

# NO BEER AFTER THE 9TH INNING

MAJOR LEAGUERS DEAL WITH  
ALCOHOL RESTRICTIONS  
AFTER A SOBERING TRAGEDY.

By ERIC BUTTERMAN



**B**aseball and beer go together like...well, baseball and peanuts. Still, every fan has witnessed that familiar sobering sign: "No beer after the 7th inning." Put in place to protect patrons from possibly driving drunk, it couldn't save Josh Hancock, a promising St. Louis Cardinals pitcher who, just months before, called himself a World Champion for the first time. And how did his team celebrate that earlier life-altering feat? With alcohol, of course; those traditional champagne bottles bursting to their bubbling hilts. But on the night of April 29, 2007, there was no wild celebration; only the silent tragedy of a young man whose life ended prematurely from driving drunk on Highway 40 and who, mercifully, didn't take the lives of anyone else involved. Baseball's response was immediate and strict: Several teams chose to ban alcohol altogether in the clubhouse, citing that the drink culture of sport contributed to Hancock's death.

But it can't be denied that there was a positive side to that drinking culture, too. In an age when millionaire players usually part ways with each other for their post-game entourage, the almighty beer gave them



one more reason to stick around, share a cold one and maybe some important strategy for the next nine innings to come.

A.J. Pierzynski, catcher for the Chicago White Sox who became World Champions the season previous to Hancock's, believes the alcohol ban has a greater impact on the road. "When I'm playing a home game, I want to get back to my family as soon as it's over," he says. "But on the road, there's nothing else to do, so having a drink is a nice way to catch up. Players don't drive themselves from the ballpark on the road, anyway, so I don't think these rules really do much." However, Pierzynski understands why the bans were put in place to begin with. "It was a big incident with what happened to Hancock," he says. "It was about his friends' sadness, the Cardinals' reaction and baseball hearing a public outcry...But we are grown men and have to make our own decisions. This ban treats us like we're kids."

And it doesn't end at the clubhouse doors. The bans have extended to team flights, which is no small measure when you consider how long a coast-to-coast flight can take. Pierzynski's manager, White Sox legend Ozzie Guillen, who fronts one of the teams that didn't go along with the bans, believes the action, though well-intended, just doesn't mesh with reason. "People think it's the clubhouse's fault or baseball's fault about this accident. This accident happened a long time after the game was over," Guillen told the Chicago Sun-Times. That, at least, appears to be true. Reports state Hancock may have started his drinking at Busch Stadium, but it didn't come close to ending there. In fact, Hancock's father is suing the restaurant/bar Hancock visited for pouring what he believes was an excessive amount to his son.

#### WHERE THE BAN CAME FROM

Clearly Hancock's accident was the final straw that led to the Cardinals' alcohol ban, but his manager may have very well laid the tracks: The previous month Tony La Russa, the St. Louis Cardinals manager, was arrested for a DUI. Many feel this incident was vital to the Cardinals' vehement response to Hancock's death; they certainly didn't want to be known as a team with alcohol problems and no solutions. "Maybe in some way this organization is better prepared to deal with this because we've experienced it before," La Russa told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, referring to losing another pitcher years before to a heart ailment. But he could have just as easily been referring to himself and his own alcohol tribulations.

In the end, whether the Cardinals and the other teams that followed in the ban were right, one nagging question remains: How did the teams get away with these bans so easily to begin with? After all, isn't the baseball players union one of the strongest organizations in the country? Matt Sosnick, agent for all five Florida Marlins starting pitchers, says players aren't going to battle this, because other bargaining points just hold greater importance. And, on some level, they even doubt how much enforcement will go on. "You want players to have the most comfortable environment, but obviously baseball felt it had to take a stand...I think if players want that drink in the locker room they'll find a way to get it. I mean, what's baseball going to do? Suspend them for 10 games for being caught with a beer?" ●