

QuickPitch

African American Participation in Baseball: The Downward Trend Continues

Around the anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking major league baseball's color barrier, I read my share of spirited commentary about the demise of African Americans in Major League Baseball. There is no denying that the percentage of African Americans in baseball has had a precipitous decline over the past several decades. In 1975, the percentage of African Americans in baseball reached an all-time high of 27 percent, highlighted by the Pittsburgh Pirates who eventually adopted a popular theme song, 'We Are Family' from the group Sister Sledge to nicely fuse African American culture and the national pastime. Today, the tides have certainly



changed with the percentage of African American players at 8.5 percent—its lowest level since 2007—according to the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

How do we explain the exceptionally low numbers of African Americans in baseball?

It's been nearly 65 years since Jackie Robinson broke the racial barrier. If he were alive today, I imagine that he would interrogate Major League Baseball for the dearth of Blacks in prominent leadership positions. Ken Williams of the Chicago White Sox and Michael Hill of the Florida Marlins (ironically, a former teammate of mine) are the only Black general managers in Major League Baseball today.

This is just one concern.

The reasons for this decline are numerous and complex: lack of quality facilities and youth baseball programs, particularly in urban areas; scarcity of collegiate schol-

arships designated for baseball; youth are more interested in basketball and football; the game is too boring and not sexy enough for African American youth; Major League Baseball does not effectively market their product to urban communities; the international market (e.g., Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Venezuela) is more economically efficient.

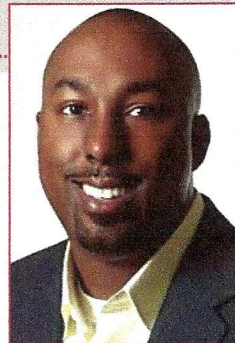
The most widely expressed reason—and perhaps the most persuasive—is the out-of-control cost to play select youth baseball today. Baseball is now considered a travel sport, and, to a significant degree, ideal for a relatively affluent family who wants their youth to play in competitive environments and receive national exposure while developing their baseball talents. The days of simply playing 15 to 20 Little League games with your friends are over. It's a different terrain for our youth athletes today. It is estimated that families pay a minimum of \$5,000 per player to play select or travel baseball, not to mention the additional cost for a private pitching or hitting instructor.

What to do?

MLB Urban Youth Academy provides free, year-round baseball instructions and education programs to young athletes at their state-of-the-art facilities located in Compton, Houston, and Puerto Rico. Darrell Miller, MLB's Vice President of Youth and Facility Development, says that they also established the 'Breakthrough Series' to provide a space for high school junior and senior baseball players from urban areas to showcase their talents to collegiate and professional scouts. According to Miller, the 'Breakthrough Series' was created to "combat the 'pay for exposure' policies that sometimes leave less fortunate baseball players on the sidelines."

MLB teams have drafted more than 100 players who either played or trained at the Compton Academy since it opened in 2006. Without a doubt, the Academies offset the considerable cost of playing baseball and attempts to address the perplexing picture of the under-representation of African Americans.

But despite the Academy's remarkable efforts, there essentially are not enough African Americans in the pipeline—from youth leagues to the college level. In 2010,



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African-American represented 5.6 percent of college baseball players, according to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.

Division I college baseball teams are allotted

11.7 total scholarships for a roster of 25 or more, and thus, most, if not all, players are awarded partial scholarships. Limited scholarships mean that families have to pay a substantial cost to attend college. Cash-strapped families—black, brown, or white—cannot afford college without a full athletic scholarship. Some African American athletes, as a result, tend to gravitate towards football and basketball where full athletic scholarships are offered.

While an increase in athletic scholarships certainly would give college baseball more racial diversity, this will not happen any time soon. The mere fact that Division I college baseball generally is not a revenue generating sport makes any potential increases in athletic scholarships almost impossible.

And the reluctance of college baseball coaches to actively recruit inner-city African American student-athletes whose families are willing to cover part of the cost for a college education only exacerbates this concern.

An MLB scout, who wanted to remain anonymous, said "they [college coaches] are not interested in doing the road work—family background work, grade checks, etc."

The time is ripe to repair and improve access to participation opportunities for African Americans in baseball. There is an increasing need for idea champions to step to the plate and to reverse the current trend. After all, the Robinson legacy hangs in the balance. **IP**

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