

Moneyball's Godfather Buys Us a Million More Hrs For Free

Written by Jeff Angus
Sunday, 10 June 2007 03:07



Mariner home games this year and last average about 25 minutes less than they did in 2000, but with as much baseball action. For the blessing of less waste, we owe a debt of gratitude to a gent who is not just Baseball's most effective management guru, but North America's most effective working manager in any field: **Sandy Alderson**.

How Alderson, now President of the San Diego Padres (the Mariners' "traditional" Interleague rival), came to give the 2.5 million Mariner fans attending games last year somewhat over a million person-hours of their lives back without depriving them of a shred of on-field mano-a-mano is a fascinating story. It's also a great example of intrepid skill and relentless negotiation that had to balance everyone else's desires and needs but still come to the rescue of the fans who pay to see the National Pastime played out on Fields of Dreams and Schemes and even (yes, we remember the Bob Melvin Era) Screams.

Changing the behaviour and processes of established billion-dollar institutions is the most difficult management feat. Changing them is much harder when the institution has an almost a religious role in our society's view of itself (after all, how many centuries after Latin became a moribund language did it take the Roman Catholic church to give up conducting services in its original tongue?). And it's harder still to get an institution to change when it's on a hot streak of financial success, even when it knows it's headed for a fall if it doesn't change (uh, global warming anyone?).

But to appreciate how Alderson executed the initiative for Major League Baseball's headquarters, it pays to know a little about him, where he comes from, how he became the wizard he is.

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Alderson grew up a military brat, a great background for a change expert.

“I grew up moving around a lot. As I try to figure out what kind of impact that had on my life, aside from the impact it may have had on personal relationships, I think it makes people more adaptable,” Alderson told me. “A willingness to embrace change, not allowing yourself to be daunted by new circumstances...the ability to create new relationships and operate in different environments. And changing all that every two- to four years.” And, he thinks, living overseas, partially in other cultures, contributes to the military brat’s successful coping toolkit.

College and law school at Ivy League institutions (another set of eccentric cultures that require adaptation) sandwiched Alderson’s service in the Marine Corps and a tour of duty in Vietnam. On graduating law school, he moved to San Francisco and practiced everyone’s favorite profession.

He practiced business law, but not with corporate clients, customers who force professional service providers to learn more and more about less, and that take their upper management ever farther away from the actual details of the working, practical part of the business.

“They were smaller clients who had more practical problems than they did theoretical ones. I was less involved in corporate governance issues and more involved in how to make a safe pole-vaulting pit. I enjoyed a range of diverse clients. I had some clients in agriculture...a lot of things where you could kick the tires and be part of the business as well as provide legal advice.”

In 1981, Alderson became general counsel to the Oakland A’s, but, as he said, “we had a small front office...bigger than Charlie Finley’s, but not by much. So while there was legal work, there was a lot of baseball administrative work...knowing all the rules...I was involved in.”

And like all great innovators, Alderson used slack time to increase his knowledge about his line of work and others. “Being a general counsel wasn’t a full-time occupation. I could go to Modesto and watch minor league games, do various things that would add to my baseball education.”

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He learned enough that in late 1983, he became General Manager, a position rarely given to someone from outside the game. Michael Lewis, the author of the best-selling book Moneyball stated Sandy was the initiator of the evidence-based analytical approach that would help lead the team to dominant years in 1988 – 1990, and that, once the team was sold to real estate developers who were resistant to investing in players, would become one of the franchise's leading strategic advantages in competing against better-funded competitors.

But as team president from 1993 - 1998, Alderson was relentless in his exploration for new kinds of data and new uses for old data, it was human factors – hiring people like Billy Beane to be a scout and then general manager and the Merlin the Magician of contemporary pitching coaches, Rick Peterson, and Paul DePodesta to be assistant G.M. to revolutionize processes on and off the field, that he believes made the difference. Looking back on all the A.L. flags of the 90's and the Moneyball A's chronic success since 2000, it's the group of people he put together and mentored of which he seems proudest.

“That means so much...and that so many of that group are still there is very satisfying,” he said.

And when the time came to move on from that endeavor, he left under his own power, and to take on more challenges. In 1998 he moved to New York as an executive vice-president for Major League Baseball where his job would be about helping headquarters be more operationally-sound and to build up processes to make them more effective.

