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## Report Information from ProQuest

July 14 2014 13:28

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## **It's Miller time; Marvin Miller, who freed baseball's players, should be in the Hall of Fame.**

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**Abstract:** Ryan reminded the audience that when he broke into the major leagues in 1966, he had to spend the winter months working at a gas station from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., while his wife worked at a local bookstore, to make ends meet. Because of Miller's efforts, Ryan said, "we brought that level up to where the players weren't put in that situation."

**Links:** [Linking Service](#)

**Full text:** Forget steroids. Forget Frank McCourt's mismanagement of the Dodgers. The biggest scandal in baseball at the moment is the Baseball Hall of Fame's failure -- for the fourth time -- to induct Marvin Miller, the man who freed players from indentured servitude.

The great Hall of Fame broadcaster Red Barber observed that Miller, who directed the Major League Baseball Players Assn. from 1966 to 1983, was one of the three most important figures in baseball history, along with Babe Ruth and Jackie Robinson. An eminent collection of Hall of Fame players, including Tom Seaver, Joe Morgan, Brooks Robinson, Hank Aaron and Reggie Jackson, want him included in the Hall of Fame, as do the many everyday players who have expressed their gratitude to Miller on a "Thanks, Marvin" website started last year by former big leaguer Bob Locker.

When he was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1999, legendary pitcher Nolan Ryan devoted part of his speech to paying tribute to Miller. Ryan reminded the audience that when he broke into the major leagues in 1966, he had to spend the winter months working at a gas station from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m., while his wife worked at a local bookstore, to make ends meet. Because of Miller's efforts, Ryan said, "we brought that level up to where the players weren't put in that situation."

Even Bud Selig, the former Milwaukee Brewers owner who has been the commissioner of baseball since 1998, agrees that Miller belongs in the Hall of Fame.

As Ross Newhan, a member of this year's selection committee, told us, "Nobody has had a more profound impact on the economics of baseball or done more to give the players a voice than Marvin Miller." The retired baseball columnist for the Los Angeles Times, a member of the Hall of Fame himself, revealed his preference. "That's why I believe he should be in the Hall of Fame."

Every three years a committee of baseball writers, Hall of Fame former players and baseball owners and executives decide on which non-players, if any, should have their plaques installed in the Cooperstown shrine. In the past, this committee was stacked with owners and executives, including some whom Miller had tangled with as head of the players union, which virtually assured his exclusion.

But last year, the committee's membership was revamped, cutting the number of management moguls and thereby improving the odds that Miller might get the 75% of votes -- at least 12 out of 16 -- needed to gain entry. When the votes were counted last December, however, Miller received only 11.

Although the ballots are cast in secret, veteran Hall of Fame watchers consider it likely that the four sportswriters on the committee gave Miller their votes, while the four baseball executives probably didn't. If that's the case, then at least one of the eight ex-players on the committee gave a thumbs-down to Miller, thus keeping him from standing on the dais at Cooperstown on Sunday, when the Hall of Fame honors its new inductees.

The only nonplayer who garnered the necessary votes this year was former minor league pitcher and longtime baseball executive Pat Gillick. Gillick had an admirable career as general manager for four major league teams,

two of which (the Blue Jays and the Phillies) won World Series titles. But his accomplishments, and his impact on the game, pale in comparison to Miller's.

In 1966, pitchers Robin Roberts and Jim Bunning (later a GOP senator from Kentucky) recruited Miller, an economist for the steelworkers union, to serve as the players association's first full-time director. He had to overcome the skepticism of some players (who were glad just to be able to wear a big league uniform), the hostility of most sportswriters (who sided with management) and the virulent opposition of team owners and their hired baseball commissions, who warned that a players union would destroy baseball's economic foundation.

Before Miller, players had no rights to determine the conditions of their employment. They were tethered to their teams through the "reserve clause" in every player's contract; those contracts were limited to one season. The contracts "reserved" the team's right to "retain" the player for the next season. Each year, the team owners told players: Take it or leave it. The players had no leverage to negotiate better deals. Even superstars went hat-in-hand to owners at the end of the season, begging for a raise.

Two years after Miller took the union's reins, the players association negotiated its first collective bargaining agreement. It established players' rights to binding arbitration over salaries and grievances. Players also won the right to have agents to negotiate their contracts. In 1976, they won the right to become free agents. This gave players the right to decide for themselves which employer they wanted to work for, to veto proposed trades and to bargain for the best contract. The players association also won increased per-diem allowances, improvements in travel conditions and better training facilities, locker room conditions and medical treatment. In 1967, the minimum salary was \$6,000 and the average salary was \$19,000. The first collective bargaining agreement the next year raised the minimum to \$10,000. By the time Miller retired, the average player salary had increased to \$240,000. Today, the minimum salary is \$414,000 and the average salary is more than \$3 million.

It's easy to see that kind of salary as bloated. But the vast majority of players spend less than five years in the big leagues. And, like it or not, Major League Baseball is hugely profitable: Last year it took in a record \$7 billion-plus in revenue. Rather than stifle baseball's prosperity, the union simply gave players the power to win a greater share of their employers' growing revenue.

We spoke with Miller last week, and he was clearly disgusted with the vote. "I'm too old for farce," he said, "and this whole process is clearly a farce." But he hopes the issue will prompt discussion. "Educating people, including players, about the union is important," he said, "and if this debate does that, it's positive, I guess."

In December 2013, when Miller will be 96, the selection committee will vote again on which nonplayers deserve admission to the shrine of baseball immortals.

Before that vote takes place, the Hall of Fame should change the rules to make the committee members' ballots public, so that the writers, ex-players and executives will be held accountable for their selections. Those who want to continue the farce of keeping Miller out of the Hall of Fame should at least be forced to do so out in the open.

Credit: Peter Dreier teaches politics at Occidental College. Kelly Candaele produced the documentary film, "A League of Their Own," about his mother's years in the All American Girls Professional Baseball League.

#### **Illustration**

Caption: PHOTO: (no caption); PHOTOGRAPHER:Associated Press

**Subject:** Professional baseball; Athletes; Committees;

**People:** Miller, Marvin

**Company / organization:** Name: Major League Baseball; NAICS: 813990;

**Publication title:** Los Angeles Times

**Pages:** A.15

**Publication year:** 2011

**Publication date:** Jul 20, 2011

**Year:** 2011

**Section:** Main News; Part A; Editorial Desk

**Publisher:** Tribune Publishing Company LLC

**Place of publication:** Los Angeles, Calif.

**Country of publication:** United States

**Publication subject:** General Interest Periodicals--United States

**ISSN:** 04583035

**Source type:** Newspapers

**Language of publication:** English

**Document type:** Commentary

**ProQuest document ID:** 878010020

**Document URL:** <http://search.proquest.com/docview/878010020?accountid=12935>

**Copyright:** (Copyright (c) 2011 Los Angeles Times)

**Last updated:** 2011-08-18

**Database:** Los Angeles Times,National Newspapers Core,ProQuest Newsstand

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