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## A New Form of Fandom: How Free Agency Brought about Rotisserie League Baseball

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### ABSTRACT

One of the most radically transformative shifts in sport history occurred between 1970 and 1975 with the dissolution of the reserve clause in Major League Baseball. In just five years, the legal proceedings of Curt Flood, Jim ‘Catfish’ Hunter, Andy Messersmith, and Dave McNally ruptured a system that had been in place since 1879 and brought about free agency, revolutionizing the economic relations between baseball players and team owners. Skyrocketing player salaries and increased roster turnover in the ensuing years, however, also transformed the dynamics between fans, their local teams, and their favourite players, relationships that historically had been built on roster continuity. Free agency elicited a heightened awareness of the imminent instability of teams, undermining fans’ traditional team allegiance and opening a space for a new mode of expression of their loyalty. This space facilitated the emergence of Rotisserie League Baseball, a forerunner of fantasy baseball and arguably the first fully-fledged fantasy sport. In other words, the advent of free agency constituted a watershed moment in baseball history that modified conceptions of fan loyalty, control, and ownership, paving the way for the birth of fantasy sport.

### KEYWORDS

Rotisserie League Baseball; fantasy sport; Major League Baseball; free agency; fandom

One of the most radically transformative shifts in sport history occurred between 1970 and 1975 with the dissolution of the reserve clause in Major League Baseball (MLB). In just five years, the legal proceedings of Curt Flood, Jim ‘Catfish’ Hunter, Andy Messersmith, and Dave McNally ruptured a system that had been in place since 1879 and brought about free agency, revolutionizing the economic relations between baseball players and team owners. Skyrocketing player salaries and increased roster turnover in the ensuing years, however, also transformed the dynamics between fans, their local teams, and their favourite players, relationships that historically had been built on roster continuity. Free agency elicited a heightened awareness of the imminent instability of teams, undermining fans’ traditional team allegiance and opening a space for a new mode of expression of their loyalty. This space facilitated the emergence of Rotisserie League Baseball (Roto), a forerunner of

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fantasy baseball and arguably the first fully-fledged fantasy sport. In other words, the advent of free agency constituted a watershed moment in baseball history that modified conceptions of fan loyalty, control, and ownership, paving the way for the birth of fantasy sport. In its various forms, fantasy sport has now become a major factor in the global sport industry, influencing the way sports are watched, conceived of, and even played.

The perspectives on free agency, fandom, and fantasy sport in this article reveal that the histories of these subjects are not distinct from but coextensive with the histories of baseball, sport, and America itself. Brief chronologies of fantasy baseball, of which there are now many in print, tend to address only briefly its existence prior to the World Wide Web (Web) by gesturing to its board game progenitors in the first half of the twentieth century, to the architects of its rudimentary forms in the early 1960s, and to the invention of Roto in 1980. Such chronologies imply that Roto was simply a refinement of or a response to baseball simulation games that preceded it. Their authors dedicate significant attention to the role played by the heightened prominence of the Web in the meteoric rise of fantasy baseball's popularity in the 1990s. In doing so, they conflate the causes of its popularity with the causes of its emergence and neglect the opportunity for a nuanced analysis of the specific economic, political, and social forces that brought Roto into existence at a particular historical moment. One such force – the arrival of free agency in MLB – precipitated the invention of Roto and laid the foundation for the global phenomenon of fantasy sport.

In making this contention, I survey the creation and implementation of the reserve clause in MLB since the late nineteenth century, and then review the most prominent legal challenges to it throughout the twentieth century. I examine the birth of free agency in 1975, and investigate its impact on the relationships between the players, the owners, and the fans. While these dynamics enabled the invention of Roto in 1980, the surging popularity of fantasy sport from the 1990s to the present is a secondary phenomenon, fuelled by its own unique circumstances. The genealogical approach to Roto in this article is intended, in part, to encourage other scholars to explore further its diverse origins and influences, of which there are many.

## **The Rise of the Reserve System**

The story of the reserve system – which is also the story of free agency and of Roto – begins in the late nineteenth century. Despite the popularity of baseball in America at the time, the game was played mainly by amateurs until soon after the Civil War, when, in 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first professional baseball team.<sup>1</sup> In 1871, the country's inaugural professional league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP), was formed. This player-run league included teams from ten different cities; however, it only lasted for a few years, torn apart by mismanagement, gambling scandals, economic issues, and player 'jumping' (i.e. players breaking contracts and moving from one team to another in pursuit of more beneficial financial situations).<sup>2</sup> While the NAPBBP ultimately collapsed, its short-lived success nevertheless indicated that there was money to be made in a

professional baseball league, if run more effectively.<sup>3</sup> In 1876, Chicago entrepreneur William Hulbert proposed the formation of a new league, one run not by players, but rather by a group of pragmatic and savvy businessmen – of magnates – like himself. He called it the National League of Professional Baseball Clubs, which soon became known simply as the National League.<sup>4</sup>

To develop fan interest and curtail player salaries, the magnates quickly realized that they would need to ensure a high level of roster continuity, enabling their fans to cultivate relationships with ‘their boys’, as the owners condescendingly referred to their players, and making of them ‘sporting representatives of their fine city’.<sup>5</sup> ‘Collective notions of local identity’, Daniel A. Gilbert asserts, ‘lie at the center of both the political economy and the cultural meaning of professional baseball.’<sup>6</sup> He continues,

The sport traffics in the powerful fiction that corporate franchises can represent communities. Teams’ success at the box office, their ability to win public support for new stadiums, and their broader cultural relevance, all depend on a sense of civic belonging. Individual players play critical roles in the construction of affiliation so central to the sport.<sup>7</sup>

