Written by Jordan Kobritz
Wednesday, 25 March 2009 11:39

The second edition of the World Baseball Classic ended its three-week run amidst a torrent of criticism, most of it undeserved. Critics pan the Classic for a number of reasons, chief among them the timing and lack of interest in the U.S. Baseball purists decree the imposition on Spring Training and the lack of topnotch talent on the rosters of most countries.

Much of the criticism comes from those who don't understand the impetus behind the event. The WBC was never designed to determine which country has the best talent. The intent was to promote the game worldwide. In that respect, it has achieved as much if not more than its supporters could have hoped for. Game attendance, TV ratings and media coverage around the globe all increased over the first WBC in 2006.

While fans in this country have been lukewarm towards the event, fans in other participating countries have embraced the WBC in ways never dreamed of before the Classic became a reality. The Netherlands defeating the Dominican Republic – twice – to move into the second round of this year's Classic gave hope to nascent baseball countries around the globe that they, too, can play the game on the world stage.

As a marketing tool, the WBC has been wildly successful. The exposure the game has received from the WBC will undoubtedly increase baseball's revenues, benefitting owners and players alike. No surprise, therefore, that this is one of the few areas of agreement between MLB and the Players' Association.

Owners and managers have voiced concerns - however muted given the support of the Classic from the Commissioner's Office - about the well being of the players, especially pitchers. And the media has chimed in with both criticism and suggestions on how to improve the event, both in terms of timing and format.

The major misconception about the WBC is that this is a world tournament. That's hardly the case. Some of the best players decline to participate, for reasons ranging from fear of injury to the outright disapproval of their clubs. Because the Classic is held during Spring Training, with the exception of the Asian teams - who begin practicing for the event months in advance - most players aren't in regular season shape. Pitchers who do agree to participate are held to set pitch counts. Position players are assured of a certain number of innings or at bats, regardless of the dictates of the games. The result is the tournament is a global version of Spring Training.

And the format – this year's Classic was double elimination for the first two rounds and single elimination for the final round – isn't conducive to the sport of baseball. MLB playoffs are best-of-seven affairs (five in the Division Series). But playing a best-of-seven series would extend the WBC beyond the acceptance of even its most ardent supporters.

The timing of the WBC is admittedly horrible. Playing games during Spring Training upsets the natural rhythms and rituals of baseball. But although a number of critics have suggested alternatives – playing the final round of the Classic in July, either around or instead of the All-Star Game, or after the season ends – those options are even less palatable than the status quo. MLB teams would not be inclined to give up lucrative July dates for the WBC. And, playing the WBC after the MLB season ends doesn't make much sense either, given that the World Series can extend into November. The fact is, there is no perfect time to hold the WBC.

The bottom line is the WBC is all about the bottom line. It was designed to generate revenue for the owners and players. The WBC isn't so much a tournament, as it is an exhibition. That doesn't make it bad, nor does it mean it shouldn't be held. Just don't make it out to be something it isn't or something it was never intended to be.

In the face of mounting criticism, even from the ranks of owners, Commissioner Bud Selig insists the WBC will continue, with the next version scheduled for spring 2013. Give Selig credit for holding firm to his position. We should be appreciating the WBC for what it is, not criticizing it for what it isn't.

Business of Sports Network Feature Article:

AC Milan, Chelsea, Inter Milan and Club América Announce US Tour Dates

Jordan Kobritz is a staff member of the Business of Sports Network . He is a former attorney, CPA, and Minor League Baseball team owner. He is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at Eastern New Mexico University and teaches the Business of Sports at the University of Wyoming. Jordan can be reached at n
jkobritz@mindspring.com