

Time Passages

The discovery of rare World Series footage reveals a refreshing era when even the most significant games were shorter



BOB LATHAM

The remarkable news that a film had been unearthed of the famous Game 7 of the 1960 World Series between the New York Yankees and Pittsburgh Pirates was cause for celebration for any baseball fan with a sense of history. After all, the game had been hailed as the best ever, and not just because it

ended with the only walk-off home run (by Bill Mazeroski) ever in a World Series Game 7.

The fact that the film was found in Bing Crosby's wine cellar, however, raised more questions than it answered. Among them: Bing Crosby was a baseball fan and not just a golf enthusiast? Bing owned the Pirates? Home recording equipment actually existed in 1960? Bing actually had "people" to record things on TV that he wanted to preserve, sort of like human DVRs? (OK, the answer to these last two questions is that Bing actually hired a film company to use a kinescope to capture the live television broadcast.)

Of all the questions that this baseball version of Pompeii raises, however, the most significant to me is this: A baseball game of great consequence that ended in a 10-9 score, was back and forth the whole game and included 24 hits and nine pitchers, took only two hours and 36 minutes to play? The length of the game was a testament to a golden era of baseball—indeed there were seven players in the game who had been or were to be named league MVPs. Sadly, there is simply no way that a 10-9 World Series game in modern times could be played in less than four hours, let alone 2:36.

While the temptation would be to blame television for that devolution, that is not where I point the finger. After all, television existed in 1960 as well. To have an efficient game, first and foremost, you need pitchers who can get the ball over the plate, and it helps if the starting pitchers have staying power to last late into the game.

I had the pleasure of being at the decisive Game 5 of this last World Series, which featured a terrific pitching duel between Cliff Lee and Tim Lincecum. Lee ended up throwing 95 pitches, 69 of them strikes. Of Lincecum's 101 pitches, 71 were strikes. Both Lee and Lincecum

seem to abide by the directives of modern-day pitching coaches: "Babe Ruth is dead. Just throw strikes." Unfortunately for Lee, Edgar Renteria of the Giants is not dead, and he hit Lee's two-out pitch in the seventh inning over the center field fence for a three-run homer that secured the World Series for the Giants.

Lee and Lincecum are rare pitchers who are throwbacks to the Bing Crosby era. Game 5 was played in a speedy 2:32, which allowed kids at the game to get home at a decent hour on a school night and for young East Coast television viewers to watch the whole game. But of course it was a 3-1 game, not 10-9 with a series of relief pitchers, each of them with their own quirks and idiosyncrasies—

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stepping off the mound before each pitch to rub the baseball, playing with their cap, stepping back onto the mound, deciding they're not quite ready, stepping off the rubber, then finally delivering a pitch. MLB would be well served to cultivate the next generation of fans by limiting the time commitment required to watch a game, and an enforced time clock between pitches would help.

The responsibility for the speed of games does not just rest with pitchers. Batters technically should not be able to step out of the batter's box, adjust their gloves, adjust their pants and comb their hair between every pitch. But there were many times in the postseason when Lee, one of the fastest-working pitchers in the game, would be in his windup, the batter would step out of the box and the umpire would call time. If umpires allowed the pitch to continue through the strike zone, batters would stop their slow-down rituals between pitches.

MLB Network's airing of Bing Crosby's tape on December 15 provided a refreshing glimpse of a time when pitchers and batters alike just got on with their business. We can thank Bing Crosby for preserving a valuable reference point for the pace at which a professional baseball game is supposed to be played. ■

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