

# Successful league depends on managers, commissioner

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The most common statement I have seen during many years of reading applications from Strat-O-Matic play-by-mail managerial hopefuls is: "I have been a member of many leagues that folded..."

I started and have been commissioner of DECADE (now in its fourth season) and also am currently acting commissioner of the Federal League (subbing for Kurt Smeby). Years of experience have led me to believe that a league's success is due 50 percent to the commissioner and 50 percent to the managers.

## MONEY AND TIME

The purpose of this article is to suggest ways you can contribute to the success of the league you join. Let me suggest the thesis that this entire article is based on:

"Every league has a limited amount of assets to devote to its success. These are comprised of two items: money and time."

First, let's consider money. Most leagues collect dues (DECADE runs on a budget of about \$200, the Federal League collects about \$450). Most leagues are also financed by the commissioner; I am not aware of any profitable leagues, although there probably is one.

Sounds like a lot of money, and it is if it is entirely devoted to newsletters, postage and miscellaneous expenses. But do you know where most of it goes?

The commissioner often has to make phone calls to managers who have missed deadlines, broken rules or disappeared. We have to spend excessive amounts of league money trying to get backup managers started midway in the season, up against almost-passed deadlines. Phone calls are usually the largest budget item and we should be able to entirely avoid them.

Every dollar devoted to solving problems is a dollar that could have been devoted to better newsletters, or more elaborate drafting procedures. Worst of all, the dollar devoted to solving problems is financed by everyone, including the reliable managers.

## MANAGERS SHOULD CALL FIRST

The first rule for a manager contributing to his league's success: Always call or write your commissioner before he has to call you!

If you're going to be late, let him know before the deadline. He can then react while he has time and usually save several phone calls down the line. I have never had a problem finding another manager to help play games or do stats, but every day the manager waits to let me know, pushes me into a must rush situation. That's expensive.

The second issue is that of time. The commissioner is limited for time. Every minute he spends chasing down managers and solving problems is time that he would like to spend improving the league. He could be writing newsletters, finding top-quality backups, encouraging other managers to write columns, devising new and better systems. But he only has a few hours and much of it is spent on work he shouldn't have to do.

He has a life, job, school and/or family of his own. Many times a manager explains he ran into "real-life" problems. These can't be avoided, but the effect can be minimized. Play early (don't put off to the deadline). Here again, let the commissioner know when you have problems.

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## VOLUNTEER YOUR SERVICES, SKILLS

There is a way to increase the time available to a league and that's by volunteering yours. What can you do? The second rule for contributing to your league's success is volunteering time and any special skills you have whenever you can.

Your league will be better if you can:

1. Offer to play games for managers who can't make the deadline or quit.
2. Offer to do stats for other managers who can't (or for the commissioner; then he can do other things).
3. Offer to do league stats.
4. Offer to write articles for the newsletter (this is one of the areas that will improve your league greatly and it's fun to see your stuff in print).
5. Offer to do odd jobs: chair a rules committee, keep track of trades, run the draft, etc.
6. Offer to publish the newsletter.
7. Offer to find backup managers.

Sounds like a lot of work, doesn't it? But guess who does it if you can't or won't? The more members contribute, the better the league.

## DO YOU HAVE TIME FOR LEAGUE?

Before you join a league, be sure to consider whether or not you really have time. The most wasteful, time-consuming job a commissioner has is replacing managers who quit at mid-season. If you join, do everything you can to at least finish the season.

When you sign up for a league, consider all of the following:

1. Will I still want to play if the team is lousy?
2. Do I have time:
  - A. To play the games and make every deadline?
  - B. To write and mail every set of instructions on time?
  - C. To compile all stats neatly and send results promptly?
  - D. To research trades properly?

Leagues require a lot more time than people think. Be sure you can make the commitment; if you can't, you are hurting plenty of people who will.

If you join a trading league, be responsible. League balance is incredibly hard to maintain (even with a trade committee) and harder to redress. Some managers ruin a team and quit, moving on to a new league and leaving a new manager with their mess. Trade slowly at first while you learn the ropes and hold on to your team if you mess it up. With time, and knowledge, you can improve it and be immensely satisfied.

That wraps up my suggestions for improving your league, but there are also a couple of suggestions regarding PBM ethics.

## CHEATING MANAGERS CHEAT EVERYONE

Emotionally, the most difficult job a commissioner has is determining if someone is cheating. There are at least two forms of evidence that suggest cheating: home records significantly better than away records and statistics that are radically better at home.

Please remember these may also result from innocent circumstances: better players used at home, platoon teams that require active managing and poor instructions. The circumstance that suggest a problem is consistency in the two indicators, year in and year out.

You owe it to your league to play the visiting teams as well as you can. You should exploit weaknesses in the opponent's instructions

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(no holding, low cutoffs, etc.), but generally you should follow your conscience and fill in omissions. You just can't cover everything in instructions.

There is another ethics problem that I ran into in the Federal League recently that I've seen before. In a sense, leagues are in competition with each other. There is a limited pool of good managers. Most leagues acquire managers through S-D-M Review ads, or referrals.

I feel that utilizing a manager list from a league you are a member of, or an ex-member, without the commissioner's approval, is like stealing a customer list from a competitor in business. That manager's list is an asset of the league, paid for and earned by the commissioner and members. New leagues should advertise in the Review, rather than pirating managers from existing leagues. Surprisingly, I've seen this happen a few times.

#### BEWARE OF THE SNOWBALL EFFECT

One last comment. There is often a snowball effect when leagues have problems. One manager will drop out, a league newsletter is then delayed, and finally other managers react, usually because they have little or no information. They don't want to do those boring stats if the league is going to fold, etc. Then the league folds because of them.

If you're worried about the league situation, call your commissioner and ask him. He should tell you the truth, how you might help, and it may save the league. Most leagues can survive one or two problems, but not an avalanche.

This is a lot of dos and don'ts for something that is supposed to be fun. Seems like a lot of work, doesn't it?

It is a lot of work, so if you're going to work why not make sure you get the rewards? It makes sense. The more you contribute, the better it will be and the better your dividends are. It works like money in the bank, except you can provide 50 percent of the interest with a league. You don't have to rely on the banker.

Successful leagues are good because their managers are good!

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