

Book brings Flood's contribution to game out of the shadows

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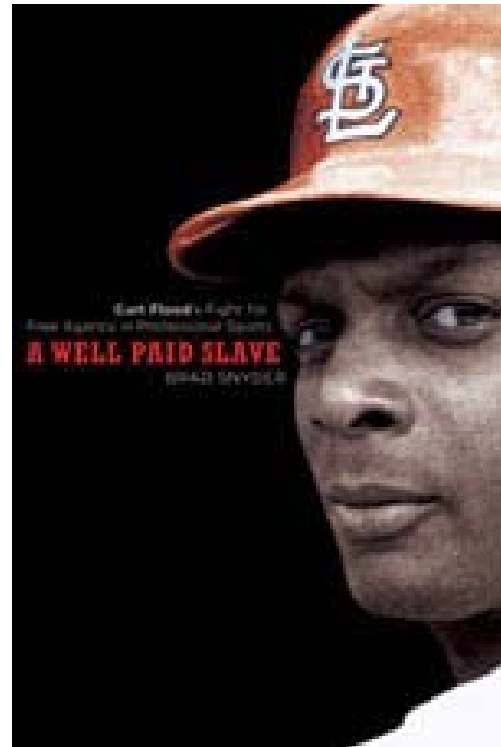
Although Jackie Robinson suffered many indignities when he broke Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1948, his legacy is enshrined. Curt Flood's historic contribution to baseball and society, however, remains in the shadows. His decision to challenge the power of the baseball establishment is still largely misunderstood. Thanks to *A Well-Paid Slave*, by Brad Snyder, we get a new look at Flood's life and times. Snyder's book illuminates Flood's challenge of the reserve clause through the events that shaped Flood, including his childhood in desegregated Oakland, playing minor league baseball in the racist, segregated South, his participation in the civil rights movement, and his troubles with alcohol.

The context provides a fascinating backdrop for an improbable, largely bungled lawsuit that ultimately increased solidarity among Major League baseball players and paved the way for free agency in baseball and other professional sports.

Snyder clearly describes how Flood took on the reserve clause, which had been a feature of MLB contracts since 1876. The clause bound a player to his team for his entire career, allowing him to be traded or sold without his approval, like a piece of property. The clause made it impossible for a player to establish his value in a free market. Earlier lawsuits (by a team vs. a league, a minor-league player, and an unsigned player) claimed that the clause violated the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, which made it illegal to conspire to restrain "trade or commerce among the several states." Baseball argued that it was engaged in exhibitions which the US Supreme Court, in 1922 and again in 1953, agreed were "purely state affairs," and therefore not subject to the Act. Through the 1960s, MLB used this legal windfall to suppress salaries. Players did little to collectively work to change the system. In fact, many believed the argument perpetuated by owners and sportswriters that free agency would doom professional baseball.

Curt Flood didn't buy it. He compared the reserve clause to the shackles of slavery. After the 1969 season, the Cardinals traded Flood to the Philadelphia Phillies. Flood refused to go, sitting out the entire 1970 season and forsaking his \$90,000 salary. (Flood believed that Philadelphia had a tradition of racism and he did not want to live there.)

Sports broadcaster Howard Cosell asked Flood how someone making \$90,000 could accuse team owners of employing slave labor. That prompted Flood's famous response: "A well-



paid slave is nonetheless a slave.” The public parsed Flood’s response: it’s all about the money. In 1970, the average MLB salary was \$29,303. Paltry by today’s standards, it was substantially higher than the salary of the average American worker, making it hard to enlist public support against the reserve clause. For Flood free agency was about freedom; he didn’t want to be bought, sold, and traded like property. As a human being, he felt baseball players deserved the right, like all other citizens, to choose where he worked and lived.

In challenging MLB’s reserve system, Curt Flood did the unthinkable: he was the first (and sadly) only major league baseball player to take on the powerful institution of professional baseball owners. Although in *Flood v. Kuhn* (Commissioner Bowie Kuhn) the Supreme Court ruled against Flood, the case paved the way for what we now know as free agency.

Flood recognized the injustice of the reserve clause — and risked his professional career for economic and social fairness.

While many have forgotten — or more likely never knew — Curt Flood, his legacy shines today despite all the doomsday predictions.

Free agency has enlivened, rather than killed, professional sports leagues in ways that few predicted. Free agency in MLB began in 1975 with Andy Messersmith signing with the Atlanta Braves. Since then, revenues and expenses have soared. So have franchise values, suggesting the former has outpaced the latter. While labor issues in professional sports have remained contentious, free agency has helped foster a partnership between players and management that did not previously exist. The NBA took this partnership to perhaps its ultimate level with buy-in from the Players Association on the salary cap. For there to be a salary cap, there had to be free agency.

Today, the public grapples with \$200-million contracts, not \$90,000 salaries. Few pro athletes appreciate Curt Flood’s profound contribution to their bank accounts and working conditions. Charles Barkley wonders: “How can anybody drawing a paycheck in sports today not know about Curt Flood? How did his contributions get so overlooked? Athletes had no say in where they played until Curt Flood stood up and refused to be traded.” Joe Torre adds, “I just want players to understand the reason that they’re doing pretty well and have lots of rights and that’s because of what Curt Flood gave up.”

Curt Flood has not yet received the credit he deserves. *A Well-Paid Slave* is another opportunity for the public to reevaluate Flood’s legacy. In return for the sacrifices made on behalf of his colleagues, perhaps it is time for pro athletes to stand up for Curt Flood. Flood has not been inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. During 15 years in the Majors, Flood was a 3-time All Star, a 7-time Gold Glove winner, and had a .293 career batting average. In 1966, appearing in 159 games, Flood went the entire season without committing an error. He helped the Cardinals win the World Series in 1964 against the New York Yankees and in 1967 against the Boston Red Sox.

Professional athletes in all sports, not just baseball, should take a small yet symbolic stand and demand Curt Flood’s induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame. If there were a Pro Athletes Hall of Fame, Curt Flood would no doubt be its first inductee.

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