He executed the emotionally-supercharged and politically sensitive league operations around a visit of the world champion Cuban national baseball team to Baltimore, and the logistically drenched and internally sensitive U.S. team that headed to, and won, the 2000 Olympics in Sydney. But it was shortening game times that had oozed to over three hours that was one of baseball's change management victories unsurpassed since the 1947 endeavor to take Jim Crow out of the game. And there are great management and life lessons in this victory.

The first lesson is that if you want to get change in a big, complex institution, you never waste your time with “voluntary compliance” or self-regulation”.

Alderson remembered, “In prior years, there had been some effort to speed up games. Steve Palermo (a former umpire) had been an advocate for speeding up games. But as there are so

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many times in life, ideas don't always get translated to action or implemented properly when they do.

“Nothing really happened.

“When I got to Major League Baseball, Frank Robinson was in charge of time-of-game. He had three or four guys who would go around talk to managers and pitching coaches and say ‘Hey, hurry it up. Please do this or that’.”

Like any accomplished Marine NCO, Alderson said he'd never relied on personal persuasion as a long-term solution. “What I tried to do first was analyze the games themselves with the notion that if you can measure it, you can improve it.”

That's the second lesson, which is while you'll need that fuzzy and non-reproducible thing called “leadership,” to succeed, you won't even get out of the starting gate without facts, evidence from which to design the new ways.

“We didn't have a complete picture of the components of the game and it's components and identify areas which were inefficient,” he said. “You can take all the actions in a game, get starting and stopping times and determine where you have slippage.

“You can have it between innings. There had been a lot of discussion about how we had more commercials than before and how that lengthened games.” But it turned out that when Alderson's team analyzed that timing data, it wasn't the commercials themselves that had caused time-between-innings to become blubbericious.

“It wasn't the time of commercials, it was the amount of time it was taking us to get out of the inning, come back to commercials and then get back to the game. We losing a minute or 45 seconds every half inning.”

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Sandy noted it was players getting out to their positions, but more markedly, “sloppiness among broadcasters who wouldn’t get out of their inning and into a commercial break fast enough to get back in time”.

And as far as the near-norm, at least on televised Mariner games, of missing the first pitch of a half inning, “That’s one of the problems of the lack of collaboration between baseball and the broadcasters.” Baseball aims to give exactly the contracted length for breaks, 2:05 for local and 2:25 for national. “But the game can’t hit that exactly every time. So we aimed to change it from about 3:15 for an inning break to something more like 2:45. If they sell 2:25, they’ll never make it in and out. But people get greedy...we had one club that was selling its own ads and selling them right up to the edge”.

That’s the third lesson: if you want a chance for success, leave slack, leave enough room that even with imprecision, you can succeed.

And the fourth change management lesson at least for the tough ones might be the most important. Because while the easier changes are built around a one or two big behavioral changes (turning back the nationwide proliferation of lead poisoning by lowering the lead content of two systems that transmitted the most heavy metal into citizens, gasoline and paint), the tough ones require managers to pay attention to everything.

Fixing time-between-innings wasn’t enough to bring game times to the target length of 2 hours 46 minutes. Batters needed to set up more quickly and to step out of the box less. Pitchers needed to work faster. And there would be no help from the individual clubs on this issue: they didn’t want to enforce against their own players. So Alderson applied another indispensable behavioral change technique: he started the initiative with those not-yet enculturated to the standard behavior.

He started in the minor leagues, getting up-and-coming minor league players and managers used to the idea of tighter games.

“Back when he played, Mike Hargrove was known as ‘the human rain delay’, but he took very little time compared to today’s batters,” Alderson observed.

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For the significantly higher number of crisper better-paced ball games we get to see, we owe a debt of gratitude to Sandy Alderson's unsurpassed skill set and relentless drive.

It's over a million hours a year for Mariner attendees alone. That's longer than Jose Vidro going from 1st to home on a double.

Jeff Angus is a presenter on [Management by Baseball](#) , and the author of the book of the same name ([available at Amazon.com](#)). His complete profile can be read on the Biz of Baseball's [Author Profile](#) page.

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