Robert E. Malchman

George Brett Pine Tar Game, or, AL's MacPhail strikes out

It was a hot July day in Yankee Stadium. The Yankees and Royals were playing their last regular-season game for 1983. Two out in the top of the ninth, New York was leading 4-3. With one man on base, the go-ahead run in the form of superhitter George Brett was at the plate. The Yankee faithful were rowdy, nonetheless. Relief ace Goose Gossage and his 95-mile-per-hour fastball were coming into the game. The fans knew it was all over.

Brett had other ideas. He launched a pitch deep into the left field stands, putting the Royals ahead 5-4. A television camera focused on Gossage as the mustachioed fireballer emphatically pronounced an obscenity. Things suddenly looked different for the Yankee nine.

There is a rule that says one cannot have more than 18 inches of pine tar on a bat. Why anyone would need even that much is a mystery to me. Pine tar is a sticky substance rubbed on the bat handle to improve the batter's grip.

Brett did with it. As soon as the bat was illegal from the beginning, irrespective of what Brett did with it. As soon as the illegality was called to the umpire's attention. Brett should have been — and was — called out.

Incredibly, MacPhail bought this argument. The pine tar did not affect how the ball was struck, he said, so the hit was legal.

MacPhail missed the point. The bat was illegal from the beginning, irrespective of what Brett did with it. As soon as the illegality was called to the umpire's attention, Brett should have been — and was — called out.

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