Andy Messersmith and Major League Baseball 40 years later

By Dan Lawton
Tuesday, April 21, 2015

To me, each April marks a special time — the beginning of another baseball season. But there is something slightly different this spring — it marks the 40th anniversary of an event that had a deeper impact on the game than anything that ever happened on the field. That event was the dawn of free agency for major league players in 1975.

The reserve clause

In the early 1970s, the economic rules governing major league baseball were relatively simple. The key rule was the reserve clause. Each player’s contract had it.

The reserve clause said this: Each year, a player’s contract could be renewed only by the club that had owned his contract the prior year. The clause prevented players from going to other teams, barring a trade done at the behest of management.

The reserve clause blocked the law of supply and demand for major league players, limiting them to negotiations only with the club that “owned” them. If a player didn’t like it, his options were to take whatever new contract ownership was offering (which might involve a pay cut), demand a trade (which was up to ownership) or quit.

The federal courts could be counted on to enforce the reserve clause against any player who had the temerity to challenge it. The courageous Curt Flood learned this the hard way, losing in the U.S. Supreme Court in the epic Flood v. Kuhn case in 1972.

Messersmith and Miller change everything

Andy Messersmith and his union lawyer, Marvin Miller, changed all that forever. In late 1974, Messersmith, a 30-year-old starting pitcher, had just finished a fine season with the Dodgers. His contract having expired, Messersmith met with the Dodgers’ general manager, Al Campanis, to discuss a new contract.

Messersmith wanted a “no-trade” clause — the right to veto a trade to another club. Campanis said no. Messersmith refused to sign — then, the following spring, reported to camp anyway, without a contract.

Legally speaking, these seemingly ordinary acts, though predictable, led to irrevocable and historic consequences, like Gen. George Custer’s decision to attack the Sioux that summer day at Little Bighorn, or Fidel Castro’s launch of the Granma in 1956.

Messersmith played the entire 1975 season for the Dodgers without a contract. After the season ended, he and Miller filed a grievance. They asserted something that Major League Baseball found astonishing and impossible: a player, after his contract lapsed, should become a free agent, able to negotiate with any club he wanted, irrespective of the reserve clause.

The case went to arbitration before baseball’s hand-picked arbitrator, Peter Seitz, in a small conference room in the Biltmore Plaza Hotel in New York, in November of 1976. Seitz precisely begged the parties to resolve things privately, so he wouldn’t have to issue a ruling that might produce great unhappiness.

The club owners, arrogantly confident of the unassailability of the reserve clause, were having none of it. Messersmith and any other player bold enough to challenge them would be taught a lesson, just like Curt Flood.

Instead, the club owners learned the lesson. Seitz ruled for the players. He found that the reserve clause could not be read to require a player’s contract to be renewed for any period beyond one renewal year after the contract had expired.

And so Andy Messersmith was free to go anywhere he wanted — to sell his services to the highest bidder, if he wished. The same would apply to any other player in Messersmith’s situation.

A weeping and gnashing of teeth ensued from Park Avenue to Los Angeles. The league presidents issued a statement predicting the advent of free agency would ‘do irreparable harm to baseball, allowing every player currently in the major leagues to turn his book on his club and move at will from team to team.’

The club owners appealed, but they lost. Free agency was here to stay. Andy Messersmith went to the Atlanta Braves and signed a three-year, $1 million contract, more than tripling his last salary with the Dodgers.

40 years later

Today, the game is financially healthier than ever. Players can become free agents after six years’ major league service. Many are millionaires; today’s average player salary now exceeds $1 million.

Ironically, the club owners are also doing better than ever. Their revenues have increased 65 percent over the past 10 years, during a period in which player payroll — as a percentage of total revenue — has gone down, not up.

Revenue sharing, ‘luxury taxes’ and the bonanza of television money which has flowed even to supposed small-market clubs like the San Diego Padres have given those clubs enough cash to sign large free-agent contracts and compete with large-market clubs.

Andy Messersmith lives quietly today in Northern California, after recently retiring from a college baseball coaching career at Cabrillo College near Santa Cruz. His lawyer, Marvin Miller, died in 2012.

At tonight’s Angels-Athletics game, I won’t expect to see any official tribute to them. But I’ll tip my beer and doff my cap anyway and say, ‘Well done — and thank you.’ Whether you’re at Petco Park, Dodger Stadium or the Big A, I hope you do, too.

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