The 2017 Houston Asterisks

Ryan Ehlinger

Sports Governance

The 2017 MLB season came to a climactic finish with a thrilling 7-game World Series between the Los Angeles Dodgers and the Houston Astros. The Astros ultimately prevailed, and, with their loveable cast of characters, the baseball world seemed contempt with the franchise getting their first title. Two and a half years later and the narrative around the 2017 Astros is quite different. It was discovered that the Astros cheated during the 2017 season and punishments were dealt out in January; punishments that weren’t harsh enough.

The initial story broke in November via Ken Rosenthal and Evan Drellich of the Athletic when former Astros’ pitcher Mike Fiers, along with three other members of the organization in 2017, came to them to divulge the Astros’ cheating scheme. This prompted an investigation from MLB (Wells, 2019).

The investigation, which lasted roughly three months, determined that the Astros did in fact cheat during the 2017 season and continued to do so for a short time during the 2018 season as well. In his statement, baseball commissioner Rob Manfred divulged the specifics behind the cheating. Their system consisted of a live-feed camera in center field which was displayed on a monitor just outside of the Astros’ dugout. Personnel and members of the team would try to decipher the opposing catcher’s signs using this monitor. Initially, these signs would be relayed to a runner on second base who could then relay them to the batter. Eventually, the Astros started relaying them in live time to the batter by banging on a trash can near the dugout to indicate a specific pitch type. These methods were used throughout the 2017 season, while the 2018 season only included communication from their replay review room to the dugout (Manfred, 2020).

Manfred’s report also dealt out the punishment that the Astros were to receive. As a team, the Astros were fined $5 million, which is the highest amount allowed. The also forfeited their first and second round draft picks in both the 2020 and 2021 drafts. Astros’ manager, A.J. Hinch, and general manager, Jeff Luhnow, were both suspended without pay for the entirety of the 2020 season and aren’t allowed in any major league facilities during that time. If they come in violation of rules again they would be considered permanently ineligible from the game. This also applies to the Astros’ former assistant general manager who was fired from the Astros for an unrelated incident in October of 2019. He is not allowed to engage with any other teams during the time period (Manfred, 2020). Former Astros’ bench coach, Alex Cora, was also suspended for the 2020 postseason due to his involvement with the Astros’ cheating. This was announced in the report of the Red Sox cheating scandal, who Alex Cora was the manager of from 2018 to 2019 (Perry, 2020). Noticeably, no players were punished by the commissioner’s office despite the scheme being “player-driven and player-executed” (Manfred, 2020).

Manfred gave the players immunity during the investigation so that he could get all the facts and really figure out what went on. He also believed that the Players Association would have had good arguments to appeal any punishments given to the players. He wanted to get the facts out to allow people to have their own thoughts and opinions on the situation (“MLB commissioner Rob Manfred”, 2020).

In addition to the punishments handed down by Major League Baseball, the Astros fired both Jeff Luhnow and A.J. Hinch (Stephen, 2020). This set a precedent as Alex Cora was fired from the Red Sox the following day (Press, 2020). Carlos Beltran, who was a player for the Astros in 2017 and the only player mentioned in the commissioner’s report, was fired by the Mets before managing a single game (Li, 2020).

These punishments are essentially a slap on the wrist to the Astros organization and players and a slap in the face to players across the league and fans everywhere. The Astros’ players cheated their way to a championship and saw no repercussions for their actions. Their manager and general manager were fired, but they still won a championship. Sure, it may now be tainted, but the players will never forget the feeling of recording the final out and getting to celebrate and hoist the trophy. The punishments that were handed out are only showing players that if you cheat you can win a World Series and nothing bad will happen to you.

