

Bunning is the man to save baseball

By William C. Kashatus

Since Fay Vincent's resignation as commissioner in 1992, baseball has limped along under an ownership junta led by Milwaukee Brewers President Bud Selig. During those four years, the owners have fought bitterly over revenue sharing, network television and a players' salary cap.

Stalemate over labor negotiations and the strike of '94 have only served to distance the fans from the game. (The Phils' plummeting attendance is not simply a matter of putting a poor team on the field.) Sadly, both the owners and the players have turned the economic issues that divide them into a morality play, painting each other as "selfish" and "jeopardizing the best interests of the game."

In fact, baseball is jeopardized by the lack of an independent commissioner.

Someone is needed with the scrupulous morality of Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the business savvy of Peter Ueberroth, and the eloquent passion of Bart Giamatti.

That person exists — and baseball need look no further than Coopers-town tomorrow when he's inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Jim Bunning, the former Phillies right-hander and now a U.S. congressman from Kentucky, is the man for the job.

Initially, the owners might quail. Though a Republican, Bunning has a strong labor background: He was one of the early driving forces behind the Players Association and the appointment of Marvin Miller as its first executive director. He was a tireless worker on the players' pension committee and later a tough-minded player agent. More re-



Jim Bunning has proved to

antitrust exemption which gives baseball protection from lawsuits over such matters as league size, franchise assignment and movement.

However, his years away from the game have given him a more balanced perspective, and his experience in politics has taught him much about the art of compromise and achieving consensus. The owners also might consider that the Almanac of American Politics compared Bunning's conservative brand of politics to "that other union organizer, Ronald Reagan." And they might consider his experience on the House Ways and Means Committee, which governs spending.

Here's someone with the ways and means to restore some common sense to the game. Here's someone who's a fiscal conservative and an advocate of free enterprise. Here's someone who's served with distinction on the Ethics Committee. Who better to deal with Albert Belle?

While Bunning said recently that he "wouldn't want to work for baseball's management," he said he was "upset about the inflexibility of both sides" in trying to achieve a contract. And he asserted that "there is plenty of ground to compromise in a labor negotiation that's been dragged out for two-and-a-half to three years with one strike and one lockout."

Bunning has a compromise solution for the commissioner's post and how to help assure its independence, while giving the commissioner the flexibility to deal evenhandedly with both sides. Let the owners and the players jointly pay his salary and have him sit on a three-member board that includes a representative of the owners and one of the players.

Bunning was one of the greatest pitchers in the history of the game, as his induction tomorrow attests. In Washington, he has proved to be an equally skillful politician — and he credits baseball.

"Politics is similar to baseball," he recently explained. "Both can be one-on-one. In committee meetings, you have to convince people that you have a legitimate point. Athletes can serve the public, too. They know what it means to play by the rules of the game."

Realistically, no modern commissioner is going to be a dictator like Landis. He'll probably have to rely more on the power of persuasion. Who would be better suited than a veteran U.S. congressman, especially one with a strong understanding of baseball history?