

# MLB Media Interview

Thursday, August 19, 2021

New York, New York, USA

## Commissioner Rob Manfred

Craig Carton's Commissioner Summit with  
Rob Manfred



HOST: And very happy to welcome to the program for the first time, at least since I've been back, the tenth commissioner of Major League Baseball, Mr. Rob Manfred. It's been a number of years since I've seen Rob, but I appreciate you coming on the show, Rob. How are you and thanks for coming on?

ROB MANFRED: I'm great. It's good to hear your voice and glad to be on with you.

**Q. The last time I saw with you, you brought Jennie Finch into a softball game to try to beat me for charity.**

ROB MANFRED: Can I tell you that's a fictionalized account for reality? We brought Jennie to promote the game. She did a heck of a job. She got a lot of young girls excited about baseball and softball. And, quite frankly, our team beating that team you used to play for wasn't that much of a challenge.

**Q. Well -- (laughter). I didn't see it was a challenge, all of a sudden I show up and I see the greatest woman's softball player of all time wearing a jersey. I said, okay, game on; here we go.**

ROB MANFRED: The more important point, she really is a huge asset for us. Every place she goes, you know, people just are crazy to meet her. She's particularly good with young girls who are interested in softball as opposed to baseball. And she's a really important part of our youth programming.

**Q. She's a great ambassador for sure. To me there's very little difference ultimately between softball, women's softball and hardball, same game at heart. She's a great representative for the sport. Couple easy ones, low-hanging fruit for you, just to get out of the way, and to discuss at length because there are important issues for your sport.**

The universal DH you've been asked I know a million

times, but as this season kind of roars towards a conclusion and there seems to be this inevitable fight amongst the players and owners about a number of issues, universal DH seems to me like both sides agree to it but it's still going to be a bargaining chip for other things. So give me an idea if I'm right on that and where you see that ending up.

ROB MANFRED: Look, I'm an optimist. I did labor relations full time for a very long time. I don't see as inevitable some sort of disagreement or fight with the Players Association. I think a lot of smart people at the table. They're going to figure out a way to make a deal. It's really that simple.

In terms of the specific issues, look, we made a variety of proposals, suggestions, midterm, that involved a universal DH. I think there's a package of issues related to the way the game's played on the field that I think the bargaining parties are going to wrestle to the ground at some point. And in my view, prior to the expiration of the agreement in December.

**Q. So you don't think the way a lot of people think that we're getting ready to butt heads and have one of those O.K. Corral type of seasons, you've seen before as a former negotiator before you were the commissioner, you don't think it's that bad right now between the two sides?**

ROB MANFRED: I really don't. I mean, I can speak most definitely about the owners and the people I represent. Our deepest desire is to make an agreement without having a problem. I think it's important for the sport to do that. Given the last 18 months that we've been through. And, quite frankly, there's absolutely no reason based on economics why we can't make an agreement.

**Q. It's interesting you say that. You and all commissioners, not just you, historically in every sport, essentially work at the behest of the owners. You're an employee for the sport. And I wonder for someone who loves baseball the way you do, are you ever conflicted between your job as a commissioner at the behest of the owners versus your love of the sport?**

ROB MANFRED: The only time -- honestly, the only place

**ASAP** . . . when all is said, we're done.®  
sports

I feel that kind of conflict is fandom. And what do I mean by that? The owners literally -- they expect you to be neutral. They don't want you to have any fan interest in terms of who wins and who loses and it's really important to present that front to them because that's what they expect. But I am a big fan and every once in a while you've got to catch yourself. You know what I mean? There's something that happens in a game that you're really glad to see and you gotta sit on your hands a little bit.

**Q. One of those things would be Shohei Ohtani, what he's done is beyond remarkable. People talk about Babe Ruth, none of us saw Babe Ruth play, what that guy's done this year is beyond anything any of us have seen.**

ROB MANFRED: It really is amazing what he's accomplished. I watched a little bit of his game last night and you think, my God, this guy is hitting a home run and pitching and doing it yet again. You know, he has been an amazing performer. And sometimes you remember when you started hearing about something and it was years and years ago before he began playing professionally in Japan that we started hearing about Ohtani and how special he was. And whoever was talking about it at that time sure turned out to be right.

