

Social issues the focus in gala honoring Selig

Paul Hagen / MLB.com | 5/14/14 1:16 AM ET



NEW YORK -- Bud Selig recalled the time when he was 23 years old and cut an accounting class to attend a Braves game against the Cardinals at Milwaukee's County Stadium. He parked far away and bought an obstructed-view seat behind a pole. And in the 11th inning, Hank Aaron homered and the Braves won the pennant.

The next morning, there were two stories side by side on the front page of The New York Times, the Commissioner recalled Tuesday night at a gala in his honor, sponsored by the National Museum of American Jewish History.

"Juxtaposed against each other were [Aaron] being carried off the field by his mainly white teammates, and [Gov.] Orval Faubus spraying [African-American] kids in Little Rock, Ark., who were merely trying to go to high school," Selig said before a packed house that included many of baseball's top executives at Gotham Hall. "That picture stuck with me to this day. And so I began to understand that as much as I loved watching games every night, that its social significance is just amazing."

Selig was honored at the museum's inaugural New York gala for all his accomplishments during his 22 years of leading baseball into an era of unprecedented popularity and prosperity, but his emphasis on social issues was highlighted.

The National Museum of American Jewish History, located on the historic Independence Mall in Philadelphia, is featuring an exhibition called "Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American" that will run through Oct. 26.

The master of ceremonies Tuesday night was Mike Greenberg, co-host of ESPN's "Mike & Mike in the Morning" show.

After a short video honoring Selig, who has announced that he will step down next January, Greenberg conducted a question-and-answer session with Selig that touched on a number of subjects. Asked how his Jewish upbringing affected his worldview, the Commissioner credited his parents.

"I give my parents credit," Selig said. "While there are things in life that are important, doing the right thing, being socially responsible, is really critical. Don't misunderstand me. Profit was always an important thing, and there was nothing wrong with that. But the fact of the matter is if you are socially responsible, and I give my parents a great deal of credit for that, things will work out well."

It was his mother who instilled his love of baseball.

"She loved the game," Selig said, recalling how she took him to Yankee Stadium when he was 15 years old. "While my father enjoyed it, it was our way to spend time together. It was my mother who got me involved in baseball."

The National Basketball Association and the National Football League now have openly gay players, and Selig said he anticipates no problem when a Major League player comes out.

"I would say about a gay player, it doesn't matter to me," he said. "If he can help me win, God bless him. We're happy to have him."

The Commissioner also anticipates the continued growth of baseball, especially internationally.

"You have no idea how big this can be," Selig said. "This sport can grow beyond our comprehension. In the next decade, people won't recognize this sport."

Selig said he's proud of baseball's competitive balance -- 26 of the 30 teams have made the playoffs in the last decade -- and the fact that he's managed to get powerful people whose interests don't always align to come together for the greater good of the game.

This was a 2 1/2-hour celebration of Selig's accomplishments, complete with a standing ovation, but with a light touch. An example of that came in the video when White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, a close friend, called him the best Commissioner baseball has ever had.

"He could have been even greater if he had listened to me once in a while," Reinsdorf deadpanned to the camera, drawing a hearty laugh from the crowd.

Paul Hagen is a reporter for MLB.com. This story was not subject to the approval of Major League Baseball or its clubs.