

Debase-ball

A can of an opener leaves Casey cold

Ahhh, Opening Day. The smell of the freshly cut grass mowed into concentric circles, the newly raked infield. The shiny home whites and road grays; the crack of a bat, the roar of the crowd. The smell of peanuts and sausages, the pop of a glove. The squeeze play and the hit-and-run; put more simply—baseball.

Yes, it is time for rejoicing you stat freaks and sandlot rats. Baseball season is back. On Monday, the American national pastime began its first season of the new millennium. Or at least I thought it did.

All the teams were in action. ESPN aired broadcasts of what seemed like six or seven games. Fans were excited. Hotdogs were consumed. Greg Maddux, Randy Johnson and Pedro Martinez pitched. Ken Griffey Jr. played in his new Reds uni. Doesn't that sound like an opening day to you?

Well, it wasn't.

Instead of continuing America's most tradition-laden sport's traditional opening day ceremonies, the brilliant people over in Proud-To-Be-Your-Commissioner Bud Selig's office decided to do things a little differently this year. They decided to stage the wonder and tradition that is Major League Baseball's Opening Day an ocean away from the fans who built, finance and love the industry that is major league baseball. You've got to be kidding me, right? Nothing can be that ridiculous.

Double jeopardy

Casey, you control the board.

I'll take Baseball Trivia for a thousand, Alex.

The Jeopardy answer is: the year baseball's opening day took place outside North America for the first time.

What it is when Hell freezes over?

No, I'm sorry, Casey, you're wrong.

In reality, baseball's opening day took place outside North America for the very first time just this year. Opening Day was not Monday. It was last Wednesday and it happened in Tokyo, Japan.

You may be confused; I certainly was. Only two teams played instead of all thirty. Neither team had home field advantage and the game started at 5 AM EST. All of which adds up to one word—weak. Very weak.

To illustrate the ridiculousness of this so-called opening day in Japan, let's look at just one player: Raul Mondesi. Last season, Mondesi hit two three-run homers on opening day—one in the bottom of the ninth to tie the game and one in the bottom of the eleventh to win it for LA. This season, Mondesi spent opening day

playing in a spring training exhibition in Dunedin, Florida. Huh?

Let me explain. Last Wednesday and Thursday, while the Cubs and Mets were playing the first two official major league baseball games of 2000 in Tokyo, every other big league club was still settling its pitching rotation for the start of the season. So, the Cubs-Mets game last Wednesday counted while the games everyone else played didn't. Instead of Boston, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, St. Louis, Atlanta, San Francisco and Cleveland, we had opening day in Tokyo, Vero Beach, Kissimmee, Bradenton, Yuma and Tucson. Now there's an opening day to get excited about.

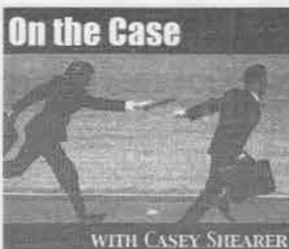
E-Selig

Having only two teams play opening day is only half the travesty. The more egregious part of baseball's error was starting the season in March, not April, with two games in Japan, an ocean away from baseball's biggest fans and even further away from the traditions of major league baseball. Japan may have Sadaharu Oh, but can they really know what it means to be haunted by the Curse of the Bambino?

In commissioner Selig's defense, it appears that he was only following the lead of another major American sport. The NBA and commissioner David Stern opened the 1999-2000 season with a pair of games in Japan, a growing tradition Stern is fostering in order to expand the game as well as his league. The so-called NBA Japan Games began in 1990 when Phoenix and Utah matched up in Tokyo. This season, Minnesota and Sacramento took the trip. Games in Japan. They're fan-tastic. Sound familiar?

There were, however, a few key differences. First, the rest of the NBA started their season the same night as the Japan Games. Second, basketball's opening night has none of the tradition, ceremony and fanfare that are associated with baseball's opening day.

The supposed reason that the baseball games in Japan took place well before the rest of the season began was due to the difficulty of travel. In the NBA, it is possible for a team to take three or four consecutive days off in order to adjust to the jetlag from a transpacific flight. For baseball, this is simply not possible. Teams rarely have two days off in a row, and never have three or four. This is the main reason that, with its current schedule, expansion teams in Japan and Europe are not a realistic possibility for baseball. For a Japanese or European expansion team to be even remotely viable, the season would



WITH CASEY SHEARER

either have to be shortened, or a whole bunch of doubleheaders would have to be added. Since both of those options decrease revenue for the owners, don't expect them to happen anytime soon.

But I digress. The key issue here is not the scheduling quirks. The important part is the tradition. If Selig wanted to open the season with games in Japan he should have done so on Monday, when everyone else started playing for real. Let the professional ballplayers deal with jetlag just like every normal businessman who travels to Asia. By not doing so, Selig has helped to tarnish one of the purest expressions of joy in American sports, baseball's Opening Day.

Get yer ice cold sake hee-ah!

Opening day is supposed to be about hotdogs, peanuts and Cracker Jack, not sushi and chicken-kabobs. Opening day is about "Hey, beer man!" not politely motioning to the girl dressed in fluorescent pink with a keg on her back and some sake in her pocket. (On second thought, that one might be a good idea.) Opening day is about diving for foul balls and taunting from the bleachers, not returning the foul balls to an usher or refusing to boo. Baseball is supposed to be about the open air of summer. Isn't that why Seattle imploded the Kingdome and Houston abandoned the Astrodome? And yet, opening day takes place in the Tokyo Dome of all places.

It's just not right. If Selig and company consider this idea again next season, let's hope that they vote "No" next time. Opening Day is an American treasure. We can share it with the rest of the world, but we shouldn't just give it away. So to all the burns on the North Side of Chicago, here's to hoping next season Slammin' Sammy takes his first cuts at Wrigley. Next year, Mister Proud-To-Be-Your Bud, we want to yell "Wassup?". not "Wasabi!"

For Bud Selig, opening day was last Wednesday. For the rest of us, America's game officially got under way this past Monday, at just the right time, on Opening Day.

CASEY SHEARER '00 was the opening day starter for his little league team in 1989.