

THE LEAGUE: The Rise and Decline of the NFL by *David Harris*

New York: Bantam Books, 1986

Reviewed by *Andy McCue*

4025 Beechwood Place, Riverside, CA 92506

I learned a lot about current baseball organization and governance from a book I read recently, so I thought I'd review it here even if it is 12 years old and barely mentions the word "baseball".

The subject of *The League* is the rise and decline of the National Football League. The echoes are eerie and the foibles of the NFL owners are enough to make me wait for the same tales to be told about the current crop of the Lords of Baseball.

But, mostly, the book made me reflect on the role of the commissioner's office. And it made me realize that we are never going to get the "strong" commissioner so many are calling for these days unless baseball gets into really deep trouble. (Not that it isn't heading there, but enough of the owners don't appreciate it.)

Pete Rozelle was held up for two decades as the kind of sports leader baseball needed, but as this book amply demonstrates, his successes were extremely limited because he was, in the last instance, a creature of the owners.

There has been only one truly strong commissioner in American sports history - Kenesaw Mountain Landis. There have been two apparently strong commissioners - Rozelle and David Stern - who combined enormous personal talent with great timing, taking troubled leagues and using a changing zeitgeist and television revenues to ride them to the top.

Only Landis had real power. He couldn't be fired without provoking an unwanted barrage of criticism. And, despite his reputation as the bane of miscreant owners, Landis generally avoided confrontations on issues beyond his perception of the integrity of the game and the rise of farm systems.

Rozelle, as Harris shows, took television's growing hunger for football entertainment and used his success exploiting that to cement a group of supporters who thought more of the league than they did of their individual franchises.

When Carroll Rosenbloom, Al Davis, and others began to assert their own franchises' rights, Rozelle's coalition fell apart and he spent his last decade fighting brush fires and watching his league's popularity stagnate.

Today, we watch Jerry Jones (Dallas Cowboys) cut his own deals with Pepsi and damn any deal the league might have cut with Coca-Cola.

And, like a mirror, we see George Steinbrenner sue baseball because it wants to enforce its own merchandise marketing plans, which conflict with Steinbrenner's 10-year, \$95 million contract with Adidas.

The League is a ripe case study of the differences among owners. Those who came from the old, struggling NFL and some from the scruffy AFL were imbued with what Rozelle like to call "League Think", putting group interests ahead of one franchise.

The Carroll Rosenblooms, Joe Robbie, and Al Davises weren't so imbued. And then when the pressure for new stadiums grew, the ball wobbled completely out of Rozelle's control. With most stadiums sold out, and television money shared evenly, the one area where football owners could make their real money was in luxury boxes and individual licensing. This money could either go to the owner's pocket (see Georgia Frontiere) or into buying the best talent (see Jerry Jones).

The League has a great deal of detail on how this state arose and how individual owners tried to maximize their leverage to get what they wanted from various cities. The parallels with baseball are all too obvious.

We can currently see the Twins and Reds poodle faking with their cities about new stadiums, after apparent recent successes by the Astros, Giants, and others.

The League is wonderful at detailing how owners will consistently put their own interests first, followed by those of their franchises, and only later by those of the sport as a whole. Sounds like a couple of leagues I know.