In an effort to cultivate such continuity and community, the owners of every National League team met in Buffalo, New York, on September 29, 1879. During this meeting, they agreed to allow each club to reserve five of their current players for the next season, guaranteeing each team a stable nucleus of talent.<sup>8</sup> This agreement had an immediate and dramatic effect on player salaries, which shrunk from an average of 60 percent of a club’s revenue in 1879 to an average of less than 15 percent of a club’s revenue throughout the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> The magnates were so pleased with their new system that they soon expanded the limit of reservable players per team to eleven and, in 1889, began including a clause with this stipulation in every player’s contract.<sup>10</sup> The clause enabled a team to unilaterally renew the previous year’s player contracts, a manoeuvre that could be repeated without the players’ consent every season in perpetuity.<sup>11</sup> In other words, such contracts constituted one-year agreements with one-year team options on a player’s services.<sup>12</sup> Brad Snyder explains, ‘Before each season, therefore, [players] had no choice but to accept their teams’ final salary offers and to sign new contracts containing the same one-year option provision. A contract for one year became, in effect, a contract for life.’<sup>13</sup> Clubs also had the exclusive right to terminate players’ contracts with only ten days written notice.<sup>14</sup> Due to the 1883 National Agreement, a pact between the owners to honour the reserve clause and the binding nature of each other’s contracts, players either had to accept this new system or not play professional baseball.<sup>15</sup> Players who objected to this treatment too strenuously were often fired and then blacklisted.<sup>16</sup> The reserve system thus allowed the owners to maintain a ‘virtual hegemony’ over the players for almost a century.<sup>17</sup>

While the majority of players were at first slow to perceive the full implications of the reserve clause, some soon came to understand that it reduced them to what John P. Rossi describes as ‘pampered serfs’.<sup>18</sup> John Montgomery Ward, a graduate of Columbia Law School, the founder of baseball’s first union – the Brotherhood of Professional Base Ball Players (Brotherhood) – and a star shortstop for the New York

Giants, was one of the first to speak out against the reserve system. He was particularly concerned with the selling of players, which was quite common and done not only without the permission of the players but also with no monetary profit for them. All proceeds went directly and exclusively to the owners.<sup>19</sup> In 1885, he declared in the Brotherhood's manifesto that 'players have been bought, sold, and exchanged as though they were sheep, instead of American citizens'.<sup>20</sup> Two years later, Ward wrote an article for *Lippincott's Magazine*, in which he addressed 'a new form of slavery [that] was developing less than a generation after the Civil War'.<sup>21</sup> Disgusted by the thought that he could be sold like a piece of livestock, Ward raged at the owners' inhumane treatment of the players.<sup>22</sup> 'Like a fugitive slave law', he insisted, 'the reserve rule denies [the player] a harbour or a livelihood, and carries him back, bound and shackled, to the club from which he attempted to escape. He goes where he is sent, takes what is given him, and thanks the Lord for life.'<sup>23</sup> While Ward may have been the first ballplayer to publicly compare his contract situation to that of slavery, he was not the last.<sup>24</sup>

The reserve clause and the system that it perpetuated, allowed baseball's magnates, like the robber barons of the Gilded Age, to restrict the marketplace and control the labour force.<sup>25</sup> Hulbert's philosophy in establishing the National League was, according to Rossi, 'an almost perfect reflection of the new attitude toward business that flourished in the post-Civil War era – ruthless competition, rationalizing business practices, and a smart emphasis on the bottom line'.<sup>26</sup> He argues that Hulbert was 'simply following the [...] economic attitude of the era and applying the Social Darwinist principles of John D. Rockefeller and Andrew Carnegie to the business of baseball'.<sup>27</sup> Club owners went as far as to contend that the reserve clause was necessary for baseball's survival because it greatly reduced the owners' risk of bankruptcy and thus provided added job security for the players.<sup>28</sup> The magnates asserted that the reserve system was also in the best interest of fans, as it supposedly ensured competitive balance throughout the league, rather than allowing the richest clubs to hoard all the best players. It enabled teams to maintain roster continuity, which resulted in a better on-field product and the opportunity for fans to develop enduring relationships with the players.

For nearly a century, not only fans, but also sportswriters, politicians, and even Supreme Court Justices accepted the magnates' arguments and with them the idea that baseball was a unique sport – an American institution – that would cease to exist without the reserve system.<sup>29</sup> Greg R. Miller and Michael Real insist that, in the first half of the twentieth century, 'America's identification with baseball developed out of a perception that baseball players represented modern working class America',<sup>30</sup> mainly in that they were not unionized and thus shared in the 'working class predicament' of 'play or leave your job'.<sup>31</sup> Miller and Real contend that, largely because of its blue-collar reputation, baseball developed into a prominent symbol of American culture, so much so that 'a player's passion and love for the sport' was considered 'a representation of their love and passion for America'.<sup>32</sup> As the public began to embrace baseball as the national game, fans increasingly considered players fortunate to hold such privileged positions. They believed that players should be above petty labour resentments and that it was the players' patriotic duty to play the

game without complaint.<sup>33</sup> Fans, the media, and legislators were reluctant to accept the idea that baseball was big business, since such a notion threatened the presumed purity of the American pastime. Maintaining this myth required the sporting public to perceive players as grown men, lucky to be playing a boys' game and making money doing it.<sup>34</sup>

