

ANALYSIS

A rainbow, a storm, and a cloudy future for MLB's priorities

BY SAM BLUM AND STEPHEN J. NESBITT / THE ATHLETIC
NYT News Service/Syndicate Stories

When he was Major League Baseball's commissioner, Bud Selig touted the league's role in advocating social change. Selig oversaw the retirement of Jackie Robinson's number, the expansion of the league's outreach to urban youth and the establishment of events supportive of the LGBTQ+ community.

After he retired, Selig was asked whether MLB remained a pioneer in social change. "I would hope," he replied in 2019, "because I believe baseball's a social institution. I've said that, you've heard it a million times. It is a social institution. And therefore it should take a leadership role in items like this, no question."

Selig's sentiment stands in stark contrast to the stance taken this week by his successor, Rob Manfred, amid a maelstrom of controversy after the league warned several San Francisco Giants players for writing Bible verses on their Pride-themed caps:

"The league does not desire for its players to become messengers for political or social issues while in uniform playing baseball games," Manfred wrote in a letter, "because many messages have the potential to offend some segment of our fan base -- even if that was not the intent of the player."

The letter, which largely reiterated and defended MLB's policies on altering uniforms, was sent to Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., who had accused the league of discriminating against players professing their Christian faith. Pitchers Landen Roupp, Ryan Walker and JT Brubaker wrote references to Genesis 9, in which a rainbow represents God's promise to never again destroy all life in a flood, beside the rainbow-colored Giants logo on their caps. (A fourth pitcher, Sam Hentges, wore a regular Giants cap.)

Florida's attorney general is investigating whether MLB engaged in religious discrimination by selectively enforcing its uniform code. The Department of Justice referred the matter to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The vice president posted about it on social media.

All of this -- a baseball cap fanning the flames of a culture war -- underscores the needle that MLB and other pro sports leagues are attempting to thread in the current political climate.

"Every league, they're just trying to ride it out," said an executive in a big four men's sports league, who spoke on condition of anonymity in order to speak freely on the subject. "Then in four or five years, they'll all pretend that they've always been on board" with diversity initiatives.

As Pride Month comes to a close, the question becomes how MLB will move forward. Riding it out has been a turbulent strategy, if it can be considered one. Not so long ago, the league went out of its way to highlight its commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. Today, that commitment is less clear, as what was once promoted as a priority for the league has become more politically fraught.

While 29 of 30 MLB clubs still host Pride-themed events, the league in recent years quietly backed away from allowing most teams to use specialty uniforms and caps with rainbow insignia. That did not prevent the latest Pride Night controversy.

An MLB spokesperson

declined to answer a list of questions, including one asking whether the league still prioritized initiatives around LGBTQ+ inclusion.

In 2022, three Tampa Bay Rays players refused to wear rainbow logos on their caps and uniform sleeves. MLB later adopted a new policy that did not permit special uniforms, caps or equipment to be used on clubs' designated celebration days -- such as a Pride Night -- to "avoid putting players or others in an uncomfortable position," Manfred wrote. The Giants and the Los Angeles Dodgers, clubs with long-standing ties to the LGBTQ+ community, were the only teams allowed to continue using special uniforms under the condition that no one be required to participate.

"MLB believes in the right of our players and fans to express their religious beliefs, and at the same time supports the communities in this country that are fans of our clubs, including the L.G.B.T.Q. community," Manfred wrote in the letter to Hawley. "We believe that a policy permitting our clubs to celebrate or honor segments of its fan base, yet does not require players or other on-field personnel to directly participate in the celebration in ways that make them uncomfortable, strikes the right balance."

An MLB spokesperson declined to comment on whether the league would restrict future use of the uniforms. Neither the Dodgers nor the Giants responded to questions about whether they would continue using Pride-themed uniforms or caps. The Major League Baseball Players Association also declined to comment on the larger issue.

MLB has 12 leaguwide "celebration days" in which the uniforms or hats are altered and all clubs must participate, including Mother's Day, Father's Day, Sept. 11, Jackie Robinson Day and Roberto Clemente Day. Manfred's letter indicates that will not change: "We are unaware of any significant complaints from fans or players regarding these celebratory days," he wrote.

In 2014, Selig's last season as commissioner, he appointed former big league outfielder Billy Bean as the league's first ambassador for inclusion. Bean, a gay man who would later be promoted to senior vice president of diversity, equity and inclusion, interacted directly with players, including those who had expressed reservations about acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community.

