devising them are too afraid to stray away from tradition. They fear changing the game. But I've got news for ya, MLB, that's what sports do. They evolve, whether you like it or not. And if they don't, they become stale; people get tired of them real fast. That's why your stadium attendance is the lowest it's been in 15 years. It's not because of a record number of strikeouts or whatever excuse you make to defend yourself. It's because you are resistant to change.

Don't get me wrong; not all evolution in sports comes from rule changes. Lots of evolution comes from the players, themselves. What we've witnessed over the past few decades is a more player-central sports climate. It's not so much the teams that drive the conversation;

it's the individuals on those teams. They're the ones selling jerseys. They're the ones with shoe deals and advertisements. And most importantly, they are the influencers revolutionizing their respective sports. LeBron, Jordan, Beckham, Brady, Manning, Gretzky. I can't name a single person in recent MLB history who's revolutionized the game of baseball. Only a few people even cross my mind, and they all used steroids. To further my point, I found a Bleacher Report article from five years ago, which ranked the 25 most influential people in sports. Only one baseball player was on that list—Derek Jeter at #12—and he's not even in the league anymore. There are no influential baseball players because the MLB refuses to adapt to this current sports climate.

Part of the reason I mentioned all those players above is because they have charisma; they have flare, and their sports embrace it. Baseball, on the other hand, does anything possible to diminish it. This was evidenced by Chase Utley the other day. He wore what he wanted, he stood out from the crowd, and Joe Simpson couldn't bear it. If a batter hits a moonshot and decides to stare at the ball a bit before jogging towards first, he's looked down upon by the baseball community for showboating. Meanwhile in the NFL, Odell Beckham Jr. is proposing to a field goal net after a touchdown. Guess which league is doing better. I'm not insinuating the NFL is superior to the MLB solely because it allows players to perform wild celebrations. I am saying, however, that one league likes vibrant stars, and the other one doesn't, even though that's what sports fans are clamoring for nowadays. We never cared about the Cleveland Cavaliers; we cared about LeBron. We never cared about the MLS; we cared about Beckham. We gravitate towards athletes who are charming, authentic, and entertaining. It's impossible for an MLB player to be any of those things when they are so bogged down by the unwritten rules and traditions of an old and lifeless gentleman's game.

If the baseball community was smart, they'd support guys like Bryce Harper. I watched him in the Home Run Derby, and it was the most fun I've had watching baseball in almost a decade. Why? Because he was himself. He wore whatever accessories he wanted. He celebrated and revved up the crowd. You could feel his passion through the television screen. It was charming, authentic, and entertaining. That's what baseball needs. Stop reprimanding players for breaking the game's unspoken rules from the 1900s. Stop attacking players when they don't necessarily fit in with everybody else. And most of all, stop taking everything so damn seriously. You are killing the game. And sooner or later, America's Pastime will be nothing but a thing of the past.