

Written by Maury Brown

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Stan Kasten is, for all intents and purposes, a free agent. The former president and still partial owner of the Washington Nationals, left the club at the end of the season.

And while Kasten has left the Nationals, he is far from retired. He has been mentioned as a possible successor to Bud Selig as commissioner, but given that he's been president of an NBA and NHL club at the same time as being president of an MLB club (Hawks, Thrashers, and Braves), he's become the topic of numerous rumors of landing as an executive outside of baseball.

Gregariously, Kasten waves off such comments. But, while he won't speak of how the high-placed positions in sports might include him, he's engaging on a host of others.

While with no club, Kasten has been at the Baseball Winter Meetings, often visible. With the Nationals and Jayson Werth agreeing in principle to the terms of a seven-year, \$126 million contract, many were picking their jaw off the ground, trying to wrap their head around the deal.

When asked what his reaction is on the Werth deal, Kasten chuckles.

"I have two separate reactions. I know the industry was surprised, and you can have your own opinion about that, but as a Nats fan it's a very exciting acquisition. It says a lot of things. First

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of all, it's saying – as the organization has been for the last 6 months -- that the club is getting much closer having established a minor league system, and now you're putting pieces together that allow you to first competing and then contending.”

Kasten contends that the Werth deal shows that the Nationals were not going to put moving forward on hold due to the injury to Stephen Strasburg. “They not going to put the team on hold till 2012,” said Kasten. “They're going to start adding pieces now.”

On the state of the game, Kasten has been involved tightly with issues around signing key player talent out of the amateur draft, first with Stephen Strasburg, and then with Bryce Harper, both represented by Scott Bora. Both deals seemed to possibly be touch-and-go based upon terms of an MLB contract and bonuses. The Harper deal was reached just over a minute from the signing deadline. Still, Kasten dodges talk of a slotting-system. “It's one solution, but not the only one,” Kasten says. Instead, he focuses on how MLB's calendar is arranged.

“In the last two seasons there was talent head-and-shoulders above the pack,” Kasten said. “In both cases, that player was drafted and signed by the team with the worst record. That's a good result, and how the system should work. But, all too often we know that that's not what happens. Often times the best players aren't going to the neediest teams due to signability concerns. That's a problem that we need to fix.”

Kasten added that due to the deadline that was reached in the last CBA, too many players are not signing till right up to that point, and because of that, players are not benefiting from getting, what he sees as critical training, etc. at a critical point.

Those that have followed Kasten's long history as an executive recall [Hal Bodley's article in USA Today from 2005](#)

In it, Kasten reflected on the roles player agents have in sports. In it, Kasten mentioned removing agents from the equation, all together.

Kasten subscribes to an “agent-free universe”. While the likes of Scott Boras, Dan Lozano, and others would scoff at the notion, Kasten believes that union and management could function without them.

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“The unions could do this more effectively. More efficiently. To the betterment of the industry and the bottom 90 percent of the players,” Kasten said. While it doesn’t fit neatly into baseball model, he capped systems such as the NBA where rookies are slotted into wage scale and max players at the very top, lessen the need for agents.

Asked if he believes the Luxury Tax in baseball acts as a soft cap, Kasten argues against it, citing the Yankees. “It’s not cap,” Kasten adds with energy. “Baseball doesn’t have a cap at all. When you have one team in this sport that goes so far beyond it and don’t care about it, and you have the rest of the league 95 percent of the time being is so far from [the Luxury Tax threshold]... If that’s the case, you don’t have a capped system.”

Kasten has been in the sports executive game for some time. Whether it was his beginnings in 1979 when he became the youngest GM in the NBA for the Atlanta Hawks through 2006 when he became a minority owner and President of the Washington Nationals, clearly, the sports landscape has changed. Asked what has been the single biggest change in how ownership looks at the game, Kasten sees the fan experience at its center.

“There’s been a revolution in the way we reach out to our customers; the fans that come to the games. The experience at the ballpark is so different today. And content delivery systems are completely different than it was 25-years-ago. Content delivery seems to change every month. Three years ago we didn’t know what Tweeting meant, and now social media is a key part of reaching out to customers.”

As Kasten heads back into the flurry of activity at the Winter Meetings, you sense that Kasten is clearly not done being a player in the game. A man that notoriously sidesteps what he has plans for in the future seems to be everywhere showing up at games across the four major pro sports speaking with owners. And while many believe that MLB’s owner would like nothing more than to figure out a way to install Selig in for life, and beyond, a point is coming when baseball will have to shift hands to a new commissioner. Kasten will likely continue to be on the short list for that position.

From the Winter Meetings: Stan Kasten Talks Werth Deal, Agent-Free World, and the State of Baseball

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