**Q. What's interesting about him, Rob, because he's a Japanese born player, he's one of a very small group of Japanese born players currently playing in baseball. There's been a number over the years. Phenomenal ball players. He's unique in that regard. But I wonder baseball talks a lot about -- we talk a lot about it as fans of the sport, what's the disconnect between baseball players and fans? How do we make guys like Ohtani, like Mike Trout, Aaron Judge, how do we make them more popular, more household names? And I wonder how you struggle with that. Ohtani may be a bit of an outlier, possibly because he's Japanese born. So he's different from jump street, but how do you guys wrestle with having great players, great young players to teach junior, you know all the guys that are just beyond great now, who are young, who our younger audience would be attracted to, how do you beat that and figure that part of this out?**

ROB MANFRED: Look, some of this we have to take responsibility for. And it's something that we've worked really hard at. Let me give you two examples. People look at the relationship with Nike and the swoosh being on the front of the uniforms, and they think that's about our revenue and there's obviously revenue associated with it. But for us it was more about that national marketing engine being available to our players.

**Q. So the credibility of the swoosh?**

ROB MANFRED: Yeah. But not just the credibility of the swoosh, but their marketing, their interest in the game, their push of our players independent of anything we're doing. So that's one example. Second one is our social media program. You know, I mean, one of the things we sell obviously is highlights, video clips. Our social media program we've signed up literally hundreds of Major League players, made clips available to them. Rendered them assistance to try to make them more active on social media.

And again, that's about marketing the game and marketing the game to a younger generation where they live, meaning social media. Now, what's the limiting factor? The limiting factor, I think, for us is -- and you see it in our economics. Our strength economically has always been local. Right? The people, the fans are engaged with their local team. And as a result of -- that engagement is great. It's important for us. It drives our sport. But it also makes it more difficult to sell a particular player across the entire league.

**Q. Right. Very few teams transcend. Yankees one of them. Football, the Raiders, the Cowboys. Pittsburgh Pirates don't, no fault of their own, they just don't. I understand that fight. One of the things I would think that you have to wrestle with in an attempt to get the younger audience more actively interactive with the sport is gambling. And everyone knows my background. I'm a compulsive gambler. I can't do it responsibly. And I think I'm a good story to tell because there are people, about 10 percent of the population, that will create a problem when they start gambling. That being said, gambling is a very big growth opportunity for baseball and all the other sports for a much younger male audience. I know you're talking to Barstow. I saw that. I think it's brilliant for alternative broadcasts. How do you weigh the need to attract that audience with the worry that we're bringing younger people into a world that they might not be ready for, meaning gambling?**

ROB MANFRED: I think you need to think about this issue sequentially. As a result of the Supreme Court decision, there's going to be more sports betting in the United States. I mean, that's just absolutely -- it's going to be more open. And number two, sports betting has always existed. You wanted to bet on sports, even prior to the Supreme Court decision, you can find a way to do it. Unfortunately, that way was illegal and unregulated.

So in some ways, the sports betting market is much safer

and better today. And what do I mean by that? It's regulated. It's open. It's legal, and embedded in that legislative framework are certain protections designed to deal with, your number, the 10 percent of the population that cannot safely participate in this type of activity. Given that it's out there and it's legal, I think the way we think about it is it can be a great source of fan engagement.

We want our involvement with it structured in a way that always protects the integrity of the sport.

**Q. And that's the key. It becoming legal and being taken out of the back alley. The biggest concern you guys have in all sports is the dirty nature of gambling, the games being fixed or that type of thing. The legalization of it really should wipe a lot of that concern out because now it's in broad daylight.**

ROB MANFRED: 100 percent. And look, the second thing is we will always be above and beyond on the topic of taking responsibility to make sure that people that are betting to the extent that we possibly can are betting responsibly. Messaging and all that, it's important. It's really important.

**Q. I know you talk epic risk out of London coming here doing a lot of great work for what we call RG, responsible gaming. I'm going to be doing some work in that field. I don't know that it's called a necessary evil, but there's this huge audience of young men and women who are actively engaged in it. And baseball more than any other sport lends itself to the in-game wagering which makes it potentially -- football aside because of what the NFL is, the most popular to be engaged in in from a standpoint?**

ROB MANFRED: No question about that. And there's another piece to that, the kinds of bets that we allow and how far you go down that road I think is really relevant to both the integrity issue and the responsible gambling issue. You structure it in a way, what types of bets you make available to people, can have a big influence on them.

