

Is modernizing baseball with “Pace-of-Play” rules ruining the MLB?

In the last 20 years, Major League Baseball (MLB) has had issues getting television viewers, and was seeing lower fan attendance at games. After getting feedback from the “average sports fan”, the final consensus was that MLB games were too lengthy. The average time of a regular season MLB game in 2017 was three hours, five minutes and eleven seconds, which is longer than the average NBA, MLS, and college football game.

MLB games have always been long, this is due to the fact that each game is played with a minimum of nine innings. For those that don't understand the basics on baseball, the sport does not have a clock. That means that some innings can be more lengthy than others. If the game is high scoring or extra innings are needed, the game can last over four hours before a winner is decided. Others can last less than three hours if the pitchers are pitching well. Due to the inconsistent nature of the sport, it makes it difficult to implement changes to shorten the games.

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred saw an opportunity to try and shorten the games and bring “life back to the sport”. He passed a few rule changes from 2017-2020 that were meant to speed up the game. These rules were referred to as the pace-of-play rules. Back in 2018, two major rules about mound visits went into effect as an effort to shorten games. A mound visit is when a coach or a fielder can pause the game and talk to the pitcher about strategy. The first rule was putting a 30 second timer for mound visits. Previously, there was not an official time limit for mound visits, it was at the umpires discretion. The other rule was making a 5 mound visit limit for each team. This something which has never had a limit in the history of Major League Baseball. The 30 second rule in 2018 was not closely monitored, so in 2018 the average mound visit time was still over 80 seconds. The mound visit limit rule proved to be much more effective as the average mound visits per team went down from 7.42 to 3.78.

In addition, many other minor rules were put into place, most notably the new intentional walk rule, which is one of the

most unexplainable and uncalled for rules in sports. The intentional walk rule was put into place to save time. It is where when an intentional walk is issued, instead of throwing four pitches outside of the zone, all the team has to do is point the batter to first-base, eliminating the act of the pitcher throwing four balls. As one can guess, this rule saves about 20 seconds, and rarely happens in the average game. Overall, the pace of play rule changes were a massive failure in 2018. The average time of an MLB game during that year only decreased by five minutes. The five minutes saved did not make up for the negative impact it did to the game of baseball. Not only is five minutes hardly noticeable when watching a full game, but the rules also impacted strategy and how the game is played. Game altering rules hadn't been implemented in over 100 years. This marked the beginning of the “pace of play” controversy that could be ruining baseball. Are the pace-of-play rules really worth it? Many fans, including myself, don't think so.

In 2019, even more rules were added to lower level pro leagues in an attempt to save time. Pitch clocks, which are timers for how long you have to pitch the ball after the previous pitch, have generated some controversy. The issue with this rule is that it is not properly enforced. The rule states that the umpire must give a warning once the 20 second pitch clock has run out, and 2 warnings can then lead to an ejection. However, umpires have not been issuing official warnings like the rule states they should. Their explanation for the lack of warnings is that, unless the pitcher is being egregious, issuing warnings would waste more time. The issuing of warnings actually wastes more time than the extra few seconds pitchers use after the pitch clock expires.

Rule changes resolving the pace of play “issue” are not the solution to solving the steady decrease of viewers over the last few years. While a couple of the rule changes have proven to be somewhat effective, they are not effective to the extent where it changes the experience of the viewer. The average sports fan is not persuaded to start watching more games because of the 5 minutes saved, but now lifetime followers

are starting to vanish because they feel the rules have fundamentally changed how the game is played.

Commissioner Robert Manfred's lack of a baseball background and baseball knowledge is clear. The new pace-of-play rules are going to start the decline of the MLB if they aren't stopped. Fundamentally changing the game of baseball will not solve the decrease in viewers of the MLB. It will only make it worse. ■

AVERAGE TIME OF A REGULAR SEASON MLB GAME SINCE 2017

(When most “pace-of-play” rules went into effect)

2017 → 03:05:11

2018 → 03:00:44
-00:04:27

2019 → 03:05:35
+00:04:51

2020 → 03:07:00
+00:02:25