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ASTROS SPYING SCANDAL

THEY'RE OUT

TOP BRASS AXED: GM Luhnow, manager Hinch fired for roles in cheating

OTHER PENALTIES: Club is hit with maximum \$5M fine, loses draft picks



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Astros owner Jim Crane said at Monday's news conference that he fired general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch so the club could "move forward with a clean slate" following the Major League Baseball report on the sign-stealing scandal.

By David Barron
STAFF WRITER

Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch were fired Monday afternoon by team owner Jim Crane, who said the need to clean house in the wake of a sign-stealing scheme warranted the dismissal of a leadership team that had carried the club from doormats to champions.

The firings of Hinch and Luhnow were announced after Major League Baseball issued a nine-page report confirming published reports that the Astros in 2017 and 2018 used a center-field camera at Minute Maid Park to pick up signs from the opposing team's catcher and then relayed them to batters at the plate.

As a result of that investigation, MLB commissioner Rob Manfred suspended Luhnow and Hinch for a year without pay. He also fined the Astros \$5 million and stripped the ballclub of its first- and second-round draft choices in 2020 and 2021.

Crane, however, said his "higher standards for the city and the franchise" required him to take the more drastic step of immediately dismissing Luhnow, the architect of the Astros' rebuild from 100-game losers to 100-game winners, and Hinch, the team's manager since 2015.

"We need to move forward with a clean slate, and the Astros will become a stronger organization because of this," Crane said. "You can be confident that we'll always do the right thing and will not have this happen again on my watch."

Monday's announcement by Manfred, followed by Crane's decision, capped a whirlwind two-month period during which the Astros, once championed for their innovative, analytical approach to baseball and beloved locally as a symbol of Houston's resilience in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, were branded as high-tech cheaters — willing and able to use any and all means to achieve victory by striking at the

Astros continues on A7

Say it ain't so: That magical 2017 season forever branded by an *

BRIAN T. SMITH
Commentary



It was the most powerful, uplifting and unifying moment in the history of Houston sports.

The long-delayed glory arrived on a shining November night while our city was recovering from the destruction of Hurricane Harvey.

And the rebuilt Astros gave it

an asterisk that can never be erased.

The 2017 World Series champions*.

Damn them.

Houston doesn't deserve this. Devoted Astros fans definitely don't.

And I don't know when the lovable*, addicting* Astros are going to feel like a normal baseball team again.

In a scathing nine-page report authored by commissioner Rob Manfred and issued by Major League Baseball on Monday, the grand ol' game ultimately said one thing: The sign-stealing Astros cheated to win the 2017

Smith continues on A6

MLB REPORT

• The Astros began using a video system using a video system to steal signs in 2017 using a camera in center field and signaling the batter by banging on a trash can near the dugout.

• The Astros continued to use the system in the postseason after commissioner Rob Manfred put teams on notice that electronic sign stealing would be dealt with harshly.

MLB PENALTIES

• A one-year suspension for general manager Jeff Luhnow.

• A one-year suspension for manager A.J. Hinch.

• The forfeitures of first- and second-round draft picks in both 2020 and '21.



Michael Wyke / Contributor

A.J. Hinch, left, and Jeff Luhnow were ousted.

• A fine of \$5 million, the maximum allowed under MLB's constitution.

• The placement of former Astros assistant GM Brandon Taubman on baseball's ineligible list.

THE FALLOUT

• Astros owner Jim Crane fired both Luhnow and Hinch.

IN SPORTS: SOLOMON: CRANE MADE RIGHT MOVE. • CULTURE: MANFRED RAPS LUHNOW. • IMPACT: WHO WILL GUIDE TEAM?

Hidalgo transforming county's role

A year in office, Harris exec works to enact broader, progressive vision

By Zach Despart
STAFF WRITER

During her long-shot campaign in 2018, Lina Hidalgo at times sounded like a candidate for mayor or Congress. As her talking points focused on immigration, criminal justice reform and education, her critics contended she surely misunderstood the role of county judge.

Hidalgo insisted the incumbent crop of leaders had a too-narrow view of what county government could accomplish. She unseated Ed Emmett, the popular three-term county judge, in an Election Night stunner amid a Democratic sweep of countywide posts. And then she set about enacting her vision.

After a year in office, Hidalgo has mollified many concerns about her inexperience, marshaled the county's response to a series of chemical fires and presided over a Commissioners Court of older men who of

Hidalgo continues on A8



Annie Mulligan / Contributor

Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo has drawn a lot of interest since she was elected at the age of 27.

Trump to redirect \$7.2B more for wall

Military building projects would again lose funds

By Nick Miroff
WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump is preparing to divert an additional \$7.2 billion in Pentagon funding for border wall construction this year, five times what Congress authorized him to spend on the project in the 2020 budget, according to internal planning figures

obtained by The Washington Post.

The Pentagon funds would be extracted, for the second year in a row, from military construction projects and counter-narcotics funding. According to the plans, the funding would give the government enough money to complete about 885 miles of new fencing by Spring 2022, far more than the 509 miles the administration has slated for the U.S. border with Mexico.

Trump took \$2.5 billion *Wall continues on A8*

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ASTROS SPYING SCANDAL

CAUGHT STEALING

MLB details use of technology to decode signs during 2017 title run

Crane wants to move on with 'clean slate' after firing Luhnow, Hinch

Options inside organization could fill GM, manager jobs

By Chandler Rome
STAFF WRITER

Eight-plus years ago, when the Astros were also-rans, Jeff Luhnow sold Jim Crane on sustainability. Luhnow longed for the sort of franchise that could live without fear of a closing championship window. Crane enjoyed the premise. At the conclusion of the job interview, Luhnow inquired about any possible constraints in pursuit of his grand plan.

Perhaps now infamously, Crane tore a blank sheet of paper off a notepad and presented it to Luhnow.

Nothing, apparently not even the sport's rules, would impede Luhnow from executing what he envisioned. He and his hand-picked manager oversaw four playoff appearances, two pennants and the 2017 World Series title – unparalleled success aided in a most underhanded way.

"I have higher standards for the city and the franchise," Crane said Monday, moments before he announced the dismissal of Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch.

With the firings, the most

Astros continues on C6

Cultural issues in baseball side of front office receive blame

By Chandler Rome
STAFF WRITER

Rob Manfred broke from script briefly, on the sixth of a nine-page report that resulted in two firings and the most devastating day in a franchise's history.

Manfred had many sordid details of the Astros' sign-stealing scheme – one spearheaded by players and not stopped by their superiors – to cover. But perhaps the most damning 304 words of the entire document came at the end of Manfred's assessment of Jeff Luhnow's involvement.

MLB's commissioner excoriated the "insular culture" of the Astros' baseball operations department under Luhnow, the management consultant turned baseball man who changed the way franchises are built.

"No one can dispute that Luhnow's baseball operations department is an industry leader in its analytics," Manfred wrote, "(but) it is very clear to me that the culture of the baseball operations department, manifesting itself in the way its employees are treated, its relations with other clubs, and its relations with the media and ex-

Culture continues on C5

ROB MANFRED

"Players stated that if Manager A.J. Hinch told them to stop engaging in the conduct, they would have immediately stopped. ... (Jeff) Luhnow failed to take any adequate steps to ensure that his Club was in compliance with the rules. Luhnow did not forward the memoranda and did not confirm that the players and field staff were in compliance with MLB rules and the memoranda. Had Luhnow taken those steps in September 2017, it is clear to me that the Astros would have ceased both sign-stealing schemes at that time."

