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African-Americans in College Baseball

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Abstract:

The under-representation of African-Americans in college baseball is evident. African-American athletes make up only 4.5% of all National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) baseball players. They are a shrinking percentage of Major League Baseball players. A focus group was established to identify specific sociological issues which were perceived to influence the under-representation of African-Americans in collegiate baseball. Additionally, information from the observation of SEC baseball games during the 2006 season was used to quantify the social pattern. Data from the "traditionally black" Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) and the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) were also collected during the 2006 season. For the Southeastern Conference (SEC), fan attendance was less than 1% African-American and the player participation rate was 1.91 per team during the 2006 season. Additionally, none of the SEC head or assistant baseball coaches were African-American. The focus group determined that the reasons for the decline in numbers were related to (1) lifestyle factors, (2) competition from other sports and social opportunities, and (3) the absence of African-American role models in baseball. The authors propose that Title IX legislation and the influence of sports media were primary factors in the change.

African-Americans in College Baseball

The under-representation of African-Americans in college baseball is an obvious yet perplexing picture in athletics today. African-American athletes are more than equitably represented among many of the most popular collegiate spectator sports; however, their near absence in college baseball appears to be more than coincidental. Questions arise as to whether the educational system, the social system of athletics, and/or federal legislation have been responsible for the reduction in the number of African-American baseball players in America.

Only 4.5% of all National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) baseball players were African-American during the 2004 season. This includes all divisions, in addition to the historically African-American colleges and universities. On the contrary, 42.0% and 32.3% of NCAA basketball and football players, respectively, were African-American in the 2003-2004 academic year (Bray, 2005).

When specifically examining one of the perennial collegiate conference baseball powers, the Southeastern Conference (SEC), only 4.2% of 2006 roster players were African-American, as noted in Table 1. The twelve universities that make up the SEC represent states with an average African-American population of 20.8%.

Ironically, when examining the historically black Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) and the Southwest Athletic Conference (SWAC), findings surface which again support the difficulty of finding African-Americans in collegiate baseball. African-Americans are the minority on many of the rosters of these teams, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1: African-American Participation and Attendance at SEC Baseball Games

University	Number of African	State Population	Number of African	Average Attendance	Number of African
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	American Players	(African American)	Fans	American	American Coaches
Alabama	1	26.0%	15	4172	0
Auburn	3	26.0%	7	3021	0
Arkansas	1	15.7%	0	7156	0
Florida	3	14.6%	8	2607	0
Georgia	1	28.7%	10	1958	0
Kentucky	1	7.3%	6	1250	0
Louisiana State	3	32.5%	8	7508	0
Mississippi	0	36.3%	2	4363	0
Mississippi St.	0	36.3%	3	6160	0
South Carolina	3	29.5%	22	3424	0
Tennessee	4	16.4%	5	1378	0
Vanderbilt	3	16.4%	3	1484	0
Alabama	1	26.0%	15	4172	0

Source:
Attendance
statistics
from SEC
member
schools
2006. All
observations
of fan counts
were from
weekend
games in
spring 2005
and spring
2006. State
African-
American
percentages
were
obtained
from the
United States
Census
Bureau.

With approximately 12.8% of the United States population reported to be African-American (United States Census Bureau, 2006), it would appear that African-American collegiate baseball players are under-represented. This is the case in both college and professional baseball.

Ken Williams of the Chicago White Sox, Major League Baseball's (MLB) only African-American general manager, blamed the small number of collegiate scholarships designated for baseball on the small number of African-American players (Nightengale, 2006). Logan White, the Los Angeles Dodger's amateur scouting director, noted that in his trips to colleges across the United States, he rarely encounters an African-American baseball player. Not only is the absence of the African-American player obvious at the collegiate level, the population has gone from 27% of Major League Baseball (MLB) players in 1975 to 8% today (Nightengale, 2006). Sociologists have recognized this trend and have proposed several theories to explain it.

Theories

A possible explanation for the diminishment of African-Americans in collegiate and professional baseball could be explained by Giddens' (1979) "structuration" theory. This theory assumes that certain behaviors are shaped by an array of interconnected structures. These interconnected structures can include norms, accessibility, and facilitators. Norms are the expected behaviors that govern a

culture. Facilitators can be individuals or events that increase the likelihood of engaging in a behavior. (The behavior in this case would be baseball.) Accessibility refers to the degree of availability a population has to baseball.

The Negro Leagues of the early part of the 20th century, in particular, provided African-Americans with access to a culture aligned with baseball. Prior to the integration of African-Americans into Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947 ("African Americans in Sports," n.d.), an estimated 2,300 African-Americans participated in professional baseball through the Negro Leagues (Lynn, 2006). In the 1920's, even small African-American communities, such as the town of Buxton, Iowa, touted semiprofessional teams like the Wonders (Beran, 1990). African-American fans often traveled to surrounding states to watch the Wonders play. These games became a routine part of daily life for this community. Beran (1990) further noted that the games served as a gathering place for members of the community. As a result, the Wonders became a major part of the cultural identity of Buxton. Since the retirement of former Negro-League stars who went on to stellar careers in MLB, such as Henry Aaron, the number of both African-American baseball players and spectators has steadily declined in MLB (Early, 2000; Flanagan 1999).

