

On Making Sense of the Here and Now

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At this writing, the 2020 World Series has just ended. There was a big to-do about the manager of the losing team, the Tampa Bay Rays, in the last game, which the Rays lost to the Los Angeles Dodgers, taking his star pitcher Blake Snell out of the game--prematurely, so it was asserted--in the fifth inning. Snell had pitched brilliantly up to that point and had only thrown 73 pitches (anything under a hundred is OK) and Tampa Bay was ahead of the Dodgers 1-0. Snell's replacement, Nick Anderson, promptly gave up runs that put the Dodgers ahead, and the Dodgers held on for the rest of the game and won the Series.

In justifying his replacement of Snell, Rays manager Kevin Cash said he didn't want Snell facing the Dodger line-up for a third time. Indeed, analytics—statistics—show that pitchers, including Snell, do less well when a hitter faces them the third time, and all through the regular season, Cash's pattern had been to take Snell out of a game after two times through the opposing team's line-up. Critics said that doing it this time was an example of mindlessly letting analytics rule in-game tactics.

In defense of Cash, the Rays had gone by the analytics book, as it were, all season and here they were in the World Series. And nobody claims that letting analytics determine decision-making works every single time; just that over time you come out ahead if you operate that way.

I'll offer a couple of considerations I think shed light on this yanking-Snell-too-early controversy.

The first one is the distinction between *over* time and *this* time. Something may be a good idea generally but not a good idea in this instance. You need to look hard at the particulars of the current reality and factor that inquiry into your considerations. For instance, how exceedingly well Snell was doing that night: only two hits and a whopping nine strikeouts in four innings. After the game, Rays

players said that was the best they'd ever seen Snell pitch. And that the next batter up for the Dodgers, Mookie Wilson, doesn't do well against left-handed pitchers, which Snell is. And that the next batter after Wilson, Corey Seager, is a left-handed batter who doesn't do as well against lefthanders as righthanders.

And there is the need to identify the downside, or potential downside, of taking Snell out of the game. Like the fact that while his replacement, Anderson, a right-hand pitcher (not a good as a lefthander in this particular circumstance), is generally a good pitcher, lately he hadn't been throwing well or achieving good results.

You get the idea. Nothing in the world is the same as anything else, and you need to take this uniqueness into account. Doing so in this baseball game would have made the choice of whether to pull Snell more complicated, indeterminate, than simply deferring to the tendency of pitchers to do less well the third time through an opposing team's line-up and repeating what had been done with good results in the past (taking Snell out of the game before facing hitters a third time).

How might this World Series example inform our lives?

When making a decision, stay referenced in the particulars of the immediate circumstance. Learn from the past, but don't be dictated by it.

Be grounded in goals. What are we trying to get done exactly? The challenge is to do what can reasonably be expected to best accomplish those goals.

Scrutinize the current situation as objectively and rationally and completely as we can. A crucially important part of that is to identify the downsides of any course of action, with the assumption that anything we might do—and really, the accomplishment of any goal—has downsides, no exceptions. Life is never all good; it has its negative aspects. Our job may be great, our relationship with another person may be great, this vacation site may be great, but none of them are perfect; circumstances are never without their drawbacks. We need to know the imperfections that will likely

result from whatever we do. It's not good to do something or another, create some circumstance or another, and then realize, oops, I didn't think of that, and now I have to live with it.

To summarize: be guided by goals; do what makes sense to achieve them informed by an objective and complete (within reason) understanding of the present reality; and don't be directed by what happened in the past or in unrealistic hopes for the future. It appears baseball manager Kevin Cash failed to follow those precepts and paid a price for it, and so will we.