JEROME SOLOMON
Commentary



Team owner's reaction shows desire to win the right way

Jim Crane paused for a moment, then choked up as he noted he has had many tough days as a business owner.

Monday, a dark day in Astros history, was among the toughest.

The Astros owner's decision to fire general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch did not come lightly.

Professional sports owners all say they're going to win the right way. They don't always mean it.

Many don't know how to win, and plenty who do are flexible on what is the right way.

Crane has proved he is a winner. Monday, he showed how important winning the right way is to him.

MLB commissioner Rob Manfred announced he had suspended Luhnow and Hinch for the 2020 season for allowing Astros players to participate in an electronic sign-stealing scheme throughout the 2017 season and parts of 2018.

Crane could have taken the road most often traveled in such situations by following MLB's punishment and welcoming Luhnow and Hinch back after their season in exile. That would have been completely acceptable.

After all, MLB's dual sanctions were unprecedented. Hinch's suspension is the second longest for a manager, Luhnow's the sixth longest for a general manager.

Their MLB punishment exceeded the crime. But acceptable is too low a bar for Crane. He demands more.

With all the good Crane has done in taking a franchise that had been run into the ground by Drayton McLane and turning it into a source of civic pride, his organization needed a cleanse.

"I have higher standards for the city and the franchise, and I'm going above and beyond MLB's penalty," Crane said at a press conference at Minute Maid Park after MLB released a nine-page report on its exhaustive investigation.

The embarrassment of his franchise forever being tainted by a cheating scandal moved Crane to take the extraordinary step of dismissing the two men he most credited with turning the Astros into World Series champions in 2017.

Solomon continues on C6



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Manager A.J. Hinch twice damaged monitors used in the Astros' scheme but was blamed for not taking the necessary steps to put a stop to it.

A.J. HINCH

"As a leader and Major League Manager, it is my responsibility to lead players and staff with integrity that represents the game in the best possible way. While the evidence consistently showed I didn't endorse or participate in the sign stealing practices, I failed to stop them and I am deeply sorry."



Godofredo A. Vásquez / Staff photographer

Given leeway in running the baseball operation, general manager Jeff Luhnow's lack of oversight was cited in the penalties by MLB and subsequent firing by Jim Crane.

JEFF LUHNOW

"I am not a cheater. Anybody who has worked closely with me during my 32-year career inside and outside baseball can attest to my integrity. I did not know rules were being broken. As the Commissioner set out in his statement, I did not personally direct, oversee or engage in any misconduct: The sign stealing initiative was not planned or directed by baseball management; the trash-can banging was driven and executed by players, and the video decoding of signs originated and was executed by lower-level employees working with the bench coach. I am deeply upset that I wasn't informed of any misconduct because I would have stopped it."

TEXANS: JOHN MCCLAIN SAYS COACH BILL O'BRIEN ISN'T GETTING FIRED THIS YEAR. **C2**

CFP TITLE GAME: LSU'S BURROW ACCOUNTS FOR SIX TDS IN WIN OVER CLEMSON. **C3**

ASTROS SPYING SCANDAL



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

Astros manager A.J. Hinch, left, and general manager Jeff Luhnow led the franchise to new heights, but their tenures ended in ignominious fashion Monday.

STATEMENT FROM MLB COMMISSIONER ROB MANFRED

EXCERPTS OF REPORT

At the outset, I also can say our investigation revealed absolutely no evidence that Jim Crane, the owner of the Astros, was aware of any of the conduct described in this report. Crane is extraordinarily troubled and upset by the conduct of members of his organization, fully supported my investigation, and provided unfettered access to any and all information requested.

FACTUAL FINDINGS

At the beginning of the 2017 season, employees in the Astros' video replay review room began using the live game feed from the center field camera to attempt to decode and transmit opposing teams' sign sequences (*i.e.*, which sign flashed by the catcher is the actual sign) for use when an Astros runner was on second base.

Early in the season, Alex Cora, the Astros' Bench Coach, began to call the replay review room on the replay phone to obtain the sign information. On at least some occasions, the employees in the replay review room communicated the sign sequence information by text message, which was received on the smart watch of a staff member on the bench, or in other cases on a cell phone stored nearby.

Approximately two months into the 2017 season, a group of players, including Carlos Beltrán, discussed that the team could improve on decoding opposing teams' signs and communicating the signs to the batter. ... One or more players watched the live feed of the center field camera on the monitor, and after decoding the sign, a player would bang a nearby trash can with a bat to communicate the upcoming pitch type to the batter. (Witnesses explained that they initially experimented with communicating sign information by clapping, whistling, or yelling, but that they eventually determined that banging a trash can was the preferred method of communication.) Players occasionally also used a massage gun to bang the trash can. Generally, one or two bangs corresponded to certain off-speed pitches, while no bang corresponded to a fastball.

Witnesses consistently describe this new scheme as player-driven, and with the exception of Cora, non-player staff, including individuals in the video replay review room, had no involvement in the banging scheme. However, witnesses made clear that everyone proximate to the Astros' dugout presumptively heard or saw the banging.

Notwithstanding the publicity surrounding the Red Sox incident, and the September 15th memorandum that I sent to all Clubs, the Astros continued to both utilize the replay review room and the monitor located next to the dugout to decode signs for the remainder of the regular season and throughout the Postseason.

RULES VIOLATIONS IN SUBSEQUENT SEASONS

Prior to the 2018 season, and with MLB approval, the Astros relocated their replay review system to a video room located much closer to the dugout, as is the case in many ballparks throughout the league. The investigation uncovered no evidence that Astros players utilized the banging

scheme in 2018. However, the Astros' replay review room staff continued, at least for part of the 2018 season, to decode signs using the live center field camera feed, and to transmit the signs to the dugout through in-person communication. At some point during the 2018 season, the Astros stopped using the replay review room to decode signs because the players no longer believed it was effective. The investigation did not reveal any attempt by the Astros to utilize electronic equipment to decode and transmit signs in the 2018 Postseason.

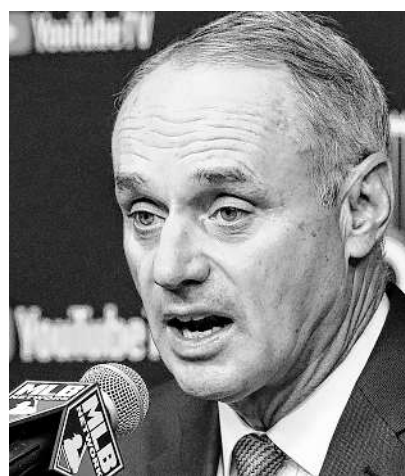
The investigation revealed no violations of the policy by the Astros in the 2019 season or 2019 Postseason. Other than described above, the investigation did not reveal any other scheme or method utilized by the Astros to decode an opposing Club's signs from 2016 to the present.

CULPABILITY OF ASTROS PLAYERS AND EMPLOYEES

The Astros' methods in 2017 and 2018 to decode and communicate to the batter an opposing Club's signs were not an initiative that was planned or directed by the Club's top baseball operations officials. Rather, the 2017 scheme in which players banged on a trash can was, with the exception of Cora, player-driven and player-executed. The attempt by the Astros' replay review room staff to decode signs using the center field camera was originated and executed by lower-level baseball operations employees working in conjunction with Astros players and Cora.

The efforts involving the replay review room staff were mentioned in at least two emails sent to Luhnow, and there is conflicting evidence about conversations with Luhnow on the topic. Regardless of the level of Luhnow's actual knowledge, the Astros' violation of rules in 2017 and 2018 is attributable, in my view, to a failure by the leaders of the baseball operations department and the Field Manager to adequately manage the employees under their supervision, to establish a culture in which adherence to the rules is ingrained in the fabric of the organization, and to stop bad behavior as soon as it occurred.