**Q. To wrap up the gambling part of this conversation, based on the legalization of it and the proliferation of it and the fact that you like all the leagues will now actively participate in gambling marketing deals, has that at all changed the thought about Pete Rose getting into the Hall of Fame?**

ROB MANFRED: Look, I see those issues completely separately. No matter what we do on the gambling front in terms of fan engagement and marketing, it will always be against our rules for anybody involved with the play of the game on the field to be betting on baseball. I see those

issues.

**Q. Let's talk more about the rules. Obviously the seven-inning double headers a lot of argument about it. Started with the COVID stuff, of course, and the idea that it might protect players. Walk me through that and the secondary part of that the extra inning man starting on second, are those two things here to stay or do you think it's going to be something negotiated out pretty quickly or is it your sense that the Players Union actually likes the seven-inning double headers?**

ROB MANFRED: I think the most important point is that those rule changes like every other kind of aspect of changing the game are a product of collective bargaining. So they're not really exclusively in our control. But let me say a word about each of those changes. The seven-inning double headers you're right was a COVID thing. It worked really well last year when our experts were telling us don't keep your players together very long.

It was a really good idea. What happened this year that has made it more controversial and less embraced by some in the game is split double headers. Last year all the double headers were traditional double headers because we had no fans. So we were just playing two games.

And we played 14 instead of 18. Okay. That's fine. Now, this year the problem is Rob Manfred and his three children, you're going to a game and he invests a bunch of money in tickets.

There's a rain problem. Not only do I move you to a different day but now you're getting seven innings instead of nine innings, I don't want that. That's a problem. So as much as I understand how seven inning double headers move things along. It's faster, don't have the time commitment -- the split double header is a real issue.

**Q. For the fans. The players may like it. We get complaints about it.**

ROB MANFRED: At the end of the day, I love our players but at the end of the day it's about the fans, that's what it's about. So the extra inning rule, I think people really like the extra inning rule. I think it's a good change for our game.

18 innings, there's not a ton of people who really want to see that many extra innings go on.

**Q. Do you think it's because it creates guaranteed action and the fan base likes that?**

ROB MANFRED: I think it makes it like overtime in other

sports. You have a much better idea about when that action is going to take place. And for the casual fan, in particular, you might capture them with the enticement of knowing, wow, I know when this game is going to be decided. Or I can make a pretty good guess as to when it's going to be decided.

**Q. It ain't going 16, we know that?**

ROB MANFRED: And I think that's good for the sport over the long haul. Whether it ends up in the package I can't tell you.

**Q. Rules-wise, there's a lot of talk amongst the purists of the sport, maybe they're aging that the shift is bad for the sport. Is that anything that's ever been on your radar as a conversation piece?**

ROB MANFRED: The shift has been a big conversation piece in the game. I think there's lots of people who would like to see regulation in the shift. What I would say again, this is part of the overall mix that's going to get shaken out in bargaining. You can't make too much of my comments because I don't control that process.

**Q. You're not negotiating in the mirror.**

ROB MANFRED: But I think the interesting thing with the shift is, let's say you made a rule where you had to have two infielders each side of second base. What is really the downside there? The only downside the game looks like it always did for decades. There's not a lot of downside associated with that one.

**Q. I don't see why that would be an arguing point. There's other things much more valuable to argue about. One of those -- we're talking to Rob Manfred, commissioner of Major League Baseball, kind enough to join us. "Field of Dreams" was an unmitigated success. Unmitigated. Couldn't have got any better. The game itself, other than the Yankees losing. For our purposes it could not have been any better. I know you've announced you're going to do it again. I am not sure if the teams are official. I think I saw the Reds or Cubs involved. Walk me through, before first pitch, were you worried, were you nervous about how it would come across? Or were you pretty confident it was going to be the success it was?**

ROB MANFRED: Look, I was very confident that it was going to be a success. And I'll tell you, everybody in and around the sport loved this idea from the first time that it surfaced.

And then I think we had an amazing kind of run of great

good fortune. I think the people responsible for the event in the commissioner's office devoted extreme care to making sure that everything about the setting was perfect. It was down to the dugout phones were covered in wooden boxes so they wouldn't look out of place. The Gatorade thing was in a wooden cover. We didn't use EVI behind home plate. We had signs that people in period dress rotated through the various innings.

Great thought was given to how the fans were going to enter and how the corn, how the cornfield was going to play for the fan entrance. And then of course the player entrance. Then I can't say enough. Kevin Costner, you know, I have to tell you, the thought and emotion that he invested in the pregame ceremony, the entire undertaking to tell you the truth.

