

Viewpoints

Sports Strikes: Let the Games Continue

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THOSE who do not understand labor history are doomed to repeat it. So it is with the professional hockey strike; its participants act as if they must sacrifice their season just as their counterparts in baseball did. But there is a way for hockey — and baseball next spring, if necessary — to have a strike and play the game, too: a "virtual strike."

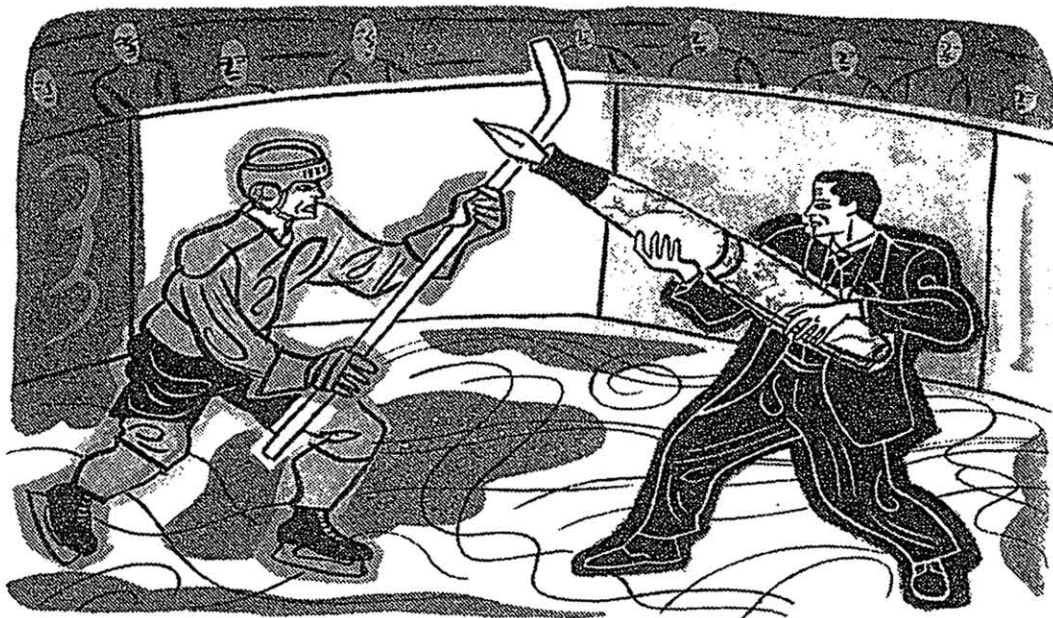
This technique, derived from an idea of our colleagues Howard Raiffa and David Lax, would allow the season to be played as usual, but with an important twist. Neither the players nor the owners would receive a nickel until they resolved their differences. Instead, all ticket and television revenues would pour into an escrow fund guarded by a trusted third party.

Not only would players and owners inherit a happier base of fans when the strike was over, but they both would have a chance to preserve their handsome streams of income. If baseball had done this, it would now have nearly half a billion dollars in escrow. No matter how this pot was divided — 50-50, 10-90 or 90-10 — both sides would be better off than with canceled games and no revenue.

Moreover, such a fund — its large sums tantalizingly out of reach until the strike ended — would surely raise the incentive for ending the dispute. And, to turn the screws even tighter, for every week that passed without agreement, a fraction of the fund could be given to a worthy cause, like the United States Olympic Committee.

Beyond owners and players, whom would a virtual hockey strike help? Ticket takers, vendors and Zamboni drivers would clearly benefit; indeed, all those whose jobs and businesses depended on the sport would get their income again. And hockey fans would be able to cheer their favorites on the ice. Imagine if baseball had had a

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Illustrations by Edward Briant

virtual strike. Fans would have answers to what are now eternal unknowns: Would Frank Thomas have won batting's first triple crown in decades? Would Tony Gwynn have batted .400? Would Ken Griffey Jr. have broken Roger Maris's season record of 61 home runs?

A virtual strike is much different from the cooling-off periods or standstill agreements seen in other industries. Under those processes, in order to defuse tensions, labor and management basically return to business as usual while continuing to negotiate. Thus, these techniques grant a reprieve to any side in financial distress.

In contrast, a virtual strike would not disturb the contenders' balance of power. Each side could still bargain as hard or as collaboratively as it saw fit. Baseball team owners, for instance,

could have held out until the next spring training or beyond, hoping that the players would break ranks. Or the players could have waited for the owners to cave in under the weight of lost revenue. And in a virtual strike, the escrow fund is also in play. The contenders could split it in accord with the new agreement or with the old one, or even let someone else decide.

In short, for players, owners and fans, a virtual strike is a win-win-win idea. The contenders can continue to wage economic warfare with their relative positions unchanged, but minimize their financial losses. And fans and people whose livelihoods depend on the struck sport can be protected for the duration.

Theoretically, one side might resist a virtual strike in the hope that a game-deprived public would pressure the other side. Such pressure has built up in the baseball strike; look at the Congressional proposals to strip the sport of its antitrust exemption and to deny owners the right to impose salary caps. Still, it is costly and risky for baseball players to bet much of a season's revenue that Congress will do so. Anyway, the prevailing public attitude has hardly been partisan. It has been "a plague on both your houses."

What if the adversary's demise is one party's goal? Marvin Miller, the first executive director of the Major League Baseball Players Association, believes the owners want to break the union, for example. But while virtual strikes underscore the disputants' common interest in maximizing the sport's income, the technique would still allow any party so inclined to wage a war of economic attrition. In a virtual strike just as in a real one, when the players' strike fund is exhausted or a franchise teeters on bankruptcy, either side can surrender.

Hockey can learn from baseball's mistakes, as can football, basketball and other industries that may get caught up in strikes. Baseball fans everywhere have had to subsist on the thin gruel of computer projections of how the 1994 season would have ended. Baseball had it backwards: The games should have been real, but the strike did not have to be.