Most of the position players on the 2017 team either received sign information from the banging scheme or participated in the scheme by helping to decode signs or bang on the trash can. Many of the players who were interviewed a mitted



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

Commissioner Rob Manfred said it was impractical to discipline the players involved in the scheme.

that they knew the scheme was wrong because it crossed the line from what the player believed was fair competition and/or violated MLB rules. Players stated that if Manager A.J. Hinch told them to stop engaging in the conduct, they would have immediately stopped.

Although the Astros' players did not attempt to hide what they were doing from Hinch or other Astros employees, they were concerned about getting caught by players from other teams. Several players told my investigators that there was a sense of "panic" in the Astros' dugout after White Sox pitcher Danny Farquhar appeared to notice the trash can bangs. Before the game ended, a group of Astros players removed the monitor from the wall in the tunnel and hid it in an office. For the Postseason, a portable monitor was set up on a table to replace the monitor that had been affixed to the wall near the dugout.

Some Astros players told my investigators that they did not believe the sign-stealing scheme was effective, and it was more distracting than useful to hitters. I am neither in a position to evaluate whether the scheme helped Astros hitters (who were unquestionably a very talented group), nor whether it helped the Astros win any games. There are so many factors that impact the outcome of games that addressing that issue would require rank speculation. But for purposes of my decision, regardless of whether the scheme was effective or not, it violated the rules and, at a minimum, created the appearance of unfairness, and for that, it necessitates severe discipline.

I will not assess discipline against individual Astros players. I made the decision in September 2017 that I would hold a Club's General Manager and Field Manager accountable for misconduct of this kind, and I will not depart from that decision. Assessing discipline of players for this type of conduct is both difficult and impractical. It is difficult because virtually all of the Astros' players had some involvement or knowledge of the scheme, and I am not in a position based on the investigative record to determine with any degree of certainty every player who should be held accountable, or their relative degree of culpability. It is impractical given the large number of players involved, and the fact that many of those players now play for other Clubs.

But more importantly, the Club's General Manager and Field Manager are responsible for ensuring that the players both understand the rules and adhere to them. ... Here, because the Club's Bench Coach was an active participant in the scheme, and the Club's Manager was aware of the scheme and did nothing to stop it, I recognize that some players may have understood that their conduct was not only condoned by the Club, but encouraged by it.

JEFF LUHNOW

Luhnow adamantly denies knowledge of both the banging scheme and the efforts by the replay review room staff to decode signs and transmit them to the dugout. The investigation revealed no evidence to suggest that Luhnow was aware of the banging scheme. The investigation also revealed that Luhnow neither devised nor actively directed the efforts of the replay review room staff to decode signs in 2017 or 2018. Although Luhnow denies having any awareness that his replay review room staff was decoding and transmitting signs, there is both documentary and testimonial evidence that indicates Luhnow had some knowledge of those efforts, but he did not give it much attention.

Luhnow did not forward the memoranda and did not confirm that the players and field staff were in compliance with MLB rules and the memoranda. Had Luhnow taken those steps in September 2017, it is clear to me that the Astros would have ceased both sign-stealing schemes at that time.

But while no one can dispute that Luhnow's baseball operations department is an industry leader in its analytics, it is very clear to me that the culture of the baseball operations department, manifesting itself in the way its employees are treated, its relations with other Clubs, and its relations with the media and external stakeholders, has been very problematic.

A.J. HINCH

Hinch neither devised the banging scheme nor participated in it. Hinch told my investigators that he did not support his players decoding signs using the monitor installed near the dugout and banging the trash can, and he believed that the conduct was both wrong and distracting. Hinch attempted to signal his disapproval of the scheme by physically damaging the monitor on two occasions, necessitating its replacement. However, Hinch admits he did not stop it and he did not notify players or Cora that he disapproved of it, even after the Red Sox were disciplined in September 2017.

As the person with responsibility for managing his players and coaches, there simply is no justification for Hinch's failure to act.

ASTROS SPYING SCANDAL

'I FAILED TO STOP THEM'

Hinch led Astros to new heights, but inaction on wrongdoing nets ouster

By David Barron
STAFF WRITER

Through his words and his attitude, A.J. Hinch for five years provided a human face to an organization that far too often was embodied by the cold, hard prisms of data and technology – sometimes obtained legally, sometimes not.

Hinch was a baseball man, a former catcher, but he also was a Stanford University man with a psychology degree, and he used those skills to become the most successful manager in Astros history.

But now, after committing the very human failure of not stopping his co-workers from committing actions that he knew was wrong, he's out of a job.

On Monday, Hinch was fired by Astros owner Jim Crane after he and general manager Jeff Luhnow was suspended for a year for their part in failing to crack down on the Astros' player-driven sign-stealing system in 2017 and 2018.

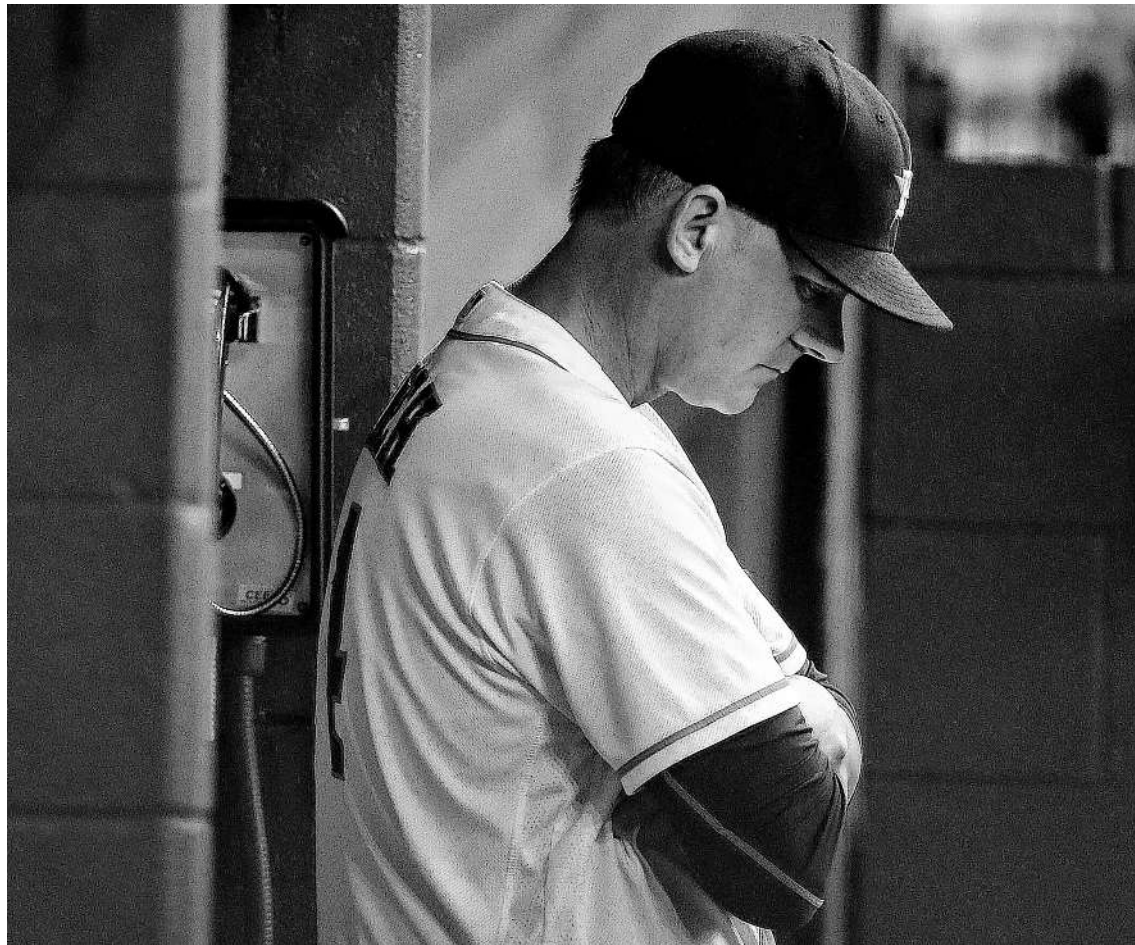
In a statement released by the Astros, he applauded the efforts of Major League Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred to police the game's ethical standards.