**Q. Was that an easy yes when you first reached out did it take a long time for him to say yes to?**

ROB MANFRED: No, he was very interested from the beginning. I cannot say enough about what he added to the event. I mean, he was just absolutely phenomenal. And then of course the third thing is the one you really want.

So at the end of the day, for us it's always about the game shining. And man we got one hell of a game.

**Q. One hell of a game.**

ROB MANFRED: We did. We got one hell of a game.

**Q. If there's anything that you guys have ever done that was perfect Hollywood script, other than, of course, the Yankees losing it was that. I hate to say that I've never seen the movie "Field of Dreams" which I know belies the fact that I'm a sports talk show host in New York City, does that now become your go to default favorite baseball movie, are you allowed to say "Major League" or "For Love of the Game," or does it have to be something like that?**

ROB MANFRED: Can I tell you something I've had a soft spot for two baseball movies. "Field of Dreams" is one of them because it's about fathers and sons. I had a great relationship with my dad.

The other one, that would be right there that I was telling you, "The Natural" is a great movie.

**Q. What a lot of people don't know about the natural because it's in the background, when Roy Hobbs hits the penultimate home run, Bob Kostas is doing the play-by-play. I don't know if people knew that.**



ROB MANFRED: There you go.

**Q. Kostas is one of them because he's played baseball at some point in his life, but Robert Redfield looks like a baseball player.**

ROB MANFRED: What's really interesting, Kevin Costner talked about that in the press conference that we did before the "Field of Dreams" game, and how challenging it is to get involved with a movie based on a sport if you've never played, because so many people play baseball that they can tell if you've never played.

**Q. He never swung a bat. (Laughter). Let's talk playoffs. I know there's been some conversation about, hey, do we shorten the regular season, extend the postseason, can we get some type of 14 postseason teams? Walk me through where you think we are with that. If not, next year, say next couple years, do we see an expansion of the playoffs and the potential for a shortened regular season?**

ROB MANFRED: I think the best thing I can say to you about that is I like the expanded playoff format we had last year. I thought it was good for us. I thought it was really, really exciting in the early rounds. Baseball kind of owned the week. I think all of those are positives.

**Q. If not 14, you do like the concept of expanding it more?**

ROB MANFRED: Yes.

**Q. Got it. And what about the concept of robotic strike zones? Baseball has always said missing a call is a part of it. Don Denkinger missing a call is part of the baseball lore. Santana is one hitter which is now a no-hitter, part of baseball lore. It's human nature. But we do see the box on the screen. And my ten-year-old can tell me if it was a strike or not because he sees the box on the screen. Do you think we are close to having robotic strike zones?**

ROB MANFRED: Well, from a technology perspective, we have a system that we've used at various levels in the minor leagues that is definitely up to the task. I mean, it's an outstanding system. We've been kind of at the forefront in terms of sports and technology.

And the system that's been developed is really accurate. From the fans perspective, the call is relayed to the empire through an earpiece. So it looks like baseball has traditionally looked.

I think there is a policy judgment to be made as to whether -- not every technology that you develop should be used. You've got to make your mind up of that one.

**Q. What works in the minors when you do it, the computer reads it strike and instantaneously, real time, the umpire has an earpiece, he either hears strike or ball?**

ROB MANFRED: Yes. He makes the call based on what he gets from the computer. That's important for a whole host of reasons. It does -- there's no disruption to the traditional role of the empire. And we are a tradition bound game. And I think that there was real thought and care that went into developing that aspect of the system to make sure that baseball looked like baseball.

**Q. As you're well aware a number of years ago I started something here in New York, the five boroughs, The Borough Cup, largest youth baseball tournament in the country. Teams literally representing every borough except Manhattan, never had a team, amazingly enough. Over the course of the last years, 10,000 kids play. Major League Baseball has been a great partner of ours with The Borough Cup, which I have no longer active involvement with. John Franco and Gary Perone and I started it a number of years ago. The idea is there's a lack of baseball amongst minorities, specifically Afro American kids in the five boroughs. Latin American kids it's very strong still in the boroughs. I know you've taken it on to make sure that young minority children, not just in the five boroughs, but nationwide, are given the opportunity to discover baseball the way we all did. Could you give me an update how that initiative has gone just beyond The Borough Cup or New York City but across the country?**

ROB MANFRED: Let me talk about two things. Let me talk about data first. The most important number I can give you is over the last five years, 20 percent of our first-round draft choices have been African-American, that's compared to eight percent currently in the big leagues. Almost every one of those players.

