

On the Run

Extending the maximum effort in sports should be the standard, not the exception



BOB LATHAM

The Major League Baseball season is underway, which means I will be spared further video of MLB players at spring training gently loping across the outfield grass. Baseball spring training will never be confused with NFL preseason camps, where maximum effort can secure a job. Meanwhile, Ken Burns' superb documentary on Jackie Robinson debuted on PBS in April. The sight of Robinson explod-

ing out of the batter's box and running full-tilt stands in sharp contrast not only to the standard MLB spring training images but also, unfortunately, to the way too many players today approach the base paths during the regular season.

In the deciding game of last year's American League Championship series, Lorenzo Cain of the Kansas City Royals was lauded for his sprint from first base to home on a single—a play that made the difference in the Royals' advance to the World Series. It proved what I hope is already widely known: Running can often be the deciding factor in a baseball game. A player who hits a ground ball through the infield and runs hard out of the box might get to second base if the outfielder bobbles the ball. That extra base might allow him to score, that run might win the game, and that game could decide whether the team makes the postseason.

It's not too much to expect that baseball players run hard, given that they may be required to run the bases only two or three times a game. Joe DiMaggio was once asked why he played so hard every day. His response: "There is always some kid who may be seeing me for the first or last time." Fans deserve to see each player run to the best of his ability. That applies not just to the fast guys, but to every single player. Fans also deserve to see a team give itself the best chance to win a game. When winning a game may depend on a fraction of a second on the base paths, no runner should take anything for granted.

Pete Rose, before descending into ignominy, distinguished himself by hustling on every play. Why is that a distinguishing factor in baseball? Even Cain's laudatory dash from first to home is instructive in what it reveals about ballplayers picking up their speed when they realize it might be to their advantage. Cain went from first to second in 3.81 seconds, second to third in 3.34 seconds and third to home in a blistering 3.31 seconds. Could Cain have

shaved a few hundredths of a second off his times between first and third? Possibly.

Has it always been this way in baseball? Have some players been expected not to run as fast as they can? Is the ancient video we see only of superstars at important moments, rather than the ordinary players of yesteryear jogging to first base on a ground ball? That DiMaggio was asked why he played so hard suggests that he, Robinson, Rose and their ilk were exceptional even in their own times. I have followed baseball for a long time, however, and there seems to be an increasing tolerance for lack of effort on the base paths. Perhaps it's that salaries are so high and players are such valuable commodities that they are encouraged not to risk injury by taking unnecessary risks running the bases.

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Maybe it's a holdover from the steroid era when overgrown muscles would pop if a player ran hard. But power hitters, and those likely to pull a muscle, do not get a pass. When Willie Mays retired, he had the second-highest home run total in history, yet he still ripped around the bases.

Perhaps in the deluge of analytics and sabermetrics associated with baseball, more statistical analysis (and there is some already) could be conducted that would show how good base running increases the chances of winning. I'd say that the rare times when it makes a difference—be it 1 percent of the time or .1 percent—justify the effort. That's the difference between winning and losing, between excellence and mediocrity. That's the case in any field of endeavor, and I fear that young MLB fans may be absorbing the wrong message—that you only run hard when you need to.

John Kruk was once teased by a woman who thought his ample form was not befitting a professional athlete. "I ain't no athlete, lady," Kruk replied. "I'm a ballplayer." Now, I'm a big fan of John Kruk. And I love baseball. All I am asking is that players help me love it a little bit more. So please, mix in a few sprints with the spring training outfield jogs. ■

Bob Latham is a partner at the law firm Jackson Walker, L.L.P., and a World Rugby board member. A compilation of his best columns titled "Winners & Losers: Rants, Riffs and Reflections on the World of Sports," is available in the Media Zone at SportsTravelMagazine.com.