

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

One big switch in baseball that went smoothly

*By George Castle, CBM Historian
Posted Wednesday, May 24, 2017*

Change comes oh-so-slowly to baseball, unless the game has a proverbial gun to its head.

One main instance was labor peace after baseball tottered on a precipice following the 1994-95 strike stopped only by a federal court injunction. More recently, postseason umpiring was so bad that the Lords of the Game accepted comprehensive replay, having resisted it for decades after other pro sports adopted video systems.

Now, change is still forthcoming in an active player, executive, broadcaster or writer not yet coming out as gay. Billy Bean came out publicly only after his playing career ended, and was eventually appointed Major League Baseball's ambassador of inclusion. The conservative nature of the game inhibits individuals revealing their true selves while on active duty. Baseball figures coming out eventually will be recorded, but not on a timetable seen elsewhere in society.

There is one interesting exception. Christina Kahrl of ESPN is one step ahead of the above scenario. She is an openly trans-gender baseball writer covering baseball, and fortunately not encountering any flak for what by all scientific accounts should be just a segment of one's heart and soul. And definitely a passion and aptitude for baseball smoothly crossed the gender line without any alteration.

Full disclosure here. I researched and wrote my fifth book, "Throwbacks," on old-school baseball archetypes in 2001-02 for release in 2003 by Washington, D.C.-based Potomac Books. My editor was a baseball aficionado named Chris Kahrl. Many conversations about the nuances of the game and Chicago baseball management piggybacked onto our ongoing business. Kahrl already gained fame as a founding editor of the Baseball Prospectus analytical site.

Nothing about Kahrl's impending life change ever came up. That was another part of her personality that had little or no effect on our relationship. And if the subject came up, so what? I would have wished Kahrl well, then gone back to the discourse on books and baseball. A youth or adult identifying with another gender and desiring an official



Christina Kahrl reports smooth sailing in baseball clubhouses as a transgender writer.

change to that side of life's home plate was programmed by Mother Nature. Medical professionals should have a new-age obligation to assist in the process.

While using her profile as a writer to advocate trans-gender civil rights not already codified into law or custom, Kahrl has encountered few choppy waters in the often hide-bound grand ol' game. Thank goodness for small favors.

"Within baseball, players have been basically very cool," Kahrl said recently. After relocating to ESPN's headquarters in Bristol, Conn., she had come back to her favorite city to speak at the induction ceremony of Ring Lardner into the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.

"I'm just another person with a mic, I'm just another person asking them about baseball," Kahrl said. "My re-appearance in a clubhouse after my transition was totally a non-story, which was exactly how I wanted it. I remember I interviewed Paul Konerko when he retired. He was the last active player I interviewed as the old 'me' with the Ditka moustache back in the Nineties.

"The same interest in baseball, the same interesting in finding out what he has to say about the game, that's the thing that commands the same kind of respect."

Kahrl remembers after her transition to a woman just one player refusing to answer a question, and she cannot pin it on gender change at all.

"It was a backup catcher for the Mariners," she said. "I was asking for some extra color on a Felix Hernandez story. He wouldn't take my question and ran into the trainer's room. Maybe he was just shy."

Kahrl believes baseball's clubhouse culture has changed. Certainly players' treatment of women in the locker room has evolved from crudity and harassment in the 1980s. Infamous was Dave Kingman sending a caged rat to writer Susan Fornoff. Less well-known was a prominent Cub (we will allow him to remain unnamed) shaking his private parts across the clubhouse at the sight of a woman.

"The players aren't the problem," Kahrl said. "The players from this country were in high school and college, they're under 30, growing up in an environment where you had straight-gay alliances in high school or out trans people in college. The issue is more generational, people who are 50 and older who might bat an eye. But managers and coaches have been reliably awesome.

"I have no complaints about how I've been treated. I'm just another reporter. I wouldn't ask for any other way to be treated to the clubhouse. It's a gift the game gave me. I hoped, but I didn't expect or demand, the kind of respect that I deserved as a working professional. The fact they gave it to me was obviously a relief. More than anything else, it made me feel great about the game."

Kahrl certainly is appreciative of female trailblazers who made life easier for her.

"Sharon PannoZZo certainly had to put up with a lot of stuff," she said of the Cubs media relations director from 1991 to 2006. Now an NBC-Universal public relations vice president, PannoZZo was one of the first women to hold the job as a team's top PR per-

son. She fortunately dodged the outright severe harassment experienced in the 1980s by Robin Monsky of the Atlanta Braves.

Activism is easier to do without job conflicts

With a relative placidity on the job, Kahrl could feel comfortable evolving into a transgender activist.

“The things that people trying to do in public education or prevent civil equality for all Americans is appalling,” she said. “The legislation that is being aimed at trans people is part of a more general pushback against Americans of every stripe.

“It’s a reminder where I’m a trans person who works for ESPN. That’s a position of enormous privilege. The question is how I use that privilege to benefit others, beyond just doing my job as a professional. It also requires a sense of obligation to try to help other people do the job or other people gain the same benefits I can afford to take for granted.

“It’s not a me-slash-trans issue, it’s a human-rights issue.”

In an odd way, Kahrl has advanced to the point where she likely has more worry about a workaday issue like ESPN’s recent massive job cuts. The “Turk” came for minorities, women, world-class baseball writers, young and mature alike. Almost equal-opportunity slashing. Kahrl was spared.

That’s maybe a segue to another issue on her plate to take up. The internet and factory closings are dislocating millions from employment. Before he was cashiered amid his own sexual harassment scandals, blowhard Bill O’Reilly shouted down Mark Cuban, if that’s humanly possible, on his Fox show. Cuban tried to warn the government needs to retrain the masses for new-economy jobs. O’Reilly parroted a simplistic conservative line about the return of gobs of industrial jobs, but would not let Cuban clearly offer a counter viewpoint.

Well, the opportunistic O’Reilly, surely no friend of someone like Kahrl, is off the air. Cuban still has a bully pulpit. Before ESPN starts getting more ideas about shrinking, Kahrl has the chance to verbally and on-line tell a lot of truths beyond balls and strikes.