"I regret being connected to these events, am disappointed in our club's actions within this timeline, and I accept the commissioner's decision," Hinch said in the statement. "As a leader and major league manager, it is my responsibility to lead players and staff with integrity that represents the game in the best possible way.

"While the evidence consistently showed I didn't endorse or participate in the sign-stealing practices, I failed to stop them, and I am deeply sorry."

Hinch apologized to Crane, who hired him beginning with the 2015 season, and thanked fans "for your continued support through this challenging time – and for this team."

He also apologized to fans, adding, "My time in Houston has provided some of the greatest moments in my career, and those memories will always be near and dear to me and my family.



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

A.J. Hinch says he disapproved of the sign-stealing but never brought it up to front-office staff or players. He was fired Monday after five years as the Astros' manager and a 481-329 record.

A.J. Hinch file

Hired as Astros manager on Sept. 29, 2014, his second job as a major league skipper.

In first season, led Astros to 86-76 record in 2015 and their first postseason berth since 2005. They beat Yankees in AL wild-card game before losing the division series to Royals in five games.

After playoff absence in 2016, guided the 2017 Astros to 101-61 record and the first World Series championship in franchise history, a seven-game triumph over the Dodgers.

Managed Astros to club-record 103 wins in 2018. Lost AL Championship Series to Red Sox in five games.

Led team to a club-record 107 victories and the 2019 AL pennant before a seven-game World Series loss to the Nationals.

Fired on Jan. 13 with a record of 481-329 (.594) and three seasons left on his contract. According to MLB investigation, Hinch knew of the Astros' sign-stealing scheme and, although he neither devised nor participated in it, did not stop it or express his disapproval to players or bench coach Alex Cora. Commissioner Rob Manfred said there was no justification for Hinch's failure to act or bring it to the front office's attention.

Steve Schaeffer

"I regret that my time with the Astros has ended but will always be a supporter of the club, players and staff I've had the privilege of working alongside. I wish them the best in the future of the game I love."

Hinch departs Houston with a record of 481-329, setting Astros managerial records for winning percentage (.594) and ranking second behind Bill Virdon (544) in total wins, and as the only Houston manager to lead the franchise

to a World Series championship in 2017, the same season that the team improperly employed a camera system to relay opposing catchers' signs to hitters at the plate.

Hinch's 2015 team finished sec-

ond in the American League West and beat the Yankees in the wild-card game before losing to the Royals in the division series. His last three teams each won 100 games, capped by the 107-55 regular season in 2019 that ended with a World Series loss to the Washington Nationals.

His was the first voice heard when the Astros returned to Minute Maid Park in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, greeting fans before a doubleheader against the Mets with a pledge that the Astros would do their best to live up to the "Houston Strong" uniform patch they wore in the storm's wake.

"We wear this patch on our jersey the rest of this year to represent you," he said that day. "So stay strong, be strong, and we appreciate every one of you. Go 'Stros."

More recently, his was the voice of reason as the Astros scrambled through disaster mode in the wake of Astros executive Brandon Taubman's verbal assault against three female reporters in the clubhouse after the American League Championship Series.

"It's unfortunate. It's uncalled for," he said. "For me as a leader in this organization, I take everything that happens in the clubhouse to heart. You should never feel like you're going to be uncomfortable or disrespected. ... I think we all need to be better across the board in the industry."

Monday, however, Crane acknowledged that Hinch, too, had been found wanting in failing to crack down on electronic sign stealing.

"Neither one (Hinch or ousted general manager Jeff Luhnow) implemented it or pushed it through the system," Crane said. "It really came from the bottom up. It's pretty clear in the report that's how it happened.

"But neither one of them did anything about it, and that's unfortunate and the consequences are severe."

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CULTURE

From page C1

ternal stakeholders, has been very problematic."

Manfred's skewering of this systemic problem – in such blunt terms – added another layer of ignominy on a day enveloped with it. Astros owner Jim Crane fired Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch for their inaction toward electronic sign-stealing during the 2017 and 2018 seasons.

Though Crane accepted and exceeded Major League Baseball's stiff penalties – the league called for Hinch and Luhnow to each serve a one-year suspension – he denied Manfred's assertion of a culture problem within his organization.

"I don't agree with that," Crane said. "I think we've got a lot of great people here. We have over 400 people working here, and they work hard. I think there was some isolated situations that led to that. We have one of the best business operations in baseball, and I think if we did have any problems, we'll quickly define those problems and move forward in a very positive way."

Manfred specified that his comments were directed only toward the team's baseball operations department – not business operations – and heaped almost all blame on Luhnow.

"Crane and his senior executive team spent their energies focused on running the business side of the Club while delegating control and discretion on the baseball side to Luhnow," the report said. "And it is difficult to question that division of responsibilities in light of the fact that Luhnow is widely considered to be one of the most successful baseball executives of his generation, credited with ushering in the second 'analytics' revolution in baseball and rebuilding the Houston Astros into a perennial postseason contender."

Manfred's investigation ostensibly affirmed what the baseball industry has long thought: As a cold, calculating executive, Luhnow surrounded himself with like-minded individuals who val-



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Astros owner Jim Crane, left, allowed general manager Jeff Luhnow free rein in the baseball side of operations, and the resulting operation ended up damaging the club's once-glowing reputation.

Jeff Luhnow file

Hired as Astros general manager on Dec. 7, 2011.

Built a team that suffered three consecutive 100-loss seasons, including the first two years of his tenure, into one that won in triple digits three straight years (2017-19), capturing the World Series in 2017 and the American League pennant in 2019.

With an eye on rebuilding through the draft, presided over the selections of Carlos Correa (top overall pick, 2012) and Alex Bregman (second overall pick, 2015) but also selected busts Mark Appel, (top overall pick, 2013) and Brady Aiken (top overall pick, 2014).

Made trades via which the Astros obtained Yordan Alvarez (2016), Justin Verlander (2017), Gerrit Cole (2018) and Zack Greinke (2019).

Promoted to president of baseball operations/GM on June 18, 2018.

On June 30, 2018, made controversial trade to acquire Roberto Osuna while the pitcher was serving a 75-game suspension for domestic violence.

Fired on Jan. 13, 2020, with four seasons left on his contract. According to the MLB investigation, Luhnow had no direct involvement in the Astros' efforts to decode signs in 2017 or 2018 but was, based on documentary and testimonial evidence, aware of the scheme. Commissioner Rob Manfred held him accountable, saying it is a GM's job to be aware of staff activities and to ensure they meet MLB rules and standards. Manfred also referred to a "problematic" culture within Luhnow's baseball operations department.