I think without exception has some involvement with a Major League Baseball program. We are investing in underserved areas to provide opportunities where they did not exist -- my favorite -- I've got to do two. My favorite pieces of our effort are the Jackie Robinson Training Center in Vero Beach. We took over the Dodgers old -- former -- I shouldn't say old. That's not what I mean.

**Q. Around a long time, I got it.**

ROB MANFRED: And the first year that we did it, five years ago, we invite all young men and women of color to participate in the program. We had a hard time filling a two-week session. We now run multiple sessions. We are oversubscribed. We have all former Major League players and coaches who come back to provide training to really elite players who are going to have an opportunity either to play at the college level or to play professionally.

And I can't particularly given what has happened in the last 12 months, the Hank Aaron Invitational, just a huge opportunity particularly for young people of color to be showcased, to have college and professional scouts see them. And it's really the pinnacle of our programming as part of this effort.

**Q. It's a big change over the course of the last three, four, five years?**

ROB MANFRED: Yes, look I have to say this name. Tony Reagins, the general manager of the Angels, now runs all of our youth programming. And the job that Tony has done for us in this space, I cannot, cannot say enough about.

I mean, this guy is in Hampton Inns all across the United States all year long, running grassroots programs making our game available to people who otherwise would not have a chance to play.

**Q. I think it's great. I didn't know those numbers. That's great. That means the initiative is working, that we're getting the message out and giving young kids, minority kids an opportunity that they may not have had for, whether it's fiscal reasons or just access to fields or whatever the case may be, which I think is great. Couple more baseball things for you. Realignment, league division realignment, any possibility in the near future, do you think that's happening?**

ROB MANFRED: There's two sides to that coin, right? So let me tell you the positive side. The positive side, if you realigned, I think during the playoffs we could do a better job for our fans.

What do I mean by that? In the early rounds, if you played up from the West Coast and up from the East Coast you would avoid everything what is always a challenge for us. Anaheim plays Boston in the first round, right, and who gets the game time that's less than ideal for their fans. You can eliminate that if you regionalized.

The flipside of it is it's hard to imagine through the American League east that that doesn't look like the current American League east.

**Q. You want Yankees, you want Red Sox, you need that.**

ROB MANFRED: There's two sides on that one. And I think people get used to those rivalries and they're really important to our sport.

**Q. Are you still swinging the bat at all, playing any whiffle ball in the back with the kids?**

ROB MANFRED: Can I tell you, I have a grandson -- we actually have been blessed in the last few years. We have four, now, grandchildren, with one more on the way. But my oldest is a -- the oldest of the group is a grandson. And I've resumed my whiffle ball career because he's very interested in hitting anything with a bat and ball.

**Q. Do you have an entrance song when you come out for that, or no?**

ROB MANFRED: Can I tell you something? You know, I am so single minded when it comes to music that my family makes fun of me. There's only one -- there are sports stations, but in my cars there's only one preset music station. And that's XM20, which is the Springstein station.

**Q. Really?**

ROB MANFRED: Thunder Road 100 percent best song of all time.

**Q. So the Commish comes out to Thunder Road for whiffle at-bat with the grandson. Have you seen Springstein in concert?**

ROB MANFRED: I don't know exactly how many times. The first time, believe it or not, was in the late '70s in the Utica War Memorial.

**Q. That building doesn't even exist anymore.**

ROB MANFRED: Yeah.

**Q. Last baseball question for you, and I'll let you go because a lot of people called in about it. I think it's a regional sports issue not a commissioner issue. But help me with that. People get ticked off when games are blacked out on MLB app. Is that a commissioner or league issue, or is that totally controlled by the RSNs?**

ROB MANFRED: It's both. The blackouts exist because the rights are sold exclusively to the RSNs. If they don't

have distribution, the game's not available. We don't have the right to do it on MLB.TV. Having said that, the league overlay on it is one of our most priorities is to make sure that we deliver games to our fans who want to watch them, and we are working hard in that space because of the changes.

Right? The RSNs, fewer people in the cable bundle and even within the bundle less distribution than there used to be. We see it as a problem and it's something we're working hard on to correct.

**Q. Have you had to explain to each grandchild who Bruce Springstein is or do they get it?**

ROB MANFRED: They get it. Everybody in my family gets it.

**Q. When grandpa is driving on a road trip, they know what's going to be on the radio.**

ROB MANFRED: They know what's on the radio.

**Q. I appreciate you coming on today.**

FastScripts by ASAP Sports