

Vincent: Baseball's fall guy

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Ah, the rituals of spring training. This is the time of year when our thoughts turn to the athletic millionaires vacationing in Florida and Arizona. This is the time of year when we buy baseball magazines printed months ago before the major offseason trades, look at our favorite teams' outdated rosters, and pray that next year is this year. It's the time of year when we scan the reports out of the training camps and sagely note to each other, "The pickets are ahead of the blatherers."

With opening day apparently off, I was struck by the memory of sitting in the Toronto SkyDome press box last fall during the American League playoffs and marveling at Dave Stewart's performance for the Oakland Athletics.

He didn't have his best stuff that final game, but he just wouldn't let up to any Jays batter. I thought to myself that his resolve to win that day, that series, was as great as any pitcher's ever.

But is it any greater than the resolve the misnamed negotiators are showing this spring? Both sides act as if they feel giving in will mean losing more face than Marie Antoinette.

The guy I feel sorriest for is Commissioner Fay Vincent, and believe me, I'm not the kind of guy normally to feel sorry for the commissioner of anything.

Isn't anything ever going to come easy for this man? He gets his job because his boss and close friend passes away. First thing he has to do is preside over the Earthquake Series and make the call whether to suspend or continue, knowing that either way he will be barbecued by half the sporting press and reviled by countless fans.

He's asked to give Steve Howe one more chance to come back from his trip down Cocaine Road. Later, he undoubtedly will have to make the tricky call on whether to lift the Pete Rose suspension – a suspension he didn't impose.

And, for now, he must preside over a sport that is on a self-imposed sabbatical. This is a no-win proposition for the commish. If the players come away dissatisfied, they'll blame the man who is supposed to be an impartial leader. If the owners come away dissatisfied, they'll blame the guy they hired and pay. If both sides are unhappy, it probably will not occur to them to look in mirrors.

Pay-for-performance, arbitration after two years or three, percentage of revenue – the terms come rattling off the tongues that should be discussing batting averages and earned-run averages. Simply put, though, the issue is this:

Baseball, as an industry, is stinking rich. Escalating television contracts guarantee the owners will become even more aromatically affluent. The players, who feel they've gotten a smaller slice of the sport's revenues than performers in other fields of sport and entertainment, are fighting for a share of that increase.

That's why Vincent's proposal, that spring training and the season proceed under the status quo under a no-strike guarantee by the players, was so amusing. That would bring the TV

money pouring into the owners' pockets in record abundance while leaving the player position unimproved.

Vincent's proposal was forced by desperation, the realization the negotiators are playing to the gallery, not to the room. They are far more concerned by what is said and thought by their bosses away from the table than what is said and thought by their counterparts across the table. They're more concerned with posturing and posing than most models.

Despite their best efforts, a resolution eventually will be reached, the season eventually will begin, and the World Series eventually will be played, surviving again whatever adversity comes its way.

When the season does get going, when the contracts are signed and the television money is flowing, owners and players alike should give something back to the world that has given them so much.

Let them make a donation to science by sending their negotiators to a taxidermist for stuffing. They'd make for unique specimens, for, like the duck-billed platypus, they appear to be a blend of different species. In the case of the negotiators, however, we're talking about the merger of opposite ends of a pig and a horse.

No insult meant toward the animals.