Steve Schaeffer

ued winning over anything else. The franchise's treatment and firing of many longtime scouts upon Luhnow's arrival drew ire.

In 2018, Luhnow spearheaded the acquisition of closer Roberto Osuna, who still was serving a suspension for violating MLB's Joint Domestic Violence, Sexual Assault and Child Abuse policy. Luh-

now touted his supposed "zero-tolerance policy" to rationalize the transaction, only to clarify that it was in effect when a player was part of the organization.

Only a year later, Luhnow's top lieutenant – assistant general manager Brandon Taubman – directed an expletive-laden tirade toward a group of female report-

ers in the Astros' ALCS-winning clubhouse.

Taubman's fury was aimed at a woman about whom he'd previously complained – a woman who wore a domestic violence wristband regularly. He taunted the group by saying "I'm so f---ing glad we got Osuna!" after the pitcher had surrendered a tying home

run in the ninth inning of Game 6, which the Astros eventually won to claim the pennant.

The incident and the team's subsequent mishandling of it spurred the league's first investigation into the club. As part of Monday's punishment, Taubman was banned from baseball for one year. He can apply for reinstatement following the 2020 World Series.

"The baseball operations department's insular culture – one that valued and rewarded results over other considerations, combined with a staff of individuals who often lacked direction or sufficient oversight, led, at least in part, to the Brandon Taubman incident, the Club's admittedly inappropriate and inaccurate response to that incident, and finally, to an environment that allowed the conduct described in this report to have occurred," Manfred wrote.

Confronted with this theory in October while in the bowels of Nationals Park, hours after he fired Taubman during a World Series off day, Luhnow vehemently denied such an issue existed.

"This is not something that's endemic," Luhnow said in one of his final media appearances. "This is not a cultural issue."

Given Manfred's assessment of the Astros' culture – and many Luhnow-hired employees still present in the organization – Crane could be confronted with a decision of how deeply to examine his baseball operations department. Twice on Monday, he referenced his two firings as "housecleaning" for the franchise.

"We had one of the best baseball operations in the business and got a lot of great results," Crane said. "That didn't happen with one or two people. That happened with a lot of good people, and so we'll move forward to handle that in a very professional manner. It's not a very big organization, so I think if there's any problems, we'll root it out and fix it."

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FROM THE COVER

SMITH

From page A1

World Series.

From the Lastros to the promise of a new dynasty to blowing Game 7 of the 2019 Fall Classic in the seventh inning inside a stunned Minute Maid Park ... to a much more painful asterisk.

Black Sox. Pete Rose. The steroid era's Mitchell Report.

The 2017 Astros*. Say it ain't so.

Seriously. Say it ain't so.

"The Astros' violation of rules in 2017 and 2018 is attributable ... to a failure by the leaders of the baseball operations department and the field manager to adequately manage the employees under their supervision, to establish a culture in which adherence to the rules is ingrained in the fabric of the organization, and to stop bad behavior as soon as it occurred," Manfred wrote.

Jeff Luhnow, general manager and architect of the organization's massive reconstruction, was suspended by MLB for the entire 2020 season.

A.J. Hinch, manager of a ballclub that brought the fourth-largest city in America closer together than ever before, also was suspended for the entire 2020 season.

Then owner Jim Crane coldly fired both, and the darkest day in Astros history was official.

"My time in Houston has provided some of the greatest moments in my career, and those memories will always be near and dear to me and my family," Hinch said in a statement. "I regret that my time with the Astros has ended but will always be a supporter of the club, players and staff I've had the privilege of working alongside. I wish them the best in the future of the game I love."

There had never been a day like Monday for MLB. Then the news started breaking, Houston started shaking, and it was instantly clear the Astros were never going to be the same.

Crane insisted that MLB's \$5 million fine, unprecedented suspensions, and revocation of the team's first- and second-round picks in the 2020 and 2021 drafts didn't taint the Astros' 2017 World Series championship.

How wrong can you be?

The Astros also have committed



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Manager A.J. Hinch (14) was front and center during the Astros' World Series championship celebration at City Hall on Nov. 3, 2017. Just over two years later, he was fired along with general manager Jeff Luhnow over the team's sign-stealing scandal.

ted about 200 public relations nightmares since Crane purchased the team in 2011, once believed that slyly trading for a troubled Roberto Osuna was a brilliant move, and kept professionally sticking their foot in their mouth during the 2019 World Series.

Nothing's shocking nowadays.

"It is very clear to me that the culture of the (Astros') baseball operations department, manifesting itself in the way its employees are treated, its relations with other clubs and its relations with the media and external stakeholders, has been very problematic," Manfred wrote.

Those words were almost as damning as the suspensions.

By firing Luhnow and Hinch, Crane played billionaire PR 101: Protect the brand at all costs.

Got to keep people coming to the downtown ballpark and buying Jose Altuve jerseys from March through September, right?

But not even a couple sacrificial lambs can clean up the As-

tros' self-created high-tech mess.

What do you do with your well-worn 2017 World Series champion T-shirt? Hat. Book. Hoodie. Blu-Ray DVD. Pennant. Banner. Memories.

Trash can? Furious flames? Cardboard box in the attic?

Maybe you keep everything just like it is and wait for the gnawing numbness to go away.

The Astros denied, denied and denied. Fans, players and team personnel were stuck in limbo for months. Then a whispered worst-case scenario became fact.

"Witnesses made clear that everyone proximate to the Astros' dugout presumptively heard or saw the banging," Manfred wrote.

"In addition to players using the monitor installed near the dugout to decode signs, employees in the Astros' replay review room continued to decode sign sequences using the monitors in the room and communicate those sequences to the dugout for use when a runner was on second

base. Both methods of sign stealing were used by the team in parallel throughout the 2017 season."

Throughout the 2017 season. The magical season.

The season when the Astros started 60-29, Altuve won the American League MVP, Harvey kept flooding Houston, Justin Verlander was wrapped in orange and blue during the final minutes before the last trade deadline, and Houston proudly lived through its baseball team.

Then things really became special.

The Astros beat Boston in the Fenway Park rain. The Astros fell behind 3-2 to the New York Yankees in the AL Championship Series, then rediscovered life with back-to-back wins inside an electric Minute Maid Park. The Astros played their greatest game to win Game 5 of the World Series, returned to a roaring Dodger Stadium, and finally won it all for the first time in Game 7 in the glowing Los Angeles night.

That team ... cheated?

Blatantly?

Over and over, even after MLB publicly forbid it?

It's going to take weeks to let this all spill out, months to adapt, and years to fully process.

The "In Luhnow We Trust" era is over.

Hinch, who got so much right on and off the field, has been fired.

The rebuilding Astros losing at least 106 games three consecutive seasons wasn't this painful. Three straight glorious seasons with at least 101 wins now look distorted and skewed.

Major League Baseball could not officially take away the Astros' only World Series trophy. So baseball did the next most painful thing.

It gave Houston's world champion 2017 Astros* a lasting asterisk.

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ASTROS SCANDAL TIMELINE

Start of 2017 season: Employees in the Astros' video replay review room begin using the live feed from the center-field camera to attempt to decode and transmit opponents' signs. Astros bench coach Alex Cora begins to call the replay room to obtain sign information.

Circa June 2017: A group of Astros players, including veteran Carlos Beltran, discuss improving the sign-stealing operation and communicating them directly to batters. The trash-can banging system to communicate pitches begins.

August 2017: The Boston Red Sox are caught transmitting sign information from their replay review room to the dugout via Apple Watches.

