

Best Interests of Dave Kingman

Now that Bowie Kuhn has appointed himself supreme arbiter of all player transactions, with the wisdom to foretell which deals will be good for baseball and which bad, the question is whether he would sanction a trade that would separate Dave Kingman from the Mets.

As the earthly vicar of Kenesaw Mountain Landis, Bowie has managed up to now to balk Charlie Finley's efforts to convert players into cash. A year ago Charlie sold Vida Blue, Joe Rudi and Rollie Fingers for \$3.5 million but just as he reached out for the swag the commissioner slapped his hand away, saying, "Burny! mustn't touch!" Bowie explained that too much money was bad for Charlie and that it would be bad for baseball in Oakland if Rudi, Fingers and Blue left town. Since

then, Rudi and Fingers have left town along with all other members of Oakland's three-time world champions except Blue and Bill North, and on Saturday the A's drew the second smallest crowd that has ever watched them open a season there. Bowie can point with pride to this evidence that he was right.

Blue was now the unwilling prisoner of a three-year contract with Finley, and the commissioner appears to have no intention of springing him. At least, Brad Corbett of the Texas Rangers says Kuhn won't let him send six players and \$2.5 million to Oakland for Vida. "But something may be doing in the next couple of days," Finley said Saturday. "Not just with Texas, maybe the Yankees or anyone."

The Yankees already have a five-man starting corps of Catfish Hunter, Dock Ellis, Don Gullett, Ed Figueroa and Ken Holtzman. Would they rotate six starters? Or would they invite unhappy Dock Ellis to seek happiness in Oakland, and maybe throw in Holtzman, who escaped from Finley just a year ago?

'The Biggest Bargain'

But let's step back to Kingman, described in the Mets' press guide as the "biggest bargain purchase in Met history." In the baby blue eyes of M. Donald Grant he is no bargain. Nor does M. Donald, the Mets' chairman of the board, have an irresistible appeal for David Arthur Kingman. Two short years ago they were the happiest of couples but Dow Jones came between them.

Now Kingman wants to be traded and the Mets say they are trying to accommodate him, even though he is, next to Tom Seaver, their biggest gate attraction. A typical fan writes:

"Dave Kingman is numero uno in our house. He is the reason we go out to Shea and why we buy box seat tickets. He is also the reason we just purchased a color TV set and subscribe to cable TV. At our house he is Dynamic Dave and we love him."

Obviously, alienating fans like that is not in the best interest of baseball. When Finley sued Kuhn because the commissioner's ruling on Blue, Rudi and Fingers had cost him \$3.5 million, Federal Judge Frank J. McGarr found that Bowie did indeed have the authority to take what steps he deemed proper to protect the interests of baseball.

The judge voiced doubts about the wisdom of delegating such extraordinary authority to an individual but there it was in the major league agreement. All club owners promised to accept the commissioner's decisions as final, and all of them—including Charlie Finley—forswore the right to seek relief in court.

Weehawken West

So the question is posed for Kuhn: Would the Mets be acting in the best interests of baseball if they disposed of their single season home run champion? Kingman had 32 home runs when he tore up a thumb last July 19. Unhurt, he might have broken Hack Wilson's 46-year-old National League record of 56 in a season. He has the power to break the record any summer, and at 28 years old he has ample time. Is it good for the Mets, good for business, good for baseball to get rid of a player like that? Kuhn has assigned himself to answer all such questions. To be sure, if the Mets don't trade or sell Kingman, Dave can play out his option and walk away at the season's end, just as Rudi and Fingers and all those other A's did last year.

Kuhn didn't let that factor influence him last year. Could he make it a consideration now without confirming Finley's charge that the commissioner is out to get him? Kuhn denies that he is pursuing a personal vendetta against the Oakland owner but the fact is there are men in baseball who would be happy to be rid of Finley.

Some owners had grave misgivings when Finley was admitted to the American League as buyer of the Kansas City Athletics in 1960. Time and again his lodge brothers blocked his attempts to move the franchise to a more fertile area because they hoped that by pinning him down in Kansas City they could starve him out. He was too stubborn for them, and in 1968 he made the move to Oakland.

As a big-league baseball town, Oakland is strictly Weehawken West. In an era when some clubs say they must sell a million tickets to break even, the A's have reached that goal only twice. Oakland's peak season was 1975 when the club had won its third world championship in a row and was on the way to a fifth straight title in the American League West. Home attendance that season was 1,075,518. This year it could fall below 500,000.

If this should come about, driving Finley out of baseball and the A's out of Oakland, Kuhn would be delighted. Moving the club to Washington would be his idea of serving the best interests of baseball.