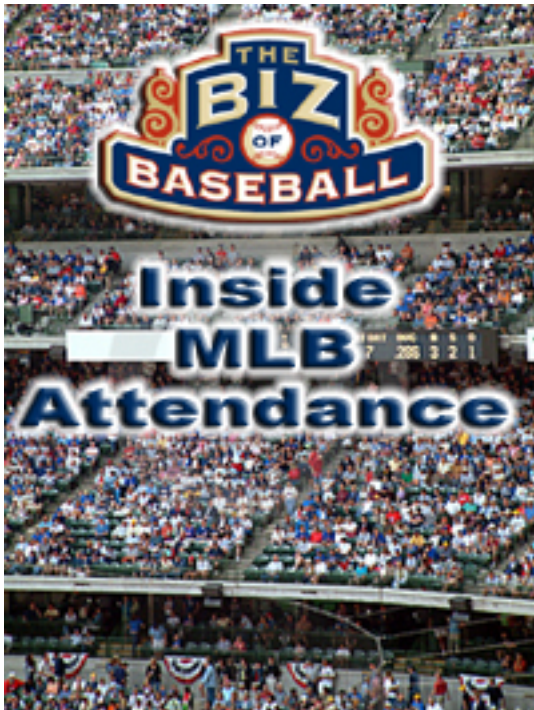


Numbers Show That MLB Interleague Play Isn't As Popular As We Were Led to Believe

Written by Maury Brown
Tuesday, 02 July 2013 13:11



It has been one of the key moments in Bud Selig's tenure, created barstool debates throughout the country, and until this year, hasn't had enough information to say definitively how popular it really is.

The topic is interleague play in Major League Baseball.

Since Bud Selig and the owners agreed that having a smattering of games that sees the National and American League teams competing in the regular season, the chorus from the league has been simple: interleague, while controversial to the purist, is a fan favorite.

Since it started in 1997 interleague games had drawn an average of 33,285 through 2012, or 12 percent higher than traditional intraleague. Selig and the league—first to highlight that they had, indeed, made the right decision in 1997, and then to promote its legacy—have touted interleague's popularity.

The problem has always been that interleague occurred in two short series, first in May that surrounded Memorial Day and later in the season when a longer stretch is played in July. The limited number of games, one of which took advantage of the 3-day weekend, and the others

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around summer when weather is at its best and kids are out of school, never really spoke wholly to how popular interleague might be over a long stretch.

That all changed this season. When the Astros moved to the AL West, and the AL and NL were confronted with 15 teams a piece, it was decided that "daily interleague" would be across the calendar. While the number of interleague tilts and when they are played do not occur daily, since Opening Day when the Angels played the Reds in Cincinnati, interleague has peppered baseball's schedule.

Leading into July, there had been 182 interleague games played. This included the "Rivalry Week" games that spanned Memorial Day to Thursday, May 30th. These games which see match-ups such as the Yankees and Mets, Reds and Indians, White Sox and Cubs, Dodgers and Angels, have indeed been the most popular. But, when we look at intraleague to interleague across what is now the middle of the 2013 season, it shows that interleague lags behind, not ahead of intraleague play, when it comes to attendance.

The 182 interleague games through June have seen an average paid attendance of 28,691 compared to 28,664 for intraleague, a difference of just 27 per game in favor of interleague. But, remember, the Rivalry Week started on Memorial Day, a Monday of a 3-day weekend, thus skewing numbers in favor of interleague. When normalizing that Memorial Day Monday to be in line with other Mondays throughout the season, interleague attendance drops to an average of 28,426 or an average of 239 less per game than intraleague sees.

While the rest of the season is yet to be played, the numbers compellingly show that interleague is not as popular as the past numbers have been said to be. It's not that the "rivalries" aren't popular, they are (they averaged 30,876 across the Rivalry Week in May this year), but rather balanced interleague throughout the season pulls in pretty much the same crowds as traditional interleague has.

None of this is to say that interleague should be removed. What it does say is don't use those past numbers as propaganda to say how much more popular interleague is since it came into place in 1997. As the numbers now show, it's pretty much a wash. Enjoy it for what it is, not some monumental popularity shift added to the regular season.

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