

The Devil Advocates:



Some of you may have suddenly realized that you don't see Dr. Fan at SABR conventions. As the formalist Aristotelian patrician elitist that he is, it is not simply that you fail to locate these chapter meetings within convenient walking distance of Crocus Hill (it wouldn't kill you to book a fine meeting room at the University Club), but that Dr. Fan simply cannot bear to be for any extended period of time in the company of those (and he has ample photographic and other documentary evidence) who appear to be making a concerted and successful effort to dress even worse than does Stew Thornley (remember, a gentleman always removes his headgear indoors [watch Dr. Fan as he enters the Metrodome], and, as the Pioneer Press "Bulletin Board" has so nimbly noted, a baseball cap worn backwards is the universal symbol of a fool [though far from the only such piece of sign reasoning]); however, perhaps, although William Faulkner would have kept going, it is time to end this sentence now . . . but not without a bit of a recursive tease, which, like some earthquakes, you do not know you have experienced until it is over.

Were it not for the number of thoughtful individuals who provided accurate (their narratives correlated remarkably, but without derivative indicators) summaries, Dr. Fan would even now be gnashing his fangs with regret at not having personally experienced the rarest of convention programs: a satiric paper so skillfully woven that, as a parody of certain types of venal "research," it fooled many into imagining that it was an actual serious study! Congratulations to the author! Among the common bogus practices it lampooned by example were:

- * claiming causation where there is, at best, correlation
- * selectively manipulating data
- * pre-ordaining a conclusion at the level of earnest belief (in the theological sense) and then tailoring the study to force the conclusion (Bill James has so often warned against this practice!)

Now, readers of this column in frontier outposts such as Nanticoke and Yellowknife may find what follows incredible, but here is the premise (remember, it's a parody!): that MLB owners agreed to engage in a unanimous conspiracy of systematic institutional racism, then maintained this conspiracy for five decades, despite frequent changes in ownership and the addition of expansion teams not (we assume) in on the original conspiracy, and successfully kept this ingenious cabal secret from journalists, players, umpires, and the public, until finally unmasked by one intrepid researcher!

What insidious, hurtful mechanism did they choose to wreak lasting harm? Oh, dear reader, pause to admire their delicate subtlety! Why, assigning uniform numbers! Mercy, as Red Barber would have said had he but known, why didn't an think of that?

Of course, this satiric premise is a wondrous example of the kind of totally imaginary and fabulous psychodrama that could be concocted only from spongicephalic unjustifiable bleeding-heart liberal guilt.

I asked some of my pals in the world of professional sport to comment on the study (assuring them, for purposes of untainted reaction, that it was not a parody; colleagues, please pardon the deception), with special regard for the assumption that high uniform numbers are a form of discrimination:

"Well, if the author is serious, he is liable, as is the SABR chapter that permitted the paper to be presented, to a class action defamation suit for implying that a particular class of MLB players would not catch on to the discrimination: even middle relievers are smarter than that."

— Tony LaRussa, famous attorney

"This must be a satire, for a key premise is backwards: a class discriminated against would be given low numbers, on the supposition that they could not count very high."

— George F. Will

"White men can't think." — 3 Harold Baines

"Is this guy Jewish? He sure sounds Jewish. Lots of them are guilty about nothing." — 77 Mario Lemieux

"Jeez, and they call us catchers dumb." — 72 Carlton Fisk

"What a Newfie hoser! Grant Fuhr [goaltender of color] and I had a few brews and figured, maybe, you know, this writer's a goalie, so he can't help it, eh?" — 99 Wayne Gretzky

"That's almost as silly as trying to get Roger Maris into Cooperstown."

— Otis Nixon, Ozzie Smith, Bip Roberts, Devon White, Lance Johnson, Brian Jordan, and GlenAllen Hill, AKA The Coalition of Seven Black Guys Whose Uniform Numbers Average 1.571

SUCH A DEAL! SEMIOTIC SILLINESS

Once again, the annual MLB poll of managers rates Tom Kelly highly. This must be the longest-running practical joke in baseball. Surely his colleagues can see that there is no there there. They see through Cito Gaston, known in "Tronno" as "The Mummy." The Blue Jays won two World Series despite Cito, and you Twins fans should remember that one of your Series titles is due to Cito's ability at handling a pitching rotation in a seven-game event. Speaking of that, Kelly's fellow managers may rate him highly because of his self-induced handicap . . .

Dick Such, the typographical error waiting to happen. One would imagine that, given the gonadic humor of baseball players, that, once having chosen the noble career that he now ignobly attempts to implement, Such would have changed his last name. Failing that, he could have chosen any other shortened first name: Rick, Rich, R.J., Snuffy . . . perhaps he was attempting to attract Baseball Annies.

Equally inexplicable is the now-retired son of journeyman actor Peter Marshall, who actually, after having been given an alternative, reverted to the true family name. Look it up if you have to. At least he used Pete, not Peter.

GERUND OR PARTICIPLE? ONLY THE TRAINER KNOWS

Someday dictionaries may contain . . . Hocking: chopping or flailing aimlessly and ineffectively, e.g. "he wasn't really hitting, just hocking at the ball, so the best he could do was a soft tap back to the pitcher."

HOW TO PAY FOR YOUR SEASON TICKET

Not that baseball needs another scandal, but the tire races on the Metrodome display screen are fixed. A season ticket holder learns the pattern without trying, and can win money from gullible Iowans by betting on the tire races. It would not be a good idea, however, to test Sporty Tire for drugs.

NOTICE: The annual parade of right-wing humorists was canceled this year. Jerry Falwell couldn't make it, and Dr. Hawkins refused to march alone.