Players and media personnel around the league have chimed in with their opinions on the situation and the punishments. Many players felt the Astros’ players deserved much worse and with the report coming out well before Spring Training began, many went to social media to voice their opinions. Dodgers’ Cody Bellinger and Alex Wood, who lost to the Astros in the 2017 World Series, took to twitter to express their discontent with the punishments handed down by the commissioner. Bellinger said “For the sake of the game I hope this isn’t true.. if true, there needs to be major consequences to the players. That completely ruins the integrity of the game!!!” and Wood replied with “AMEN!!! The fact that there hasn’t been any consequences to any players up to this point is wild.” (Traina, 2020). Now these two might just feel cheated out of the championship and that’s why they have spoken out, but many other players current and former have also spoken out. Indians’ pitcher Mike Clevinger even called out the MLB directly in his tweet where he said there’s perks to being able to throw hard and that the MLB needs to take care of the issue or he will take it into his own hands (Traina, 2020), implying that he will hit some Astros’ players with pitches.

If players, who know how hard it is to play this game and they’re putting in all this work to play cleanly, think that the Astros’ deserve harsher punishment than they were given, then they do deserve it, because no one understands the game and everything that goes into it more than the players do.

I think that the biggest, and really only argument against punishing the players is that Rob Manfred didn’t think they’d be able to win the grievances against the Players Association. Manfred had released a memorandum in 2017 about a similar, but minor, sign stealing incident with the Red Sox and Apple Watches (Zucker, 2020). Manfred told ESPN’s Karl Ravech in an interview that he didn’t think he could win the grievances because, as he detailed in his report, the memorandum in 2017 wasn’t past down from the general manager, so the claim could have been that the players didn’t know the rules (“MLB commissioner Rob Manfred”, 2020).

I do believe that there is some truth behind this. Actually trying to punish the players would have been a mess; between figuring out who had what level of involvement and dealing with grievances and appeals. However, it is a mess that MLB needed to take on; they needed to set a precedent here and make an example of the Astros to really discourage any future cheating from the Astros, or any other team.

The notion that MLB wouldn’t have been able to handle the grievances is completely untrue though. In one part of Manfred’s report it reads “they were concerned about getting caught by players from other teams.” (Manfred, 2020). The report then elaborates on the chaos of the Astros’ players when they thought a White Sox pitcher had caught on (Manfred, 2020). The fact that they were worried about other people finding out means that, at bare minimum subconsciously, they knew that what they were doing wasn’t right. But if that isn’t enough, Manfred’s report also directly states “Many of the players who were interviewed admitted that they knew the scheme was wrong because it crossed the line from what the player believed was fair competition and/or violated MLB rules.” (Manfred, 2020). These two snippets of his report are enough to show that the Astros’ players did indeed know what he was doing was wrong. Granted, not giving the players immunity during the investigation would have made the process much longer and more difficult, but if that is needed in order to punish the proper people then it is what MLB should have done from the beginning.

Because the commissioner granted immunity to players, there is no way they will ever see any suspensions, even though they should. There are however, other options that the commissioner could now take. There have been a handful of articles about what the commissioner could further do given the outrage around the league, but most just have to do with the team or distinguishing the championship for cheating. Baseball columnist, Joel Sherman wrote an article in the New York Post with a handful of good ideas of how to handle the situation, but there were two ideas that specifically applied to the players. Those two ideas were that any player from the 2017 Astros should receive a three-year ban from being in the All-Star Game and that they should never receive another postseason bonus. This includes pitchers because they ultimately benefited from their hitters’ success (Sherman, 2020).

Sherman acknowledges that the commissioner would receive pushback from the Players Association if they tried either of these things, but they should easily be able to win that fight, especially if they have the backing of all the players who weren’t on the 2017 Astros, which is a vast majority of the Players Association (Sherman, 2020).

Rob Manfred dropped the ball when it came to punishing the Astros; the players should have been punished. While it’s too late to suspend them or really punish them now, he still has the opportunity to right the ship by taking away future benefits and rewards from those players. If the MLB wants sign-stealing to be behind them, something more is needed.

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