### The Fight for Free Agency

The first significant legal challenge to the reserve system came in 1922 in the form of *Federal Baseball Club of Baltimore v. National League of Professional Baseball Clubs* (Federal Baseball). With the introduction of Byron 'Ban' Johnson's American League in 1901 and the signing of a new National Agreement in 1903, baseball was more prosperous than ever in the early twentieth century. Ambitious businessmen thus sought to capitalize on the phenomenon by establishing a third league, the Federal League of Base Ball Clubs (Federal League), in 1913. When it was denied major league status and was not allowed to conduct business under the National Agreement, the Federal League raided National and American League team rosters.<sup>35</sup> After two years of fierce competition over players and fans, and with its federal antitrust lawsuit against the two major leagues still undecided, the Federal League reached a settlement with the National and American leagues.<sup>36</sup> When the Federal League folded, two owners were allowed to buy major league franchises and the rest accepted settlements, with the exception of Ned Hanlon, owner of the Baltimore team. Having rejected multiple buyout offers and feeling aggrieved by his treatment, Hanlon brought his own antitrust suit against MLB on September 20, 1917.<sup>37</sup> The suit eventually reached the Supreme Court in 1922. The Court's decision, famously articulated by Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes on May 29th of that same year, unanimously ruled that professional baseball was exempt from the Sherman Act of 1890<sup>38</sup> and the Clayton Act of 1914<sup>39</sup> because it did not constitute interstate commerce, but rather was strictly a state affair.<sup>40</sup> While the decision has since been heavily scrutinized, Gary Hailey explains that 'The courts of that era applied federal antitrust laws only to businesses that were primarily engaged in the production, sale, or transportation of tangible goods;<sup>41</sup> thus, baseball, which was thought to traffic in the intangible, was exempt. Lee Lowenfish offers a different perspective. He argues that the Supreme Court simply did not want to 'upset baseball's traditional practices',<sup>42</sup> and therefore granted the game a 'judicially created exemption from federal antitrust law',<sup>43</sup> which, when coupled with its monopoly over the industry, safeguarded the reserve system and ensured the owners' complete control over the players for the next fifty years. The Supreme Court's decision transformed the sport from a business into a national treasure with a uniquely privileged position in American culture. The owners, the press, and the fans embraced this attitude toward baseball and many of the players did as well, making it difficult for them to band together in collective action to successfully address labour grievances, as many of them equated unionization with treason against their country.<sup>44</sup>

In 1953, the Supreme Court revisited what Jonathan B. Goldberg considers to be the 'shaky rationale' of its precedent on this issue in *Toolson v New York Yankees*,

*Inc.*<sup>45</sup> George Earl Toolson was a minor league pitcher whose once promising career was derailed by injuries. Suffering from a ruptured disc in his back that dramatically decreased his effectiveness on the mound, Toolson was demoted by the Yankees in 1950 from a Triple-A affiliate to the Class-A Binghamton Triplets. The move was accompanied by a corresponding reduction in salary and a complete refusal by the organization to cover his medical expenses because they denied that the injury was baseball-related. Angry about being unfairly treated by the club, Toolson declined the demotion and was thus placed on the ineligible list, which essentially blacklisted him from the game, as, per the reserve clause in his contract, he was unable to negotiate with or play for any other teams. In 1951, he filed an antitrust suit against the Yankees in federal court under the Sherman Act, claiming that baseball was an illegal monopoly that had deprived him of his livelihood.<sup>46</sup> Toolson was ruled against by lower courts on two separate occasions, but the Supreme Court eventually agreed to hear his appeal in 1953. After having done so, the Justices upheld their own precedent in *Federal Baseball*, not on its merits, but rather because they felt that such a decision was the responsibility of Congress and because they deemed that 'Congress had no intention of including the business of baseball within the scope of federal antitrust laws.'<sup>47</sup> The significance of the *Toolson* decision is that through it the Supreme Court made clear that any change to baseball's antitrust status would need to be made by Congress and not by the judiciary.<sup>48</sup> The result of what Roger I. Abrams terms this 'indefensible'<sup>49</sup> passing of the proverbial buck was nearly two more decades of the reserve system in MLB.

Flood's challenge to this system in the early 1970s fell victim to a similar dynamic. After playing twelve years for the St. Louis Cardinals, making three All-Star teams, winning seven Gold Gloves, serving as the club's co-captain, and helping the team reach three World Series, Flood was unceremoniously informed, after the 1969 season, that he had been traded to the Philadelphia Phillies.<sup>50</sup> Upset and unwilling to relocate to the East Coast, Flood refused, determining instead to sue for his freedom on January 16, 1970.<sup>51</sup> Convinced that he was not a commodity and that he deserved the right to choose where he would end his baseball career,<sup>52</sup> Flood began his pursuit of free agency by first petitioning the Commissioner of Baseball, Bowie Kuhn.<sup>53</sup> In his letter, he wrote: 'I do not feel that I am a piece of property to be bought and sold irrespective of my wishes. I believe that any system which produces that result violates my basic rights as a citizen and is inconsistent with the laws of the United States.'<sup>54</sup> Like Ward and others before him, Flood considered the reserve clause to be a form of slavery and was heavily criticized for explicitly using that term in this context. Many sportswriters, such as Bob Broeg of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, objected to the comparison, insisting that Flood was not forced to play professional baseball and that he was paid handsomely for doing it.<sup>55</sup> Flood responded by quoting Judge Jerome Frank's opinion in the 1949 *Gardella* case,<sup>56</sup> asserting that 'Only the totalitarian-minded will believe that high pay excuses virtual slavery.'<sup>57</sup>

While he explicitly employed the rhetoric of slavery in his fight for free agency, which reached the Supreme Court in 1972, and while he drew inspiration from Civil Rights heroes, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Jackie Robinson, Flood maintained that his crusade was for the rights of every major-leaguer.<sup>58</sup> Though the

Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA), which was established in 1954 and had been slowly growing in power since Marvin Miller became its Executive Director in 1966, backed Flood, many of the players, particularly star players, refused. Whether due to this lack of support or not, on June 19, 1972, the US Supreme Court ultimately ruled against Flood in a 5-3 vote, reaffirming MLB's unique and privileged position under antitrust laws.<sup>59</sup> In writing the majority opinion, Justice Harry Blackmun described baseball's antitrust exemption as an 'anomaly' and an 'aberration'.<sup>60</sup> He argued that baseball's standing was one of 'inconsistency and illogic',<sup>61</sup> particularly in contrast to other professional sports to which federal courts had already ruled that antitrust laws applied. However, he insisted, as had the Justices in 1953, that it was the responsibility of Congress to rectify this situation through legislation and that, until such legislation was put into law, the court had little choice but to follow their own precedents in the form of the *Federal League* and *Toolson* decisions.<sup>62</sup>

Despite the ruling, many scholars agree that Flood's lawsuit had a considerable impact on the fight for free agency in baseball and by extension in all sports. While it did not accomplish its intended result directly, the case nevertheless sensitized players, sportswriters, and fans to the 'exploitive and un-American' nature of the reserve system,<sup>63</sup> which for nearly a century had been successfully obscured behind the façade of America's national pastime.<sup>64</sup> Flood's trial, coupled with changing public opinion, indirectly compelled the owners to concede neutral grievance arbitration in the 1970 Basic Agreement, giving the players the right to challenge management on issues related to their daily lives, including fines, discipline, accommodations, transportation, playing conditions, etc. This subtle yet significant labour victory for the players led directly to the establishment of free agency just five years later via the Messersmith-McNally case. Although some critics contend that by the late 1960s free agency in baseball was inevitable,<sup>65</sup> most scholars acknowledge that Flood's efforts hastened its arrival.

After the ruling against Flood in 1972, the players attempted to make clear that they were not seeking a complete elimination of the reserve system, but rather a fairer implementation of it, which would grant veteran ballplayers a measure of control over their careers via a moderated form of free agency.<sup>66</sup> This position resonated with some sportswriters and fans of the day, and, by the mid-1970s, the players were armed with growing public support. Such support, combined with an increasing sense of solidarity amongst the players after the productive 1972 strike and after successfully weathering the 1973 lockout, convinced Miller that the time to try a different approach to challenging the reserve clause was at hand.<sup>67</sup> He believed that the new arbitration process, which involved a panel consisting of a union representative, a management representative, and an independent arbiter that had been agreed upon by both sides, was a crucial component in the players' fight for free agency.<sup>68</sup> Backed by this arbitration process, the independence of which had been satisfactorily demonstrated in Hunter's 1974 grievance against the Oakland Athletics, Miller felt that the players were now in a better position to directly challenge the reserve system. In 1975, he recruited two players, Messersmith and McNally, to be his test cases, with both men refusing to sign their next contracts

during the current season and instead playing out their options (i.e. letting their contracts expire).<sup>69</sup> Once they did so, the MLBPA argued that they should be considered free agents, while their respective clubs renewed their contracts without their permission under the provisions of the reserve clause.<sup>70</sup> Their grievance was heard by veteran arbitrator Peter Seitz, who, after reviewing the case, ruled in favour of the players in what Abrams describes as 'the most important single act in the history of the business and law of baseball'.<sup>71</sup> He determined that the reserve clause only bound players for a single option year, not a series of single years in perpetuity.<sup>72</sup> In his decision, he described the reserve clause as 'incompatible with the doctrine or policy of freedom in the economic and political society in which we live and of which the professional sport of baseball ('the national game') is a part'.<sup>73</sup> In doing so, he transformed the players from what Goldberg terms 'chattel-like property to autonomous beings'.<sup>74</sup> This historical victory for the players stripped the reserve clause of its power, which had long been considered the cornerstone of the game's success.<sup>75</sup> The owners then took their case to the Court of Appeals, where Judge John Watkins Oliver rejected it,<sup>76</sup> his ruling making it abundantly clear that collectively bargained Basic Agreements were binding and thus necessitated a new relationship between owners and players.<sup>77</sup>

The Messersmith-McNally decision brought an end to the owners' entrenched nineteenth-century industrial approach to the business of baseball.<sup>78</sup> Due to the widespread influence of anti-establishment attitudes in 1960s and 1970s America that encouraged the questioning of traditional beliefs and assumptions, athletes in various sports began to challenge the long-standing structures that limited the control they had over their careers and lives. In 1979, sportswriter Murray Chass described this era as 'the period of the liberation of the professional athlete'.<sup>79</sup> He characterized the 1970s in particular as 'the age of enlightenment' for players, a time in which 'They gained greater knowledge and understanding of the relationship with owners, and they became sufficiently sophisticated to band together within each sport and confront their owners as a united body'.<sup>80</sup> Despite being perhaps the most politically and socially conservative of major American athletes and playing perhaps the most traditional of major American sports (run by arguably the stodgiest of owners), baseball players nevertheless led the way in revolutionizing American sports culture through the collective power of their union.<sup>81</sup> The MLBPA's goals under Miller were concrete, incremental, and realistic. The players did not initially set out to achieve free agency, but rather to change the basic legal relationship between themselves and the owners.<sup>82</sup> In doing so, they fundamentally transformed the game and their socio-cultural relationship with fans as well.

