



Ten-Man Baseball

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During major league baseball's winter meetings in Chicago in December of 1928, a brash new proposal was introduced to the assembled owners, managers and other baseball executives by the president of the National League, John Heydler, a man generally unknown today.

John Heydler was born on July 10, 1869 in La Fargeville, NY. He started working as a printer's apprentice at a Rochester, NY newspaper at the age of fourteen. When he was not working he devoted most of his time to sandlot baseball. Heydler would later land a job in Washington, DC as a government printer. There he also umpired college and semi-pro games.

Heydler would go on to find work as a sportswriter, covering the sport he loved. In 1898 he got his first job with the National League as an umpire. After just one year he quit to return to sports writing. While working at various papers, Heydler proposed the idea of tabulating league leaders, and selling them to newspapers to use.



In 1903 Heydler was hired as the private secretary to National League president Harry Pulliam, principally working to compile league statistics. Heydler's work caused him to record much of the league's early history, and he became an advocate of introducing new ways to measure player accomplishments. He was a strong supporter of recording runs batted in for batters, and began computing earned run averages for pitchers.

On becoming the National League's secretary-treasurer from 1907-1918, he served as the league president briefly after Pulliam's suicide in 1909. In his short time as President he made a number of innovative changes, including putting a limit on a team's active



rosters to 25, a number that is still the standard today. However Heydler was not retained as President following the 1909 season.

He became president of the National League again in 1918 and was involved in the investigations of the Black Sox scandal. While Heydler was not very energetic in investigating scandal or in opposing league owners, he was innovative in his thinking. He pushed for the selection of Kenesaw Mountain Landis as the first Commissioner of Baseball in 1920, realizing the importance of an official who could keep the owners in check.

So when Heydler stood to address the owners and managers in 1928 to propose a radical change to the National Pastime, everyone in attendance was eager to discover what it might be.

Heydler proposed *ten-man baseball*, a format which featured a permanent pinch-hitter for the pitcher. Heydler envisioned that the game would be improved by adding more offense and would also speed up the game. It was noted that there were 698 pinch hitters used for pitchers during the 1928 season in the National League. Given the 154-game schedule at the time, this calculates to better than four times per game when a pitcher from either team used a pinch hitter for their pitcher.

Despite receiving support from even the most strict traditionalists such as John McGraw, most viewed the concept to be preposterous. The American League owners were immediately against the idea, yet the National League owners would not dismiss the suggestion right away. Sam Breadon, president of the St. Louis Cardinals, gave an interview to reporters where he spoke in favor of the idea and said that he expected the baseball world would eventually accept the suggestion in modified form.

The concept of ten-man baseball was eventually adopted by the American League as the “designated hitter” rule. This time, like other experimental baseball rule changes, the concept was the brainchild of A’s owner Charlie Finley. It was used first in spring training games in 1969, and was later adopted by the American League beginning in 1973.

On April 6, 1973, Ron Bloomberg of the New York Yankees became the first designated hitter in major league baseball history, facing Boston Red Sox right-hander Luis Tiant in his first plate appearance. “Boomer” Bloomberg was walked.

Heydler was visionary pioneer during the formative years of baseball. He remained the president of the National League until 1934. Among Heydler’s other accomplishments was helping to establish the Baseball Hall of Fame.

After retiring as league president, he served as National League chairman until his death in San Diego, CA in 1956, aged 86.