Bean died in August 2024 after a yearlong battle with acute myeloid leukemia.

"We are forever grateful for the enduring impact that Billy made on the game he loved, and we will never forget him," Manfred said at the time.

This month, on Pride Night at Dodger Stadium, the Dodgers unveiled a permanent mural honoring Bean and Glenn Burke, the first two major leaguers to come out publicly after their playing careers were over. MLB has, as recently as last October, recognized Spirit Day, an anti-bullying campaign focused on LGBTQ+ youth and a cause Bean championed.

Bean's death left a massive void in MLB's inclusion efforts. The league promoted April Brown to senior vice president of social responsibility and diversity. The word diversity has since been removed from her title; in March 2025, amid a flurry of executive orders from President Don-

ald Trump intended to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, MLB removed references to "diversity" from its careers page.

The league declined an interview request for Brown. It is unclear if her role includes the same type of direct communication with players that Bean had. She does not have an official biography page on MLB's website, and the league declined to comment when asked about the work she does related to LGBTQ+ inclusion initiatives.

The retrenchments have not gone unnoticed. Retired umpire Dale Scott, who came out as gay after 29 years of working MLB games, was critical of the league's decision to award the 2024 All-Star Game to the Texas Rangers, the only club without a Pride event on the calendar. If LGBTQ+ inclusion was a priority, Scott said in 2024, the game would have been played elsewhere. "It's not a priority," Scott said. "But it is something they don't want to be criticized about."

MLB has had multiple high-profile incidents in recent years that have strained ties with the



LACHLAN CUNNINGHAM Getty Images

A protester pickets outside Oracle Park before Tuesday's game between the Giants and Athletics on Tuesday in San Francisco. The protest follows the Giants' Pride night event on June 12 where three players for the Giants scrolled a biblical verse on their rainbow-colored game caps.

LGBTQ+ community. In 2023, star pitcher Clayton Kershaw was the most prominent voice disagreeing with Dodgers leadership over the team's decision to invite the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group in which drag performers dress as nuns, to Pride Night. Kershaw told The Los Angeles Times that his issue was not with the LGBTQ+ community or Pride but with this specific group "making fun of a religion."

In August 2024, Boston Red Sox outfielder Jarrod Duran yelled a homophobic slur at a fan. Duran apologized after the game. The Red Sox issued Duran an unpaid two-game suspension and donated his game checks to an LGBTQ+ advocacy group.

But the attention drawn by those incidents was short-lived compared to the players' Pride Night protest in San Francisco.

In the letter to Hawley,

Manfred blamed the Giants' "inadequate" communication. Buster Posey, the Giants' president of baseball operations, refused to answer questions about the topic. It is unclear whether the Giants players were aware that they could choose the regular home cap on Pride Night, as Hentges did, or whether they chose the rainbow cap to protest it. Walker, Brubaker and Hentges later said they didn't feel forced to wear the Pride-themed hat.

"At the end of the day, I don't think it's discrimination," Brubaker said. "It's just people getting ahold of something and turning it into something. I just wanted to put my message and my beliefs, and that was the end of it."

"I don't have any hatred toward anyone," Walker said. "I have gay friends."

As the situation crossed into the political realm, MLB stressed that the deci-

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sion to issue a verbal warning to the players had nothing to do with the content of their message.

The Department of Justice's referral means the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a federal agency tasked with enforcing laws prohibiting workplace discrimination, will review team and league policies to determine whether MLB "properly balanced workplace policies with employees' religious accommodation rights" under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, according to Thomas Ricotta, partner at the New York-based employment law firm Ricotta & Marks.

"An investigation doesn't mean a violation occurred," Ricotta wrote in a message, "however, employers should take it seriously because these findings can lead to litigation as well as policy changes."

Around MLB this month, most Pride Nights have gone off without a hitch. Yet politics have dominated the discourse.

The York Revolution of the Atlantic League canceled a game last week after numerous players refused to wear Pride-themed uniforms. Ben Shipley, the Revolution's president and general manager, told NBC News that fewer than nine players were willing to wear the uniform. One who was, ex-Baltimore Orioles farmhand Jacob Teter, attended the team's Pride Night activities to show support.

Teter responded to an interview request from The Athletic with a text message: "Baseball is for everybody."

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