Armando Galarraga was denied perfection Wednesday evening and in the process may have helped to save baseball. Or not.

When Galarraga of the Detroit Tigers entered the ninth inning Wednesday night against the Indians, a perfect game was just three outs away. Moments later it was two and then one. But somewhere along the path he took from the pitchers mound to cover first base on a grounder hit by Jason Donald to the gap between first and second base, Galarraga lost his chance of history due to one of the great choke jobs in baseball history.

When umpire Jim Joyce signaled safe on a bang-bang play at first it was the embodiment of both the beauty and consternation of sports and their frustrating lack of precision. Pick up a copy of the baseball rule book and you'll have trouble finding a page where the phrase "in the judgment of the umpire" isn't used. That's the bargain anyone who's ever played the game signed on for.

It was the ill-considered judgment of Joyce that came at the precise flashpoint where speed, nerves and history coalesced at the most critical moment that cost Galarraga his place in history. And yet, the alternative for Joyce or any of his fellow umps that night wasn't much better. Had Donald, for example, actually beaten the throw only to have been called out in order to preserve a perfect game, Galarraga's achievement would have always been tarnished.

In other words, Joyce found himself at the wrong place at the wrong time with only one exit route: get the call right. Whatever instinct made Joyce think Donald was safe when he was clearly out will now haunt him for the rest of his career every bit as much as Galarraga's probably only real shot at perfection will haunt him.

Now, of course, will come the usual scream and cries for instant replay. And perhaps if major league baseball were run by almost anyone other than Bud Selig, I'd say that Joyce's handiwork might actually be the springboard for baseball fully embracing technology.

But this is Selig we're talking about and thus the chance of him doing anything more than dithering until the latest ground swell dies out is nearly non-existent. Sure, he's talking about considering expanding instant replay. But Bud thinks a lot. That's never been his problem. Action, on the other hand, is as foreign to him as good taste is to Lady Gaga.

To Joyce's credit he quickly acknowledged his colossal mistake and apologized to Galarraga. The question though is why does this type of scene have to play out at all? Why can't baseball be proactive and find a way to make technology work for them instead of treating it as if it's just another passing fad?

Some of that is wrapped up in the traditions of the sport. Baseball purists, which represents far less of the sport's fans than they would ever admit, tend to think of baseball as it was played by Babe Ruth in the 1920s. Any change from that construct induces panic. They still get hives knowing that uniforms are no longer made out of 100% wool. To them the designated hitter is still an abomination on the game.

The rest of baseball fans, however, mostly don't give a crap either way. If pushed they'd probably venture an opinion but if better technology were thrust upon them they'd accept and move on to more pressing needs, like cutting the grass before it rains again.

It usually takes the considered judgment of decision makers to act on a glaring problem illuminated by the ill-considered judgment of another. If baseball can find a positive path forward out of this mess it will be of little solace to either Joyce or Galarraga but it will be of great solace to the sport itself.

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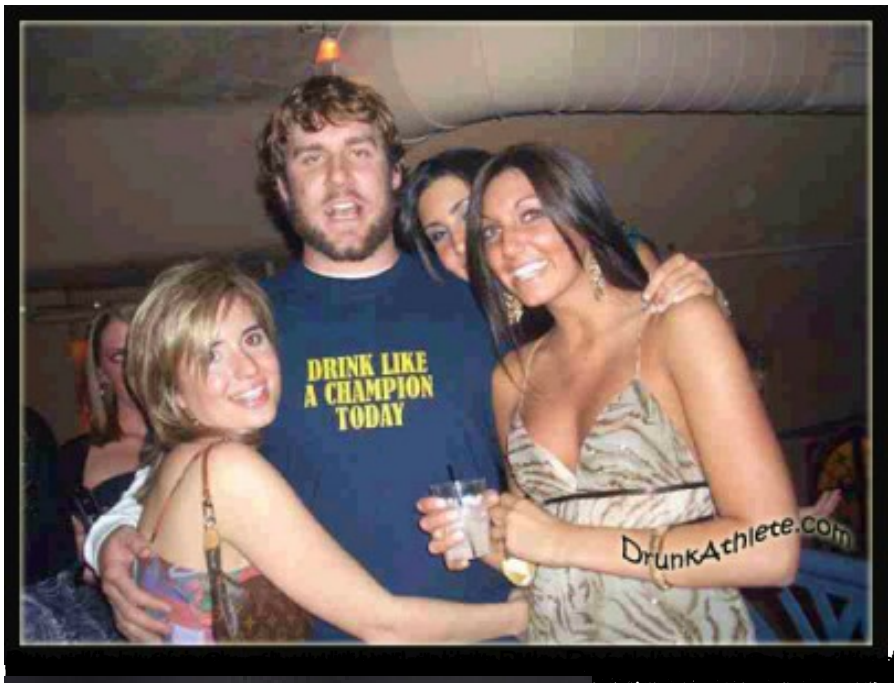
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