## The Shift in Fandom

One of the most immediate and obvious factors in the transformation of the relationship between players and fans was the sharp rise in player salaries. The average player's salary, which had not increased by more than 23.2 percent in any year since 1964 (and which typically rose by just single digits each season), skyrocketed 41.5 percent in 1977, another 32.2 percent in 1978, and an additional

24.6 percent in 1979.<sup>83</sup> To put it in terms of actual dollars, the average player's salary in baseball soared from \$44,676 in 1975, the last season played under the strictures of the reserve system, to \$121,900 by the end of the decade, with this number continuing to climb markedly in the years to follow.<sup>84</sup> As Dan Epstein writes: 'The days of major leaguers having to take off-season jobs at the local car dealership or insurance agency ...just to make ends meet [were] over forever.'<sup>85</sup> Despite apocalyptic predictions to the contrary, soaring player salaries did not ruin the financial viability of the game, impoverishing its clubs and destroying the national pastime. To the contrary, the business of baseball thrived, and both players and owners prospered.<sup>86</sup>

This 'radical altering' of the game's economics,<sup>87</sup> however, did play an important part in changing the relationship between fans and players. Since the late nineteenth century, the reserve clause had artificially restricted player salaries, enabling the media to help cultivate the perception that major leaguers played baseball purely for the love of the game, not for any financial rewards that might accompany it. This romantic outlook grew into a widely accepted myth that helped to establish baseball, in the minds of the public, as an embodiment of American values in the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, swiftly escalating salaries after free agency called this myth into question. Drawn-out legal and collective bargaining battles between the owners and the players in the mid to late 1970s were regularly reported in the press. Such high-profile and ugly feuding led to a heightened awareness among fans of baseball's enormous financial stakes, a topic largely ignored (either intentionally or unintentionally) throughout much of baseball history.<sup>88</sup> It forced fans to confront the unpopular reality that baseball was a business and that baseball players were businessmen.<sup>89</sup> While most fans in the early free agency era did not begrudge individual superstars their massive new salaries, their relationship to the players, in general, was nevertheless affected by a growing awareness of this shift from on-field achievement to off-field accumulation.<sup>90</sup>

Roster turnover in the late 1970s also played an important role in the transformation of this relationship. Perhaps the owners' greatest fears regarding free agency were that more players changing teams more often would result in decreased attendance and in competitive imbalance. Stoking this fear was the fact that in the first three years of free agency approximately 80 percent of eligible players changed teams,<sup>91</sup> using their newfound and hard-earned freedom to secure more advantageous professional situations. In his 15-part series for *Baseball Prospectus* in 2019, in which he analyzes roster turnover since 1901, Rob Mains proposes that the arrival of free agency, unsurprisingly, led to an immediate spike in player movement throughout the league in the late 1970s.<sup>92</sup> However, he insists that 'the initial spate of free agency after the 1976 and 1977 seasons was exceptional, as all players could play out their option ... and become free agents'.<sup>93</sup>

As with escalating player salaries, increased roster turnover immediately after free agency did not have the detrimental effects that the owners had expected. Rather, the dawn of free agency spurred unparalleled fan interest, with MLB setting new attendance records in each of the final four years of the 1970s. Annual attendance figures reached 31.3 million in 1976, 38.7 million in 1977, 40.6 million in 1978, and

43.5 million in 1979,<sup>94</sup> easily surpassing anything baseball had ever seen before. What Gilbert terms 'the art of flexible affiliation' helps to explain such remarkable attendance numbers in the late 1970s. He asserts that:

To connect with their teams, communities must engage in nimble acts of fiction writing, embracing each year's roster of athletes as hometown heroes, in spite of the crude reality of Major League Baseball's marketplace of athletic talent. Fans' collective revisions of local identity, like the annual acts of player mobility and roster replenishment with which they are inextricably linked, have come to define Major League Baseball in the age of free agency.<sup>95</sup>

This annual modification of fan loyalties not only served to fill stadiums in the late 1970s, but also led to the invention of Roto, which required a similar sort of flexible affiliation.

The concern over competitive imbalance proved not only to be unfounded, but to be built upon a distortion of the game's history. Dynasties had long been a baseball reality, with four teams winning nearly 80 percent of the American League pennants from 1901 to 1969, and with four teams winning more than 76 percent of the National League pennants during that same period.<sup>96</sup> By contrast, the early free agency era was characterized by unprecedented parity, with every National League team winning their division at least once from 1981 to 1993 and with all but three of the American League teams doing the same.<sup>97</sup> Joel G. Maxcy thus contends, 'A case can even be made that increased player mobility induced by free agency has improved competitive balance.'<sup>98</sup> Abrams concurs, maintaining that 'the only period of true on-field competitiveness in major-league baseball history has occurred since the reform of the reserve system.'<sup>99</sup>

Although free agency and its effects did not ruin America's game, the heightened roster turnover in its first few years and the spectre of its continuation or even escalation in the future did serve to reshape the relationship between players and fans. Roster stability, particularly in regard to star players, had helped cultivate interest in baseball throughout its history,<sup>100</sup> providing fans with a consistent and dependable form of entertainment.<sup>101</sup> The momentary yet momentous disruption of this roster continuity in the late 1970s initiated a shift in baseball fandom from a reliance on stability, consistency, and community to a negotiation of uncertainty, variability, and individuality. As Michael Burke, former president of the New York Yankees, stated in 1979, 'If you had talked about free agency in baseball 10 or 15 years ago, people would say it would shake the foundation of the game. But the game has accommodated the changes.'<sup>102</sup> Rather than dampening fan interest and destroying fan allegiance, as many had predicted, free agency in the late 1970s transformed them, replacing an assurance of salary regulation and roster continuity with an excitement about player acquisition and rapid team improvement. This shift encouraged the emergence of a new form of fandom that would eventually lead to the creation of Roto.

