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Reengineering baseball

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APRIL IS KNOWN FOR SPAWNING EUPHORIA among baseball fans, creating the illusion for team owners that they have the perfect sport for all times and all people. Although some observers of the game have suggested that baseball executives have lost touch with the game's timeless essence by realigning pennant races out of existence, scheduling opening "day" at night, and clinging to the designated hitter rule, a more challenging question is this:

Do the architects of our national pastime really expect these "innovations" to attract an audience that has been weaned on MTV and American Gladiators? Will innocuous cosmetic flourishes like new uniforms and remodeled ballparks really do the trick?

Let's get real. What we're dealing with is a completely new youth audience who increasingly seem to equate sports with high speed, bodily contact and explosive entertainment. It's going to take more than new pinstripes and longer playoffs to get them off the couch and into the stands. The time has come to reengineer baseball.

Fast-forward with me to America's pastime 2000 — that is, baseball reengineered for the youth of tomorrow. Although there are still nine innings, Pastime 2000 is radically different in virtually every other respect. Gone is the outdated three-strikes, four-balls, three-outs tedium. Traditional baseball required far too much math and sustained attention, thus confusing a generation of fans who — thanks to our country's educational system — had outgrown simple concepts like addition, subtraction and counting up to three. Now each team gets only one per out per inning and there are no strikes and balls (hence, no more colorless home plate umpires).

In Pastime 2000 every hit is considered fair and is either an out or a home run. There's no middle ground, no irritating subtleties. Forget the hit-and-run, the fisted bloop single and the 3-2-4 double play.

Here's how a typical inning in Pastime 2000 might unfold:

Casey steps to the plate for the Yankees. The Red Sox pitcher serves up a lob and Casey connects immediately with the enlarged Day-Glo "Futureball" (easier for fans to see). It's a dribbler to the mound, creating a classic confrontation, because in Pastime 2000 there are no force-outs.

Casey heads for first base. The pitcher fields the ball and charges at Casey to tag him out. At the same time Casey's eight teammates pour from the dugout and tackle the pitcher. An instant before he's tackled

the pitcher passes the ball to his right fielder who's immediately clotheslined by the Red Sox mid-field linebacker.

The ball is loose. Now the Yankees' objective is to pass the ball all the way to the bleachers. The Red Sox, meanwhile, have to reclaim the ball and tag Casey on the basepaths.

Seventeen players scramble. A bloodied Yankee emerges from the pile and charges toward the centerfield basket — one of three hoops in Pastime 2000 suspended above the warning track in left, center and right fields, respectively. The Yankee ball carrier looks desperately to pass it to the team's head cheerleader — who's double-teamed by Red Sox defenders. They surround the cheerleader but keep a respectful distance, because in Pastime 2000 the one inviolate rule is: "You Can't Touch the Cheerleader."

Suddenly the ball is jarred loose. The Yankee cheerleader grabs it. Casey circles the bases, while the cheerleader weaves (untouched) toward centerfield, looking for a receiver. (Note: The cheerleader isn't allowed to score in Pastime 2000.) The receiver everyone is screaming for is the team's Slam-Jammer.

The Slam-Jammer position is, perhaps, Pastime 2000's greatest innovation because it has lured basketball's biggest names away from the National Basketball Association. Michael Jordan of the White Sox was only the first to trade his sneakers for cleats. ("Good jam, no hit" - why not?) In rapid succession, Shaquille O'Neal joined the Florida Marlins, Patrick Ewing switched from the Knicks to the Mets and David Robinson started slam-jammin' dingers at Chavez Ravine. Even Wilt the Stilt returned to Philly!

But back to the Astroturf. The Yankee cheerleader spins, leaps and passes to Slam-Jammer Charles Barkley. Sir Charles grabs the Futureball, sheds three Red Sox tacklers and jams another Yankee homer deep into the centerfield hoop, obliterating the backboard in the process. Glass flies. Fans scream. Beer flows. Fireworks explode. Stadium rocks.

The next batter ends the Yankee inning, but the fans don't notice because it's the middle of the seventh. It's time for the rock band to emerge from the trap door behind the pitcher's mound. As the band begins to play; we hear the words of America's beloved baseball anthem bellowing from the mouths of excited youngsters throughout the park: ". . . buy me some sushi and granola snacks."

Now, that's a ballgame!

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