

Making baseball fun again

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Throughout its 150 years of existence, the game of baseball has been played with a set of unwritten rules and etiquette that the self-appointed defenders of the game insist must not be violated. The biggest of these unwritten rules, the one that I hear the most often, invokes the all-important mantra, “Respect the game.”

But what does it mean to “respect the game”? In layman’s terms, it means, “Don’t have fun,” or at least, “Limit the fun of baseball as much as humanly possible.” Don’t gaze at a majestic home run after you crush it. Don’t celebrate a tremendous play in the field or a clutch strikeout.

Don’t do any of that because that would be disrespecting the game. But how can you disrespect *a game*? Baseball is supposed to be fun. Pitchers should have the right to celebrate a clutch strikeout without fear of sparking a brawl. Batters should have the right to admire a ball they hit a mile without fear of getting drilled in the back in their next at-bat. These unwritten rules don’t protect sportsmanship. Rather, they punish players for spontaneous acts of emotion after showcasing their world-class talents before thousands of witnesses. These “rules” were created 150-some-odd years ago when actual gentleman played the game; baseball stopped being a game of aristocrats long ago, so why must we still follow their antiquated unwritten rules?

It hasn’t always been this way. During the ’70s, ’80s and early ’90s, it wasn’t uncommon for players to show more emotion. Think of Kirk Gibson’s or Tom Lawless’s clutch home runs in the World Series. They weren’t criticized for “excessive” celebration back then, and there’s no reason they should have been. They hit clutch home runs in very timely and tense situations.

We—players and fans—got sick of seeing so much emotion from players, and we over-compensated, insisting that players “respect the game” at all times. Now, when Toronto Blue Jay right fielder Jose Bautista flips his bat after a very important home run in his team’s first playoff appearance in 22 years, everyone loses their minds and it makes national news.

Why? Why is it such a big deal now to



Carlos Gomez celebrates after hitting a home run in the 2015 Wild Card game. Photo by Arturo Pardavila III.

“protect” the game from players who show emotion? There’s no simple answer. Maybe it’s the way the next generation was raised; maybe it has to do with different cultures being introduced to the Major Leagues. There are any number of things it could be, but it has to change if baseball wants to keep thriving as an industry.

Players brave enough to show emotion are not only criticized; they put themselves and their teammates in danger. If a batter pimps a home run, an altercation soon follows or the disrespected pitcher intentionally throws at him in his next at bat. These unwritten rules have molded players into emotionless robots who have to act like they aren’t doing something ridiculously impressive. What do football, basketball, and soccer players have to worry about, maybe an occasional fight if someone overdoes the celebration? For the most part, they don’t have to worry about any sort of retaliation from the other team. But if you express yourself in baseball, you’re in the minority.

And you are more likely to be a minority as well. In countries like Japan, South Korea, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and many others, baseball is the country’s

most popular sport, and kids are raised playing it. In those countries the way the game is played is vastly different than it is in the United States. While the rules are all the same, the unwritten rules aren’t.

When international players come to the Majors and play like they have always played in their home country—where they flip bats, yell and scream after great plays and wear their emotions on their sleeves—they get chastised. Some adjust to playing the boring brand of American baseball, but some stick to their guns and keep playing like the way they were taught, and they become villains, hated by every opposing fan and player but loved by their teammates and their hometown fans.

A great example of this dichotomy is Carlos Gomez, the center fielder for the Houston Astros. As an Astros fan, I count Carlos as one of my favorite players. He swings hard, he runs hard, and he genuinely looks like he is having the time of his life when he is on the diamond.

Before he was traded to Houston from Milwaukee, however, I was in the same crowd as everyone else. I hated the way he went about the game; I insisted he didn’t play with same class as everyone else. But that’s just the way

he has always played; in his eyes, we were the weird ones for not for not celebrating the joy of playing baseball.

Gomez is not alone. Players like Miami Marlins pitcher Jose Fernandez, Washington Nationals right fielder Bryce Harper, and Los Angeles Dodgers right fielder Yasiel Puig have all broken away from the traditional mold and playing the game with much more flamboyance and animation. Harper has coined the slogan “Make Baseball fun again,” a play on Donald Trump’s campaign slogan, and he’s faced a lot of scrutiny from baseball writers and old-time players as a result. They say things like “How dare he mock the game?” or “How can he say baseball isn’t fun?”

But other players have joined Harper in calling for a resurgence of fun in baseball. The only way the game will relax, however, is if fans and media stop making such a big deal every time a player shows emotion. Players won’t feel the need to retaliate if we treat emotional displays within the game as normal.

This is my call to you and to baseball fans everywhere. Jump on the bandwagon, so we can end baseball’s 20-year war on fun and make baseball great again.