



The number of Blacks in baseball is diminishing

By Kerry Schmidt 05-27-2007

The number of blacks in MLB has been diminishing for a number of years now, but since it is not a drastic situation, it has not made many headlines lately. However, the numbers are substantial and, to black leaders, a bad trend that needs to be rectified.

It is just very recently that we have even heard anything about it. In fact, in order to get all the information I needed, I had to search deep into the web, since it has yet to be a major story in the mainstream media.

Only when my man, Jesse Jackson, went in front of the press to announce the “prejudicial treatment” of black baseball players did we hear a bit of the facts of this situation. Facts, of course, are not things that have any meaning to Jackson.

It reminds me of the old story wherein he, with media crew in tow, showed up at the grand opening of a large appliance store. He quickly found his way to the washer/dryer sections, and, with cameras rolling, demanded of the manager as to why all of them were white. The manager quietly opened one up and said, “Well, Reverend Jackson, all the agitators are black.”

However, it is a fact that the percentage of blacks on MLB rosters are way down. Only 8.4% of MLB rosters are made up of American Blacks, whereas 25 years ago, that percentage was around 31%.

Or put another way, as recently as 1983, 1 of every 4 players was black. Today, it is 1 of 12.

A list compiled by ESPN.com revealed that 69 out of 750 players on opening day this year were American Blacks. Of those, neither Houston nor Atlanta – cities that are 25 and 61% black, respectively – had a single American Black on their roster.

And going “Upstairs,” just 3 of 30 managers were black, one of 30 GM’s and 31 of 519 VP’s and senior administrators. There were no American Black CEO’s or majority owners. NOTE: This deviates from the main story, the diminishing American Black player, but it is of some note.

So, why the huge drop?

This is totally opposite from the NFL and NBA. Today, 68% of NFL players are black and in the NBA, nearly 90% are black.

So why is baseball going the other way?

It can be stated in one word: Economics.

Now that has to be explained from several separate, but related actions.

The easiest to explain is the number of blacks that are gravitating towards basketball and football rather than baseball. And this is in large part, economics.

In inner city and poorer areas, it is hard, and expensive, to find enough land to build a field and to then pay for all the equipment required.

More on this later, but it is certainly a lot easier for inner city kids – many of them black, to find a rag-tag basketball court, one ball, and go at it.

But the biggest part of the money aspect is the economics of scouting and player development.



OFF THE WALL SPORTS

That leads to the amateur draft, and then, further down the line, perhaps the biggest reason for the drop, is south of the border, in Latin America.

But again, all of these aspects I will dwell on are about, surprise, MONEY.

The annual MLB draft has been a big part of baseball since its inception. But today, it is not nearly as important, for two reasons.

The major reason is the huge build up of Latin American players, and particularly how little money, in comparison, it takes to sign them.

In the regular draft, you draft players in order of last seasons finish, like the NFL. But you only draft American players, with agents and other baggage.

Not so with Latin's. Every MLB club has their own development academy in the Dominican Republic. 10 also have camps in Venezuela.

Vince Gennaro, author of *Diamonds and Dollars*, a book on the economics of baseball.

“These (the Latin American camps) are where the high revenue teams can leverage their economic advantage.”

Adds Jimmie Lee Solomon, MLB EVP of baseball operations who is black, says, “Clubs definitely leverage their dollars much better when they develop top talent that is not subject to the draft.” He added, “Those decisions are purely business, and very profitable ones at that.”

Several MLB teams operate full training facilities throughout Latin America because they own the exclusive rights to young players they sign there on the cheap. The Arizona Diamondbacks, for example, have a baseball academy in the Dominican Republic, and have 10 international scouts assigned to nine countries, including Australia!

No such camps are in America, because then each player would have to go into the general draft.

Given the wealth of talent found in Latin America, and the fact they can be signed without competition from other teams, they save huge amounts of money. Thus, nearly 29% of foreign born players make up MLB rosters this year.

In 1961 there were 16 MLB teams. Today, there are 30. This has forced teams to look beyond our borders for players, and once the wealth of the abilities of the Latin players was discovered, the doors opened wide.

And, given the poverty in many of the Latin American countries, many players sign for much less than agent fed American players. This is changing considerably now, but still the cost factor is much less.

In addition, although today they account for less than 3%, Asian players are making their mark in MLB. While 3% does not sound like much, when you remember white players make up only 8.4%, it is another item in the mix

Now when I speak of Latin players, since they are the largest single mix, there are many other foreign born players, some from South American countries and ones, while not quite fitting the “Latin” description mold, they are basically in that group and add another 16% to the makeup.

Thus, with the lessening of importance of the amateur draft, kids have just two choices.

They can sign right out of high school and must take whatever deal the drafting team gives them, or they go to collage and hope to come out later as a more advanced player.



And speaking of college, herein is another major reason for the decline of black baseball players.

College football teams can award 85 scholarships. College baseball teams only award 11.7. Thus you have 3-4 kids sharing the same scholarship.

Now, if that kid comes from a middle class or affluent family, he can readily go this route. But for the many black, inner city kids, this is not an option. Thus, football and basketball, which can award 18 scholarships – there are only 12 on a team, have a huge advantage.

Furthermore, and a very important factor, is that college football is a huge revenue sport. It makes the college a ton of money. Many millions. That is not the case at all for baseball or even basketball.

And from a purely product oriented point, Paul Swangard of the University of Oregon's Warsaw Sports Marketing Center pointed out, "People are willing, and want to wear, basketball shoes every day, it's the in thing, but they sure don't do that with baseball cleats.

Thus, you can see why the overwhelming attention given to college football.

Now the Reverend Jackson's of the world can get on their soap box and shout long and loud about how this can be fixed and should be corrected and that the black baseball player is thus being treated unfairly.

Bulls..t, Mr. Rev. Let me explain one very simply fact of life to you. If a player – black, white, red, green, yellow, et al, can play a great game of baseball, he damn well will be signed in a minute, so get off that crap.

A solution?

Commissioner Bud Selig said MLB has a Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) program. It is in its 19th year in 200 cities and has helped 120,000 children per year to bridge the gap between Little League and high school ball.

The Baseball Tomorrow Fund is a joint venture between MLB and its players that has doled out \$10 million since 1999.

There are a couple of other ventures mentioned, but as you can see, all these grand ideas have been in place for over 15 years, and you still have, well, read the column.

In response to Selig's comments above, Former Diamondbacks' Junior Spivey (who is black), said, "I think it's hogwash, to be honest. "It's been taken away from us. MLB has spent millions and millions of dollars in these other countries and here, right here at home, they're not doing that."

Thus, like most everything here in America, and the world, for that matter, it all comes down to, TA DA, MONEY!

We may love to go out and watch our favorite team play its sport, but the team and the sport only really care about the money.

Remember that.