Sept. 15, 2017: MLB commissioner Rob Manfred announces fines for the Red Sox and New York Yankees (for improperly using the replay room phone) and issues a memorandum reiterating MLB's rules banning the use of electronic equipment to steal signs. Despite this, the Astros continue to use the replay review room and monitor by the dugout to steal signs for the rest of the regular season and playoffs.

Nov. 1, 2017: Astros win Game 7 of the World Series at Dodger Stadium for their first championship.

2017-18 offseason: Manfred's office notifies teams that the phone connecting the replay review room and the dugout would be monitored to ensure it wasn't used for any purpose other than discussing a challenge to a play on the field.

March 2018: MLB's chief baseball officer Joe Torre issues a memorandum to all teams expanding on the prohibition against using electronic equipment to steal signs.

Before 2018 season: Astros relocate their replay review system to a video room closer to the dugout, similar to other setups in baseball.

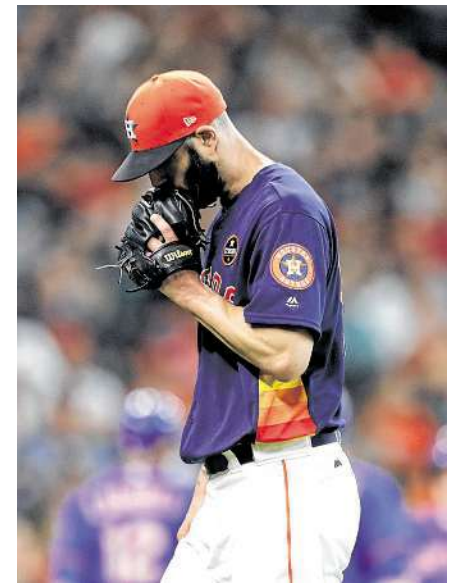
During 2018 season: Astros stop using replay review room to decode signs because players found it no longer effective.

2018 postseason: Commissioner's office issues a revised sign-stealing policy that includes placing individuals



Karen Warren / Staff file photo

The Astros celebrate their 5-1 win over the Dodgers in Game 7 of the World Series on Nov. 1, 2017, at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles.



Karen Warren / Staff file photo

Former Astros pitcher Mike Fiers told The Athletic of sign-stealing.



Karen Warren / Staff file photo

Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow, left, was fired by owner Jim Crane on Monday after MLB suspended Luhnow for a year.

retained by Manfred's office in replay review rooms to ensure no violations occur. This policy is adopted for the 2019 regular season.

Oct. 17, 2018: MLB says the Astros were making sure other teams weren't violating rules by using a credentialed team employee to monitor opposing dugouts in Cleveland and Boston during the playoffs.

Nov. 12, 2019: In a report by The Athletic, former Astros pitcher Mike Fiers alleges the Astros engaged in illegal sign-stealing during their 2017 championship season.

Nov. 18, 2019: The Chronicle reports MLB instructed video monitors working in Minute Maid Park to listen for banging sounds emanating from the Astros' dugout.

Dec. 11, 2019: At MLB's winter meetings, Manfred tells reporters his office has interviewed more than 60 witnesses and has tens of thousands of emails and instant messages to pore over.

Jan. 13, 2020: MLB announces one-year suspensions for Astros general manager Jeff Luhnow and manager A.J. Hinch, strips first- and second-round draft picks for the 2020-21 drafts and fines the franchise \$5 million. Owner Jim Crane summarily fires Luhnow and Hinch.

ASTROS SPYING SCANDAL



Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Rather than just abide by MLB's ruling, Astros owner Jim Crane dismissed the two men who helped bring him a World Series title.

SOLOMON

From page C1

Luhnow's scouting acumen and analytics expertise brought the Astros from the bottom to the top of the sport talent-wise. Hinch's steady hand, ability to relate to players and team-building are why the Astros won more games than any team in baseball over the last three years.

The brazen rule-breaking had questionable effectiveness. The players' idea to use replay monitoring cameras to spy on catchers' signals and relay that knowledge to a batter at the plate was made worse by the apparent arrogance in ignoring MLB's

warning that such cheating would be dealt with harshly.

In his interview with MLB's investigators, and again in a statement provided to media by his lawyer, Luhnow asserted he was wholly unaware of the cheating and would have put a stop to it had he been alerted.

According to the report, Hinch admitted he knew what the players were doing, and though he was against the practice, he allowed it to continue.

Crane expected them to do more. "Neither one of them implemented it ... but neither one of them did anything about it," Crane said.

Luhnow's claim of complete innocence and ignorance is

interesting. According to the MLB investigation, two emails mentioning the sign-stealing effort were sent to Luhnow, and there is "conflicting evidence about conversations with Luhnow on the topic."

"When I found out, I was very upset," Crane said. "We want to be known for playing by the rules."

MLB's sanctions will make it more difficult for the Astros to win going forward. With the talent on hand, the Astros should be a World Series contender this season. But the loss of draft picks will be costly, and Luhnow's roster-building was outstanding.

Hinch is the best manager in the sport. His ability to handle

the egos of a super-talented team has been vital to the Astros' success.

Crane recognizes this is a hit, but he is confident it will not be debilitating.

"We need to move forward with a clean slate," Crane said. "And the Astros will become a stronger organization because of this today."

On some level, he is believable. After all, he hired Luhnow and Hinch.

These were not shots in the dark. Crane knows how to win.

That he would rather make it harder on himself by doing it the right way is a good thing.

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ASTROS

From page C1

amazing era of Astros baseball is indelibly sullied by an electronic sign-stealing scheme that Major League Baseball confirmed was in existence during the 2017 and 2018 seasons.

A nine-page finding issued Monday affirmed that the Astros stole signs during the 2017 post-season. Though the sanctity of their World Series win will be called into question, Crane would not call the championship tainted.

"I think we've had a very good team for a number of years before (2017)," Crane said. "We were turning the corner. '18, '19, we had a very good team on the field this year. I think we'll have a great season. We have a lot of great players still."

One month separates those players from their first spring training workout in West Palm Beach, Fla. Crane's decisions Monday leave a team with World Series-caliber talent without any defined leadership. Finding it might happen from within.

"We had one of the best baseball operations in the business and got a lot of great results," Crane said. "That didn't happen with one or two people."

Other than acknowledging he will oversee baseball operations in the interim, the 65-year-old Crane had few absolutes for succession plans. Though he was a former collegiate pitcher, Crane has maintained a very hands-off role in the team's day-to-day baseball operations under Luhnow — allowing the man he trusted to execute whatever he pleased.

"We've got a short window here. We have to get ready for spring training — Feb. 15 or sooner — and we'll work really hard to try to take care of the team first and then look to the baseball operations," Crane said. "We've got good leaders in both of those spots. It's just a manner of organizing and managing that staff for the next 30 days, and hopefully we'll get someone to take the point."

Two worthy internal candidates — assistant general manager Pete Putila and bench coach Joe Espada — exist to fill the organizational void. Crane mentioned neither man by name Monday but referred to their readiness in vague descriptors. Whether the owner will hire a GM and manag-

On the sidelines

Other notable suspensions for management and coaches/managers in pro sports through the years.

1947: Dodgers manager Leo Durocher is suspended for a year by commissioner Happy Chandler because of his "accumulation of unpleasant incidents," including an alleged association with gamblers.

January 1987: Kings coach Pat Quinn is suspended for the rest of the NHL season and from coaching the Canucks until the 1990-91 season after accepting a job to be Vancouver's president and GM while still employed by Los Angeles.

August 1989: MLB commissioner Bart Giamatti bans Pete Rose from baseball after concluding the sport's hit king had bet on the sport, including games involving his Reds team.

