

Preservation of baseball tradition is at stake in Rose case

FROM the time I was a kid, I loved baseball. I wore the glove as I watched television, collected the cards, knew the averages and went to Yankee Stadium for my birthday to see the Bombers trounce the Indians.

I saw Mickey Mantle, Yogi Berra and Rocky Colavito. I stretched in the seventh inning. My dad explained the history of the memorials in center field. And I slept contentedly on the long drive home. What stories to tell.

I played the game, too. I wore the heavy wool uniform. It was hot, itchy in the August heat and two sizes too big, but I cherished it and the ritual of putting it on. I was ready for the game, nervous but ready to make the great play.

There are many people with comparable memories. They involve family members who cheer even when you flub the play, adults willing to coach and to encourage even the most unpopular or awkward of kids, making new friends and, for the first time outside the family, understanding the notion of "team" play.

Neighbors were the fans and parent-coaches were the Branch Rickeys and the Casey Stengels. The experience, played fully, created an enduring connection between you and the tradition of baseball that no one — not cynics, not men seeking to preserve the game for themselves, not gamblers or drug users — could, or should, be allowed to despoil.

I recount this because in the past few weeks, as the Pete Rose affair has evolved, I have been struck by the growing tendency to characterize Rose as reflecting the tough, physical realities of playing baseball, if not life, and Commissioner Bart Giamatti as reflecting the seemingly more ephemeral legal constraints placed upon it by a detached observer of the game. It is the wrong distinction.

At stake here is not only Pete Rose's career or the legal niceties of who decides wrongdoing.

At stake is the preservation of baseball's tradition and the connection between those who play the game — in the sandlot on Saturday or in their living rooms on Monday nights — and the larger history.

Rose seems the quintessential player. He slides and sweats and wears the uniform. Fans feel close to him. He works hard.



Pete Rose



NEIL PROTO

But his current greatness or his place in baseball history will come not from

hustle or breaking records, but from something more subtle: playing within the tradition, connecting back in time with Ty Cobb or Honus Wagner or with the great plays, or projecting that image, important to my old coach, that upon retirement the creation of the "Pete Rose Little League" would be as meaningful to him as being named to the Hall of Fame.

This is a modest but critical burden. For those who believe it unfair or not

realistic for Rose to carry such a burden, the half million dollar yearly remuneration he receives ought to be sufficient compensation for his trouble.

Giamatti does not play the game. He is certainly, compared to Rose, more detached from the head-first slide into third, and it is not likely you'll find him kicking sand onto the umpire's shoes.

Instead, he watches the plays and respects the hustle. He writes and speaks to baseball's relationship to America, its values and its culture. And, in the image of Branch Rickey and those parent-coaches who taught you how to stand in the box or to throw a curve ball or slide without hurting yourself or the second baseman, he has encouraged good behavior and fair treatment.

Giamatti is not detached from the game, not from its history, nor its old baggy uniforms and picture cards, the Memorials in center field of Yankee Stadium or the young boys and girls getting ready for this Saturday's game.

His burden is profound, and he has, since arriving in the majors, sustained it with grace. He must ensure that players act within the tradition. If they do not, the game becomes detached from the larger history, and the players become mere rogues, roaming the land in search of the fast buck.

We must, of course, get to the truth, and Rose must have a fair opportunity to present his position. It would be sad to many, particularly to young people, if Rose violated the rules; worse if he had to leave baseball. But if the allegations about gambling are accurate, the tradition says Rose must be punished.

In the end, if Giamatti can preserve the tradition, there will be new heroes within it — another Stan Musial, Henry Aaron, Ted Williams, Dwight Gooden or Daryl Strawberry.

There will be more picture cards and, most important, there will be that connection between the young player with great hopes and the larger history.

It should be your call, Bart. Make it with the tradition firmly in mind. Give me a reason, other than nostalgia, to pass on my worn but only slightly tattered Little League glove so it can experience another season.

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