Free agency called into question many of the foundational myths, assumptions, and values upon which baseball had been built and which had sustained the game for more than a century. In doing so, it broadened the spectrum of baseball fandom into two distinct modes of engagement, 'traditional' and 'modern', with each indicating

disparate fan responses to this significant alteration in their beloved pastime. Traditional fans, who had constituted a substantial segment of baseball fandom since the turn of the twentieth century, believed that baseball should remain 'pure and unchanged'.<sup>103</sup> They chose to view the game as 'a timeless treasure',<sup>104</sup> wilfully ignoring, as Swanson points out, adjustments owners regularly made and continue to make to the game in order to grow public interest. As they always had, such fans cultivated deep connections to their local teams and its players, demanding from the latter what they considered to be the proper gratitude and humility due their positions. They expected players to show respect for authority and for baseball tradition, as well as to appreciate the opportunity to spend a long career with one team and to love their city, their team, and their fans, as much as they were loved by them. In labour disputes, traditional fans invariably sided with the owners, convinced, as Swanson argues, that ballplayers 'needed to embrace their good fortune and avoid the collective radicalism that tore at the fabric of so many of our social institutions in the 1960s and 1970s'.<sup>105</sup> To them, the advent of free agency was a singular threat to 'the sacred continuity' of the game<sup>106</sup> and a manifestation of the self-interested individualism that 'cut at the core of baseball's identity'.<sup>107</sup>

Fans at the traditional end of the spectrum begrudged their exposure to the game's economic operations, preferring to ignore the crass new business of baseball.<sup>108</sup> They believed that free agency threatened to transform the sport from an ideal reflection of American values, such as 'hard work, honesty, [and] devotion to the team', to a bastion of 'hyper-individualism, greed, and self-promotion'.<sup>109</sup> A minority of such fans gave up on baseball entirely, while most chose to remain in thrall to the game's romantic ideals. For this latter group, of which Art Spander considers himself a part, 'This game is more myth than reality.'<sup>110</sup> 'Baseball is a dream,' he insists, 'that begins in the mind's eye when we're young enough to believe and remains inviolate even when we're old enough to know better.... We know the innocence is gone now, but we don't want the real world spoiling our pleasure. Don't bother us with the cynical details of adult life, just let the guys play the game.'<sup>111</sup> Roger Angell asserts that to embrace this romantic illusion such fans tried to 'ignore the whole mess – the lockout, the free-agent issue, the gigantic new salaries, the franchise squabbles – and follow the sport as if it were unchanged, follow it as they did when they were children'.<sup>112</sup> They were captivated by the predictability, nostalgia, and sense of tradition that enabled baseball to become the national pastime.<sup>113</sup> Throughout baseball history, the owners worked hard to promote, develop, and maintain this sort of fandom and the team identification that it entailed. They did so mainly because it produced robust team loyalty, which resulted in higher levels of fan consumption and re-patronage.<sup>114</sup>

By the late 1970s a new model of fandom emerged at the other end of the spectrum. Like the players, modern fans were no longer concerned mainly with what was good for their teams, but also, and in some cases perhaps more so, with what was good for them alone. They embraced the new reality of the players' expanded freedom and agency, eagerly claiming those same rights for themselves and harnessing their powers for their own ends. In other words, such fans accepted the players' newfound control over their relationship to the game and realized that they,

too, could exercise such control, albeit in different forms. For a century, fans had been conditioned to think that their primary attachment should be to teams, not to individual players, no matter how much they might revere the latter. The early years of free agency challenged this tenet of traditional baseball fandom and complicated fans' relationships to the game. Liberated from this conventional form of baseball loyalty – a relic of a now bygone era – modern fans soon understood that they could forge their own unique relationships with both teams and players. This burgeoning autonomy and self-interest quickly engendered in such fans a desire for enhanced ownership of and participation in the game, which they felt they had lost after free agency. While their sympathies increasingly lay with the players, their ambitions drew them more and more to the business side of baseball, its modern locus of power. Swanson contends that though fans in the free agency era still appreciated loyalty from players and continuity in teams, they now valued more than ever before 'the significance of shrewd business and player personnel moves by team management'.<sup>115</sup> While player evaluation and acquisition has been a baseball reality since the game's inception, free agency brought heightened attention and urgency to these aspects of the game.<sup>116</sup> Success or failure in this regard has since equated more noticeably to success or failure on the field, creating a situation in which, as Gilbert notes, 'general managers have themselves become stars'.<sup>117</sup> The focus of fans in this era shifted from an exclusive concern for the performance of players on the field to an even greater concern for the performance of management and ownership in the building of successful rosters,<sup>118</sup> a hallmark, I argue, of modern baseball fandom. In this sense, as Swanson asserts, free agency transformed 'the values and ideals of American sports fans, and ultimately [ ... of] American sports culture'.<sup>119</sup>

### The Birth of Rotisserie League Baseball

One of the most important outcomes of this transformation was the invention of Roto in 1980. Scholars today typically trace the origins of Roto back to table-top games popular in the first half of the twentieth century, which allowed participants to conduct their own imaginary baseball contests. The earliest such game, Clifford A. Van Beek's 'National Pastime' (1930), was soon followed by others, including Ethan Allan's 'All-Star Baseball' (1941), J. Richard Seitz's 'APBA Major League Players Baseball' (1951), and Glen Head's 'Strat-O-Matic Baseball' (1961), each offering greater nuance and realism.<sup>120</sup> These games, versions of which remain popular to this day, simulated the performance of real major leaguers by using probabilities based on their previous statistical accomplishments as determined by the chance results of spinners and dice. In 1960, Harvard University professor, William Gamson, created a new type of baseball game – the 'National Baseball Seminar' ('Seminar') – which combined his lifelong interest in baseball simulation and his graduate studies in game theory.<sup>121</sup> What set the 'Seminar' apart from its table-top predecessors was that, rather than simulating player performance from past achievements, it offered participants the opportunity to 'showcase [their] managerial prowess [by] predicting future events'.<sup>122</sup> Essentially a rudimentary fantasy baseball prototype, the game involved the virtual drafting of actual major leaguers and the tracking of their real-