March 1999: 49ers owner Edward DeBartolo Jr. is suspended the entire 1999 season for his role in a Louisiana gambling/bribery scandal.

December 2000: Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor is suspended through Aug. 31, 2001, for his role in an NBA salary cap circumvention case involving Joe Smith. Vice president of basketball operations Kevin McHale takes a leave of absence through July 31.

March 2012: Saints coach Sean Payton and defensive coordinator Gregg Williams are suspended for the entire upcoming season for their involvement in the team's bounty system.

April 2014: Clippers owner Donald Sterling is banned from the NBA for life and fined \$2.5 million after recordings of him making racist remarks become public.

er on a permanent or interim basis is still under consideration, Crane said.

"Certainly, we have a bench coach that's capable," Crane said of the managerial vacancy. "We'll certainly look outside, but we know we have to have somebody in charge when we go to spring training. That could be interim. I don't have the answer yet, but we'll make it work."

Hired as an intern under former general manager Ed Wade, Putila authored a meteoric ascension up the Astros' system. He earned an assistant general manager title in September following a three-year run as the team's farm director. This offseason, Putila interviewed for the Pirates' and Giants' GM vacancies.

Brandon Taubman's October dismissal has offered Putila more responsibility and experience in other areas of the Astros' operation. He took a more prominent role in the team's arbitration process last week. Crane sat in on those meetings, too.

"There's a lot of people there, and all of them matter, and all of them have skill sets," Crane said. "I'm going to evaluate that and see what we've got inside and then start looking outside. I think it's a good job. I think a lot of people want to come in and step into that position."

Putila's eye for player evaluation and development and his intricate knowledge of the Astros' system may be his most distinct advantage. The farm system,

once flush with top-flight prospects, was gutted in last summer's Zack Greinke deal.

The onus, therefore, shifts to development of what is left in the minor league system and adept drafting. Monday's punishment took away Houston's first two picks in the 2020 and 2021 drafts, potentially crippling any long-term maintenance plans.

Espada would assume the managerial chair with complete knowledge of the personnel and how to approach each returnee. Before Crane announced Hinch's firing, MLB.com reported Espada would be named the team's interim manager. The 44-year-old Puerto Rican was Hinch's right-hand man for the past two seasons and someone the team had long expected to lose to a better job.

Last winter, Espada interviewed with the Angels, Twins and Blue Jays in regard to managerial vacancies. This offseason, he was a managerial finalist for the Cubs and Giants. Those within the industry view Espada as ready for any managerial job.

"This thing is deep here," Crane said. "There's a lot of smart people here. I think we'll have a speed light. I'm not trying to make this light. This is a tough day. But can we recover? Absolutely, and we'll have a great team next year."

Houston still returns eight of its nine everyday position players. Reigning American League Cy Young Award winner Justin Ver-

lander will front the rotation. Greinke, a six-time All-Star, is behind him. Games can be finished by reigning All-Star setup man Ryan Pressly and closer Roberto Osuna.

Hinch's absence will not suddenly strip these players of their premier ability. The advent of technology and advanced scouting has somewhat diminished the role or value of a major league manager. Hinch's most crucial attributes with the Astros were not calling a hit-and-run or summoning a pinch hitter but rather his ability to hold the team together.

Hinch is almost unanimously regarded as one of the sport's most pleasant people and able communicators. Luhnow hand-picked Hinch in 2015 after discontent with Bo Porter became public.

Major League Baseball found no evidence that Hinch or Luhnow condoned the sign-stealing scheme, which involved decoding signs in the team's replay room and banging on a trash can to relay which pitches were coming.

The scheme was a player-driven endeavor, aided mostly by former bench coach Alex Cora, who is now manager of the Red Sox.

Luhnow "adamantly" denied knowledge of the system, the investigation said. Hinch did not order or devise it. A person with knowledge of the situation said that during a game in the 2017 season, Hinch destroyed one of the monitors that facilitated the wrongdoing. That neither man acted to stop the cheating was his ultimate demise.

"It really came from the bottom up," Crane said. "It's pretty clear in the report how that happened, but neither one of them did anything about it. That's unfortunate, and the consequences are severe."

Crane fired Luhnow and Hinch in separate phone calls "just a few minutes" before taking the dais at a 2:05 p.m. news conference. Luhnow was traveling, according to Crane, so their conversation was brief. Crane said Hinch was "upset."

"We need to move forward with a clean slate, and the Astros will become a stronger organization because of this today," Crane said. "You can be confident that we'll always do the right thing and will not have this happen again on my watch."

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Cast of characters

MIKE FIERS



The former Astros pitcher described the team's system of sign stealing in an interview with the Athletic in November. His description of a camera in center field, a video monitor near the dugout and banging on a trash can were confirmed in the investigation.

ROB MANFRED



The MLB commissioner launched an investigation that interviewed 68 witnesses, including 23 current and former players, and reviewed thousands of emails, electronic messages, videos and photos. He made the ruling to suspend Jeff Luhnow, A.J. Hinch, fine the team \$5 million and call for loss of draft choices.

ALEX CORA



The Astros' bench coach in 2017 began the club's use of video replay to learn teams' signs and often would call the replay review room to receive information. His punishment is being withheld until an investigation of allegations against the Red Sox in 2018 (where Cora is now manager) is complete.

CARLOS BELTRAN



About two months into the 2017 season, Beltran and other players discussed how the team could better communicate and decode the signs. A video monitor was placed near the dugout, and players would then hit a trash can to signal the pitch. One or two bangs meant offspeed. No bangs meant fastball.

JEFF LUHNOW



The team's general manager received two emails about the use of the replay room, but there is conflicting evidence on the topic. Luhnow, however, did not forward MLB's rulings about electronic sign stealing to his field staff.

DANNY FARQUHAR



The White Sox pitcher appeared to notice the banging on the trash can in 2017, and that sent a wave of panic through the Astros' players, who were afraid of getting caught. During that game, the players removed the video monitor from the hall in the tunnel and hid it in an office.

A.J. HINCH



The manager neither devised the scheme nor participated in it. He twice damaged the monitor to show his displeasure with its use but did not stop it or notify players or Cora that he disapproved.

JIM CRANE



Astros owner was unaware of any violations and told Luhnow in September 2017 to make sure the Astros did not engage in such conduct.

FROM THE COVER

Locals feeling 'duped' to 'always ... a fan'

By Hannah Dellinger
STAFF WRITER

For many fans, a cheating scandal has tarnished the Astros' historic 2017 World Series win, which brought hope and escape to a city recovering from Hurricane Harvey.

The triumph against the Los Angeles Dodgers — one that brought pride, joy and healing to millions displaced and impacted by Harvey's flooding — now has fans feeling "disappointed," "embarrassed" and "duped."

Major League Baseball released a report Monday detailing the Astros' scheme to steal electronic signs during the Series. Hours later, team owner Jim Crane fired manager A.J. Hinch and general manager Jeff Luhnow.

"This is not the game that I want my kids to see," said Astros fan Zulay Contreras after learning the news. "Baseball as a sport should be based on discipline, respect, honesty and trust."

The scandal is painful to many because of what the win meant to Houston. As the team prepared for Game 3 at home two months after Harvey, fans were sorting through the remains of flooded houses and living in FEMA-funded hotel rooms as they waited to piece their lives back together.

The Astros said they were on a mission to give the city something to celebrate. The win did just that, like the Boston Red Sox after the 2013 marathon bombing, and the New Orleans Saints after Katrina in 2005.

