

THE FEMININE TOUCH

A MIDSUMMER'S NIGHTMARE

By Kimberly Gadgette

"The only bad thing about winning the pennant is that you have to manage the All-Star Game the next year. I'd rather go fishing for three days."—Whitey Herzog

Once upon a time, in the faraway land of Depression Era Chicago, Mayor Ed Kelly was concerned about drawing a crowd to his city's World's Fair. Approaching promoter/sportswriter Arch Ward for help, Kelly probably pitched something like this:

In this, the year of our Lord 1933, while Chicago's Century of Progress Exposition is in full swing, let us have an exhibition game for the great masses. Let they who pay have a chance to gaze upon the likes of Babe Ruth downing hot dogs in the flesh. His flesh, but Chicago's dogs. We shall call this one-time event The All-Star Game. Dads! Moms! Kiddies! Rush to Chicago without delay! And replete our impoverished city with your hard-earned pennies!

The masses rejoiced — at least, all 49,000 of them who attended the game starring Lefty Grove, Lou Gehrig, Pie Traynor, Jimmie Foxx, and the Babe, who performed as hoped by hitting the first All-Star home run. No surprise, then, that baseball commissioner Judge Landis decreed the All-Star Game to be an annual event.

In 1933, with very little opportunity for the fans to see their favorite star players, let alone the stars playing against each other, an exhibition game made sense.

But take a promoter's idea, add 73 years to it, and lo and behold, things have changed. Since the advent of television, cable, interleague games, and ballplayers switching teams faster than I can change a channel, the All-Star game now packs about as much excitement as the opening weekend of the newest Rob Schneider film.

Yet baseball's ninth commissioner, partial to hairpieces and hogwash, slogs on. Mr. Alan H. "Bud" Selig, ergo "Wignut," was determined to stay the course, even after the 2002 game resulted in a pitcher-less, 11th inning tie. Wignut had a new plan. I hear that a light bulb actually materialized over his head, but given the macabre fascination we all have with his hairdo, nobody noticed.

Waving something like a magic bat — and with the agreement of his pals, the team owners, Wignut proclaimed a new two-year experiment in 2003: The All-Star game winner was to have home-field advantage in the World Series. "This energizes it," said the ecstatic commish. "People pay a lot of money to see that game ... Television people pay a lot of money for the game. It was not and should not be a meaningless exhibition game."

Perhaps Wignut hoped that if he built a slogan, people would come.

Hence, the annoying "This Time It Counts." With an emphasis on counts, as in advertising dollars from Fox? Counts, as in petty rulers that collect the coin of the realm to amass in their counting-houses? Or is it more like a No-Account Commissioner, so out of touch with the fans that three years later, he's still insisting that this exhibition game is more important than regular play?

After having pitched 6-1/3 innings in the previous Sunday's Mets-Marlins game, Tom Glavine bowed out of playing in this year's All-Star Game. To wit (or maybe half-wit), Wignut suggested that baseball rules be altered to prohibit All-Star players from pitching the final game of the first half of the season.

"... as far as not having guys pitch on Sunday," Glavine told the *New York Daily News*, "I don't know. If the team were to come to me and say, 'Hey, you want to pitch in the All-Star Game or you want to pitch Sunday?' I'd rather pitch for my team. That's more important. That's what the big picture is."

But it seems that Wignut's big picture is askew. He waxes on about his experience at the 1950 All-Star game, where he saw Ted Williams break his elbow in the first inning but stay in the game. What's with Wignut? Does he get misty when he recounts his own children's mishaps with chainsaws?

Times have changed, and so have ballplayers, who have a keener

sense than ever of protecting both their literal and physical jewels. At the top of "the dog ate my homework" excuse list is Manny Ramirez, who's been begging off for years, with reasons from a dying grandmother to hamstrings to sore right knees. Maybe next year he'll just tell it like it is: "This Time It Sucks."

But let's give Manny performance credit where it counts: prior to this year's All-Star break, he played in 82 out of 86 games. His consistently stunning stats speak to his commitment to the game, rather than some mindless exhibition of free-flying bats and gloves. And please, don't get me started on the Home Run Derby. What's next? Throwing cream pies at Barry Bonds for free bleacher seats?

Maybe it's Wignut's performance that should be examined, e.g., sidestepping the steroids issue as long as possible, favoring his own kind, the baseball owners, over the sport itself. But no matter how loud the jeering, Wignut remains steadfast, promising that the All-Star Game will remain as long as he's commissioner (through 2009). "If after I'm gone, somebody wants to make changes, that's OK, too," he says.

How charitable of Wignut. On second thought, ... I think charity might be the last thing on his mind. **MCS**

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WHAT'S NEXT? THROWING CREAM PIES AT BARRY BONDS FOR FREE BLEACHER SEATS?