world performances throughout an entire season in four statistical hitting categories.<sup>123</sup> In 1962, Gamson took a position at the University of Michigan, where he introduced his 'Seminar' to fellow professor Robert Sklar, who eventually passed it along to one of his former student advisees, Daniel Okrent.<sup>124</sup> In 1980, Okrent upgraded Gamson's game from what he metaphorically described as a 'covered wagon' to a 'space ship',<sup>125</sup> christening it 'Rotisserie League Baseball' after *La Rotisserie Francaise*, the Manhattan restaurant in which its original members often gathered. The game was, and continues to be, played with rosters comprised of 22 or 23 major-leaguers, acquired through an auction draft, with each team owner limited to a total budget of \$260. Player performance was tracked throughout the season in eight statistical categories, divided evenly between hitting and pitching. The categories were carefully selected for their ability to accurately emulate real-world baseball club success. The league member whose team earned the highest cumulative rank across those eight categories at the end of the season was named champion.

The game's participants acted as hybrids of owners and general managers, which granted them absolute authority over the drafting and trading of their teams' players. According to Okrent, the initial motivation behind the creation of and participation in Roto was that 'It wasn't enough to watch baseball, or to study it in the box scores and leaders lists.'<sup>126</sup> His sense was that 'we all wished, in some way, to possess it, to control it'.<sup>127</sup> The emphasis here on participation, ownership, and control is significant, as it reflects a growing desire of modern fans in the late 1970s for engagement and empowerment. Okrent himself dubbed the game's participants 'owners',<sup>128</sup> indicating what Bryan Curtis described as the 'Steinbrenner-like control'<sup>129</sup> they acquired through the game. ESPN SportsCenter anchor, Keith Olbermann echoed this sentiment, claiming:

The popularity of the game of Rotisserie really stems from a desire for control on a part of the fans that they felt that they'd lost. Because, whatever condition baseball was in in 1968 – gee, it would have been an interesting idea for us to draft our own teams, but I don't think anybody would have preferred that to being a Yankee fan or being a Met fan or being a Dodger fan or whatever. The idea was you were a fan of the team and its players.<sup>130</sup>

A direct response to free agency, the game clearly tapped into its contemporary zeitgeist, enacting an immediate and powerful transference of allegiance from team to player and of proprietorship from owner to fan. It encouraged participants to evaluate players strictly based upon individual statistics, to assign them literal dollar values in a virtual free-market context, and to select them regardless of their real-world team associations. In describing his experience of the first-ever Roto draft, Peter Gethers, co-owner with Glen Waggoner of 'The Getherswag Goners' and champions of the league that year, stated, 'Within seconds, I no longer had a favourite team, and I only rooted for my own players.'<sup>131</sup> The game's exclusive emphasis on individual player performance and its accompanying disregard for traditional team loyalty are symptoms of free agency and of fans' heightened awareness of the volatility of their favourite MLB rosters. Its invention was made possible through and capitalizes on such an awareness. Fuelled by the rise of free agency and the accompanying distance that came to characterize the relationship

between players and owners as well as between fans and teams, Roto became 'a revolution in fandom'.<sup>132</sup>

Alienated by skyrocketing player salaries, disoriented by increasing roster turnover, and confronted by growing player individualism, modern fans in this period sought out new ways to act and to be. They thus adopted the identities not only of team owner, as mentioned above, but of general manager as well, the latter of which was rapidly becoming considered the most consequential position in baseball's free agency era. Knowledge and appreciation of shrewd player personnel and business moves<sup>133</sup> imbued modern fandom with a sense of inclusion and entitlement, even if hypothetical or virtual. Fans no longer considered themselves mere bystanders, passive, if deeply invested, observers of their teams on and off the field, but rather as informed, knowledgeable, and savvy participants, capable of matching or even besting the performances of their teams' front offices. According to Okrent, Roto was born from the 'firm belief' that anyone could be a general manager. 'Being a GM', he speculated playfully, 'was *easy*.'<sup>134</sup> Adopting such an identity was a way for fans to use their extensive knowledge of baseball to demonstrate their own worth, to make themselves feel again as if they mattered in an era in which their importance to owners and to players no longer seemed paramount. Like the players before them, fans after free agency, an event that was commonly thought to have compromised the game's childlike innocence, sought to forge a more adult relationship to the game – one in which they had more authority, responsibility, and autonomy. In a sense, fandom after free agency came of age. Armed with a new mature, pragmatic perspective, modern fans accepted the fact that to run a baseball club was to run a business, and, once they did so, they soon sought out ways to do it themselves. By giving participants the opportunity to play general managers, Roto reflected, but also benefited from, this trend in modern fandom and would not have been possible without it. The game's creation necessitated the reorienting of traditional baseball allegiances and fan perspectives. The independence, agency, and autonomy modelled by major-leaguers in the late 1970s was mirrored, at least virtually, by modern fans in the form of Roto. If free agency liberated and enlightened the players, as Chass suggested, then Roto – its outgrowth – did the same for the fans as well.