Now, the collective feelings of relief the Series win cultivated for a grieving and traumatized city has left Houstonians conflicted.

Clark Commings, a fan who coached youth baseball for 15 years, said he feels like the scandal has chipped away at the integrity of the team.

"I feel duped into thinking our Astros were that good," he said.

The scandal has revealed that



Karen Warren / Staff photographer

Thousands of Astros fans celebrate the World Series win at the team's victory parade through downtown Houston on Nov. 3, 2017. Though they condemned cheating, some fans remain grateful for the Series memories that lifted up a Harvey-stricken city.

the team wasn't following the tenets of good sportsmanship, Commings added.

"(I) taught kids how to play hard (and) practice more," he said. "I always stressed maintaining your dignity. Don't let the heat of the moment do something you'll be embarrassed about later."

The former youth coach worries that in 100 years, the cheating scandal is what his hometown team will be remembered for.

"I think the whole cheating scandal brings more shame than honor to Houston," said Michael Hargrove. "The true fans here in Houston are proud of our teams win or lose, but to cheat is outright disgraceful and for that A.J.

(Hinch) must go."

It will take time and action for the team to shake its negative image, Hargrove said.

Longtime fan Chris Walters said he's deeply disappointed in the team and sad to lose Hinch, but believes MLB's and Crane's actions were warranted.

"While I am sad and hurt by losing such a great manager in A.J. Hinch, I also know you have to be held accountable for the people you put in charge," he said. "I believe the team moving forward was the best solution, and will help move past the scandal."

Other fans said MLB's findings will not weigh on their love for their team.

"I condemn the cheating, but

I'm grateful for the World Series memories and how the Astros helped make #HoustonStrong," Houstonian and consultant Richard Bonnin said on Twitter.

Walters said that the win took more than cheating.

"I, as a longtime baseball player and fan, know that it takes more than sign-stealing to be a great baseball team and to win a World Series, he said. "I believe without the tech advantage, we still (would have won) and I am not at all worried or feel less like a champion."

Some fans defended the Astros because they said stealing signs isn't new to baseball.

"I don't think the Astros were the only team doing it," said fan

Catherine Teague. "I think it has a minimal effect on wins. Knowing what pitch is coming can help, but you still have to hit a round ball with a round bat and score."

Teague said she believes the suspensions issued by MLB were harsh and hopes for equal punishment for teams who have done the same.

No matter how much they are disappointed by the scandal, many fans say they will keep rooting for the Astros.

"I will always be a fan and continue to support the players on the field and whomever leads the team into the future," Walters said.

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ASTROS

From page A1

heart of the game's integrity.

While Manfred said neither Luhnow nor Hinch developed the sign-stealing system, which continued in varying forms throughout 2017 and into the early portion of the 2018 season, both bore responsibility for allowing cheating to proceed without stopping it.

"The Astros' violation of rules in 2017 and 2018 is attributable, in my view, to a failure by the leaders of the baseball operations department and the field manager to adequately manage the employees under their supervision, to establish a culture in which adherence to the rules is ingrained in the fabric of the organization, and to stop bad behavior as soon as it occurred," Manfred wrote.

Crane said he informed Luhnow and Hinch of his decision to fire them shortly before a news conference at which he discussed the MLB report.

Hinch, in a statement released by the Astros, said, "While the evidence consistently showed I didn't endorse or participate in the sign-stealing practices, I failed to stop them, and I am deeply sorry."

"I apologize to Mr. Crane for all negative reflections this may have had on him and the Astros organization. To the fans, thank you for your continued support through this challenging time — and for this team. I apologize to all of you for our mistakes, but I'm confident we will learn from it, and I personally commit to work tirelessly to ensure I do."

Luhnow, in a statement provided by an attorney, said, "I am not a cheater. ... I did not know rules were being broken. As the commissioner set out in his statement, I did not personally direct, oversee or engage in any misconduct."

He added, "I am deeply upset that I wasn't informed of any misconduct, because I would have stopped it."

There was no immediate comment from Mike Fiers, the former Astros pitcher who confirmed the existence of the Astros sign-stealing scheme in an interview last November with The Athletic.

Crane said he had no immediate plans in naming successors to Luhnow and Hinch as the Astros prepare for spring training next month. He said he would consider internal and external candidates for both jobs.

No players were sanctioned by



Karen Warren / Staff file photo

Astros manager A.J. Hinch and bench coach Alex Cora, now the manager of the Boston Red Sox, shown at spring training in 2017, were implicated for their roles in the sign-stealing scandal.

MLB, although Manfred's report specifically named Carlos Beltran, the veteran designated hitter who now serves as manager of the New York Mets, as having "discussed that the team could improve on decoding opposing team's signs and communicating the signs to the batter."

The report also cited the involvement of Alex Cora, the Astros' 2017 bench coach who since 2018 has been manager of the Boston Red Sox. Manfred said the decision on whether to discipline Cora will be delayed until MLB investigates sign-stealing allegations against the Red Sox.

MLB said its report, which was based on interviews with 68 witnesses, including 23 current and

former Astros players, concluded that the sign-stealing system was "player-driven and player-executed" with the exception of Cora and "lower level baseball operations employees."

The report said most of the position players on the 2017 Astros either received relayed signs while batting or helped to decode signs or to bang on the trash can used to relay signs to the plate.

"Many of the players who were interviewed admitted that they knew the scheme was wrong because it crossed the line from what the player believed was fair competition and/or violated MLB rules," the report said. "Players stated that if (Hinch) told them to

stop engaging in the conduct, they would have immediately stopped."

Manfred wrote that he could not determine if the scheme "helped Astros hitters ... nor whether it helped the Astros win any games. But for the purposes of my decision, regardless of whether the scheme was effective or not, it violated the rules and, at a minimum, created the appearance of unfairness."

Manfred said that while Luhnow denied knowledge of the scheme, "documentary and testimonial evidence" indicated that he had some knowledge of cheating "but did not give it much attention."

"Irrespective of Luhnow's

knowledge of his club's violations of the rules, I will hold him personally accountable for the conduct of his club," Manfred wrote.

He also said Luhnow created a "problematic" culture within the Astros' baseball operations department. That culture, Manfred said, was reflected in the behavior of Brandon Taubman, the Astros executive who yelled obscenities in the direction of female reporters in the Astros clubhouse after the American League Championship Series.

Taubman was fired by the Astros, who initially denied reports of his conduct, and has been suspended by MLB for a year, after which he can apply for reinstatement.

Manfred said Hinch told MLB that he did not approve of the sign-stealing relay system and physically damaged a video monitor used in the scheme on two occasions. However, the commissioner said, Hinch "admits he did not stop it and he did not notify Cora or players that he disapproved of it."

Crane was the lone Astros employee to take questions at the Monday afternoon news conference. He was calm and measured throughout the 16-minute conversation, although his voice cracked as he said, "This is a tough day. I've had a lot of tough days. But yeah, this is tough."

He said the MLB report made it clear that while neither Hinch nor Luhnow originated the cheating scheme, "neither one of them did anything about it, so that's how we came to the conclusion."

Crane apologized to fans and sponsors for the violations, adding: "We want to be known as playing by the rules. We broke the rules. We accept the consequences, and we're going to move forward."

"This is behind us, and we're going to make this right and we're going to play baseball come spring."

Crane said he did not believe that the cheating scheme tainted the Astros' 2017 World Series title.

"We've had a very good team for a number of years before (2017). We were turning the corner. '18, '19, we had a very good team on the field this year," he said. "I think we'll have a great season. We have a lot of great players still. I don't think it taints it."

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