

Baseball strike scores in economics class

By MARCO BUSCAGLIA

Now it's official. For the first time since 1904, there will be no World Series.

Roger Maris' homerun record is safe, Tony Gwynn must put aside his quest for the game's first .400 batting average since that of Ted Williams, and the Cleveland Indians have to forego their chance at a berth in post-season play, potentially their first since 1954.

But even though Major League Baseball's strike-plagued season was canceled Sept. 14, talk of the National Pastime is still alive among students at colleges across the country.

If fact, they're debating the strike more than ever — and it's not on local sports talk radio stations or in the dorms. Instead, it's in economics classrooms, where professional sports is more than part of the conversation before class begins; it's the main subject.

Increasingly, advanced economics classes that focus on professional sports have sprouted up across the nation, and this year, the baseball strike is the number-one topic.

For most, a 300-level economics class is the stuff of theoretical nightmares. Even Professor Bill Baird, who teaches the subject at the College of Wooster, admits that the material can be pretty mundane. But for students in his Economics 390 class, "The Economics of Professional Team Sports," the subject matter is anything but boring.

"We can take a theory that students often believe is arcane and show them that it can be used to help them understand things that they are interested in," Baird says. "The attention level in the class is high even though we've been discussing some pretty heavy economic theory. The topic is definitely something that they're curious about."

That curiosity stems from a common interest, says Joe Grubestic, one of Baird's students.

"You look at the whole thing from a different perspective when you're a student of economics instead of just a fan and vice versa," says Grubestic, a 21-year-old junior. "I've always been a big follower of sports, and this class helps me see some issues in a completely different way."

Michael Leeds is teaching an economics course on professional sports for the first time this fall at Temple University in Philadelphia. He says he proposed the class because, like Baird, he fig-

ured it was a good way for students to make a connection to the often-difficult material.

"I'm always preaching that economics can be used to explain a lot more than the production of widgets," Leeds says. "I think it's important to try to use economic theories in as many different settings as possible."

Leeds says he has often used professional sports owners and players as examples for his theories in other classes, so his Economic of Sports course provides the perfect forum for a wide variety of practical applications.

"The students in the class are

probably able to grasp on to a lot of the concepts more quickly than those in other classes just because of the examples," Leed says. "The participation in class is definitely higher than normal."

Smith College in Northampton, Mass., offers a 300-level class on the economics of professional sports as well, focusing on anti-trust exemptions, regulations, salary levels and structures, management, the effects of mass media, and the relationship of professional sports to college athletics.

For the past four years, Carl Brehm has taught the "Econ-

ics of Sports" at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. Kenyon alternated the course between spring and fall semesters each year to allow those most interested in Brehm's class — student athletes — the opportunity to take it.

"The class is a good way of trying to funnel some economic theory to students who aren't normally receptive to it," Brehm says, adding that 75 percent of his students participate in the school's athletics program.

"It does take awhile, though, for the class to realize that we aren't going to be discussing batting averages," he said.

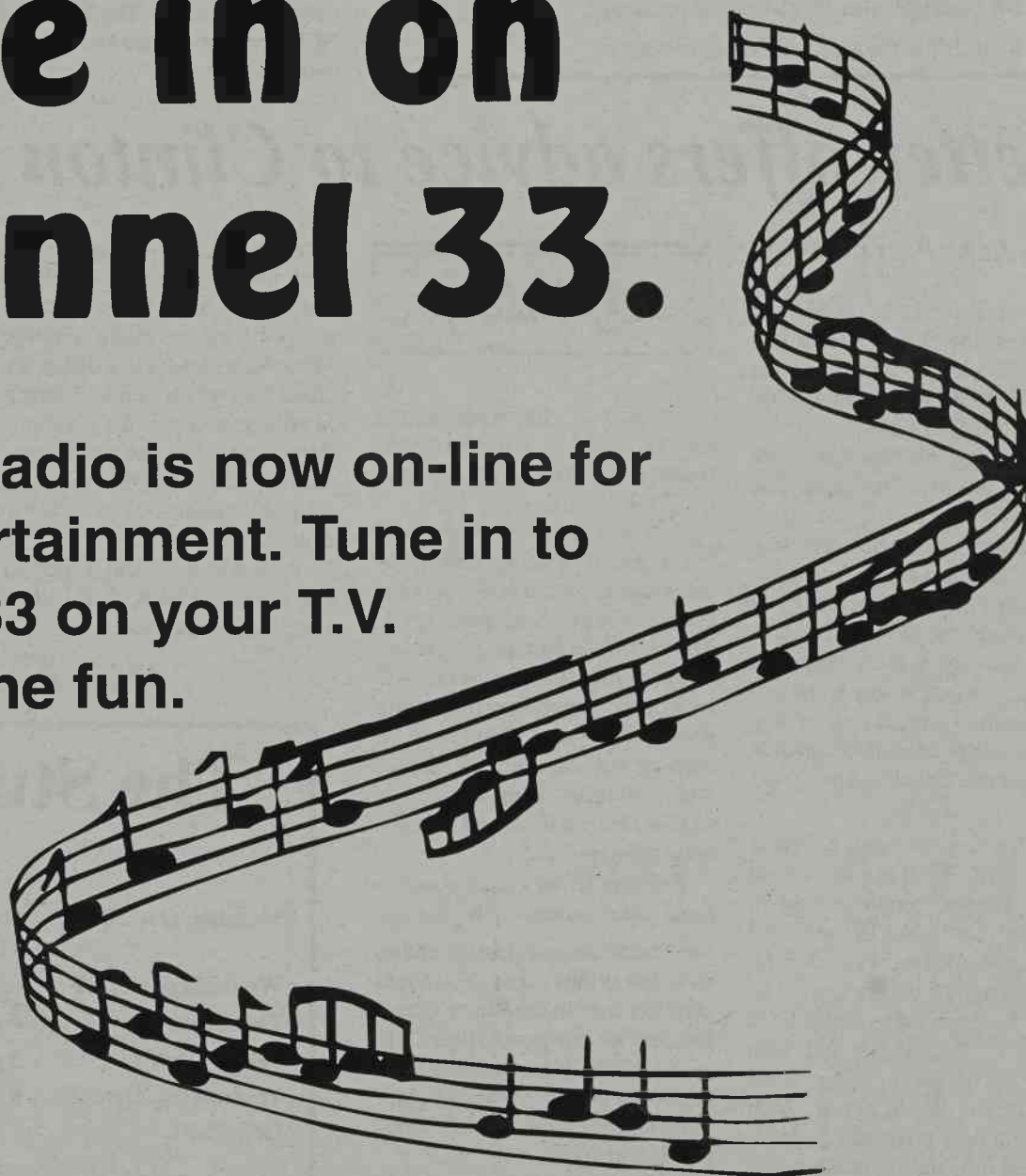
Although the economics of sports classes were proposed long before the baseball strike, both Baird and Leeds agree that the labor dispute has made their courses that much more relevant.

"Pedagogically, the strike has been great, but emotionally," says Leeds, a lifelong Yankees fan, "it's been hell."

"We will not lack for material this year, that's for sure," Baird says. "The baseball strike is a perfect example of the economic problems in sports today, and hockey players and football players are talking about striking for the same reason."

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