The game's invention thus offers insightful perspectives into the relationship between fans and players, but also into the relationship between distinct forms of fandom in the years immediately following free agency. As argued earlier, there are clear differences in the responses to this development by traditional fans, who redoubled their commitment to the game's standard mythology, and modern fans, who embraced its new commercial reality. Yet, while their responses may seem antithetical, they are actually more similar than they may at first appear. The relationship between traditional and modern fans is not simply one of mythology and reality, or of romanticism and pragmatism, but rather of fable and fantasy. In other words, of two different fictions – distinct, yet equally illusory. In the face of free agency, traditional fans chose to maintain the comforting fiction that baseball was a manifestation of purity and innocence, that they could rely on its predictability, stability, and continuity, and that their staunch dedication to teams and players was gratefully reciprocated. They took a romantic view of the game as dependable,

timelessness, and sacred, as a symbol of American ideals, vacillating at different times between wilfully ignoring and angrily decrying its potential corruption by crass contemporary realities. For their part, modern fans adopted the empowering fiction that, like the players after free agency, they, too, were endowed with greater freedom and control over their relationship to baseball, and that their recent exposure to its business side gave them increased insight into and proximity to the game. These factors permitted them a more robust sense of participation in and ownership of their relationship to baseball. Traditional fans thus insisted on the reality of their baseball fantasy (i.e. of baseball mythology), which was every bit as convincing as any other version of reality through their staunch dedication to it. This fantasy produced very real outcomes, such as record attendance levels and television viewership by the end of the 1970s.<sup>135</sup> Modern fans succeeded in making their baseball fantasy (i.e. Roto) a reality, which was just as mythical as any other fantasy in its reliance upon imagination, invention, and a willing suspension of disbelief. This fantasy nevertheless also constituted a powerful reality for its participants, one that eventually grew into the approximately \$7.22 billion per year industry that it is today.<sup>136</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, both traditional and modern fans resented challenges to the authenticity of their respective alternate baseball realities. Roto participants, in particular, were vociferous in this regard. For example, Waggoner strenuously objected to their teams being characterized as ‘imaginary’, insisting that ‘Those teams were ... ultra-real to us.’<sup>137</sup> Okrent and his league mates in 1980 even referred to MLB as the ‘other’ baseball,<sup>138</sup> eschewing the real vs. fake dichotomy as spurious and false. Roto and the ‘other’ baseball, they maintained, were not antithetical, but rather coextensive, with the latter having no greater claim on reality than the former.<sup>139</sup>

An interesting irony that emerges from this Roto mind-set relates to the commodification and dehumanization of athletes upon which the game is premised (and for which fantasy sport today has been criticized<sup>140</sup>). Describing the inaugural draft in his ‘Introduction’ to the first edition of *Rotisserie League Baseball* in 1984, Okrent facetiously blamed the league’s \$260-per-team salary cap on the absence of Miller, who won free agency among many other rights and benefits for the players during his tenure with the MLBPA.<sup>141</sup> In doing so, Okrent explicitly associated himself and his league mates not with Miller and the players (as I have argued modern fans did), but rather with Kuhn and the owners, who he claimed ‘would have been proud’ of them for effectively restricting player salaries.<sup>142</sup> Clearly intended to be humorous, Okrent’s aligning of Roto with the business of baseball prior to free agency nevertheless serves to underscore his game’s greatest allure: its promise to restore the control, ownership, and power that fans felt they had lost after 1975. While modern fans were arguably more sympathetic to the players and their plight than traditional fans, those who took up Roto were encouraged by the dynamics of the game itself to treat players like commodities that could be bought and sold at the whim and for the benefit of others. Much like actual baseball owners and general managers, Roto participants viewed the players as assets to be accurately evaluated and pragmatically utilized. In fact, Okrent’s game even involved its own version of the reserve system, with team owners allowed to select several of their best players to keep for the next season, or for as long as they chose to retain their services.

Though this all took place in a virtual realm, Roto's initial participants, it bears repeating, insisted on that realm's 'ultra-' reality. Such an attitude echoes to a certain extent the 'virtual slavery' referenced by Flood in his fight for free agency, though, admittedly, in a very different context. To be clear, I am in no way arguing that Roto enslaves players in either an actual or a virtual sense. My suggestion is rather that the game perpetuates a view of the players common to team owners throughout much of baseball history. In this sense, while Roto was born from a modern embrace of player freedom, autonomy, and agency in the late 1970s, it also exhibited a nostalgia for pre-free-agency times that aligned more with traditional fandom. Roto, therefore, cannot be considered solely a manifestation of modern baseball values. While free agency gave players a measure of control over their own commodification, in the minds of its participants, Roto quickly divested them of that control. Such modern fans embraced the values of free agency for the players, but much more so for themselves. And, when the two perspectives came into conflict, the latter clearly trumped the former. Thus, Roto can be best understood as both an extension of and a response to free agency, a complex and contradictory reaction to one of the most dramatic and disorienting developments in baseball's storied past.

## The Revolution of Fantasy Sport

The arrival of free agency has been called 'the most revolutionary change in baseball history'.<sup>143</sup> It transformed the game on and off the field, both reflecting and reshaping American sports culture. Releasing the players from the longstanding shackles of the reserve system, free agency granted them unprecedented levels of autonomy and authority. In doing so, it sparked a revolution in fandom as well. The rapidly changing baseball reality in the late 1970s, marked by skyrocketing player salaries and a sharp spike in roster turnover, led fans to construct their own baseball fantasies. For modern fans, this fantasy was one in which they were both the owners and general managers of their own virtual teams. Such a shift in fandom would not have been possible, or at the very least would not have been as appealing, prior to 1975. Only in an era in which the bonds between players and owners and between fans and teams were dramatically weakened could the logic of Roto emerge and eventually take hold with such strength. A product of dual revolutions, Roto inspired one of its own, laying the foundation not only for fantasy baseball, but for fantasy sport in general. While undoubtedly the result of various forces, the birth of Roto was primarily due to the advent of free agency and of the modern fandom that it brought about. While technology is considered largely responsible for the exponential surge in the popularity of fantasy sport in the 1990s and beyond, it merely facilitated what was already a subtle but imminent shift in logic that began with free agency and found a unique expression in Roto.

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## Disclosure Statement

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