Managing Professional Sports Poses Major-League Challenges

By Anne Ray

Basketball fans claim that their sport is fast-paced, while watching baseball can be tedious. Baseball aficionados say that they'd rather be at an outdoor stadium than in a stuffy gym, while also pointing to the status owed to a sport with a long tradition.

But fans of either game who witnessed a recent dialogue between Major League Baseball (MLB) commissioner Bud Selig and National Basketball Association (NBA) commissioner David Stern, a Columbia law school graduate and former chair of the University's board of trustees, learned that despite these differences, the challenges of managing professional sports enterprises in the 21st century are in many ways comparable.

The occasion for the meeting was a taping of the PBS program CEO Exchange, which was filmed live at the Miller Theatre on Feb. 1 in front of an audience made up of Columbia M.B.A candidates and human resource professionals who are members of the Society for Human Resource Management.

The show's host, CNN senior political analyst Jeff Greenfield, noted that the two men have much in common: both cheered for local teams as children, earned undergraduate degrees in political science and history, and "were seen as safe choices for commissioner." Each commissioner acknowledged that as major league sports have become big business, one of the most daunting challenges has been managing player behavior.

Selig, who became commissioner in 1992, said, "If I threw everyone out of baseball who had a temper, there'd be no one left. I try to hire the best qualified people, and once they're in place, I expect a reasonable code of conduct. We are a quasi-public institution, and I expect their behavior to reflect that."

Stern said that when he first became commissioner in 1984, players' reputations had "taken a hit" because of how they came across in public. His solution? To impose a mandatory players' dress code for public appearances—a policy that has paid dividends. Stern pointed out, as players began to be judged on how well they play the game rather than on their appearance. Indeed, the dress code policy is often cited as a reason for Stern's success in shepherding the league from bankruptcy to record attendance.

Both Selig and Stern have also had the experience of weathering the storm of unwanted media attention for their sports. Selig, for instance, recalled the time when labor disputes forced the cancellation of the 1994 World Series. "I was willing to endure the short-term pain," he said, "because I knew in my heart that the game needed change. It was a sport that was resistant to change."

Following failed negotiations, Selig said he went home one night and replayed old Series. "By the end of the night, I was distraught. But I think the historians will record that we had to strike. The agreements that were eventually reached are now part of baseball's landscape, he noted.

Stern faced a public relations crisis even more recently, in the wake of the Pistons-Pacers brawl in November 2004, when an altercation among the players ultimately led to some of them storming the stands and getting into fights with the spectators. By the time the brawl ended, nine spectators had been injured.

Stern said he watched the incident, like any other fan, on ESPN. After reviewing the event on tape, he called a press conference and promised that "more would be done to deal with security and the need to referee player behavior." He also issued long suspensions for the main antagonists.

The program is expected to air this April on PBS stations around the country. In addition to taping the show, a camera crew spent an additional day on Columbia's campus, capturing footage for a fast-paced tour of the business school, which will play during a break in Stern and Selig's conversation.