Research by Odgen (2003a) suggested that television images may perpetuate the stereotype that African-Americans are not welcome in baseball venues. This is the basis for Odgen's 'Welcome Theory', which states that certain groups feel a sense of belonging in some leisure activities, but not in others. Odgen found that African-Americans felt most welcome playing basketball and least welcome at country clubs. Feeling unwelcome in some leisure activities is not restricted to the African-American race. All races share a common attitude that activities are suited to some ethnicities more than others (Philipp, 1999). For example, of the 137 crowd shots at a particular televised baseball game, only one of them displayed a group of African-Americans (Odgen, 2003a). Furthermore, Ogden reported that only 3% of the attendance at a game dubbed "African-American Heritage Night" consisted of African Americans.

The Welcome Theory may be partially created by the extensive mass media edification of professional African-American basketball players (Hall, 2002). African-American youth are frequently shown that basketball is the most efficient route to fame and fortune. As a result, almost 80% of basketball players in the National Basketball Association (NBA) are African-American (Boyd, 1997).

Another factor that might explain the absence of African-Americans from baseball is a lack of social support for the game. A primary reason that children select extracurricular activity is for interaction with peers (Watson and Collis, 1982). Children naturally gravitate towards activities endorsed by peers within their social groups. The peers of African-American youth frequently endorse basketball instead of baseball by donning the apparel of their favorite NBA stars (Philipp, 1998; Wilson & Sparks, 1996).

Gravitation towards participation in sports other than baseball may begin at the youth level. Of the 2,000 youth players in select tournaments from 1998-2000, only 3% were African American (Odgen, 2001). Select leagues, also known as traveling teams, are the highest level of play in age-group baseball. These teams may be compiled from competitive tryouts and/or selecting players from other "all star" teams. Select team baseball is characterized by long and arduous seasons that may contain as many as 150 games for youth players (Odgen, 2003b). These teams often play games all across the country, which requires considerable travel expenses. This external demand may validate limited access as an explanation, if one assumes that African-Americans have less access to baseball leagues, select-travel teams, and fields. Baseball diamonds are documented more frequently in the suburbs than in the urban core, where the population of African-Americans is more heavily populated, further supporting the theory of a reduced access that African-American youth have to baseball (Odgen 2003b).

Efforts to Curb Disparity

Recently, several MLB celebrities and players have attempted to curb the lack of interest of African-Americans in the sport of baseball. Initiatives such as Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI), founded by John Young, a former major league player, have received funding from Major League Baseball ("Major League

Baseball," n.d.). RBI was created to enable inner city youth with reduced accessibility and funds to enjoy baseball. Since its inception in 1989, the RBI program has provided opportunities for youth baseball in more than 200 cities. Major League Baseball also sponsors a program known as the Urban Youth Baseball Academy ("Major League Baseball," n.d.). Some former participants in this program have remained in baseball and are now professional baseball players. Another project, known as the Urban Initiative for Little League Baseball, plans to expand existing facilities and baseball programs in the inner cities ("Little League Online," n.d.). Professional players, such as Torii Hunter, have even spearheaded efforts to raise funds for the creation and maintenance of baseball facilities in low income areas ("The Torii Hunter Project," n.d.).

After an examination of the literature, it appears that those who are associated with and who study baseball have taken note of the declining African-American population in the sport. The authors of this study attempted to quantify the number of African-Americans playing college baseball in several of the most visible collegiate conferences in America in an attempt to measure the magnitude of the social change.

Methods:

A focus group was established to assist in identifying specific sociological issues perceived to influence the under-representation of African-Americans in collegiate baseball. The focus group consisted of twelve college age, African-American males who were either currently on a NCAA Division II baseball roster or who had played baseball in high school but were no longer playing in college. The group met during the fall of 2006 in three, one-hour sessions over a one month period. The first meeting consisted of an introduction to the topic, followed by the distribution of the outline of this study. This was followed by a period of general brainstorming. The group was asked to investigate the literature related to this study topic before the next meeting. In the second meeting, the group continued brainstorming. Members were allowed to present findings from the previous week of research and to begin extrapolating reasons for the social change in baseball. Common themes among the focus group were identified. In meeting three, the focus group began the process of assembling and ranking its theories for the reduction of African-Americans in collegiate baseball.

In addition to the qualitative, focus group study, the authors gathered data from NCAA data bases and from observation of SEC baseball games during the 2006 season. The authors personally attended and collected SEC baseball attendance data by conducting visual counts of African-American fans and players at select SEC games during the 2006 season.

For point of interest purposes, data from the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) and the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) were collected by examining the media publications of each member institution's athletic website for the 2006 season. The schools in these two conferences are known as historical black colleges and universities (HBCU) with predominantly African-American populations. The authors attempted to secure the numbers of African-American baseball players and coaches from these conferences.

Results:

Examinations of the findings in Table 2 depict an SEC baseball fan attendance base that was 0.2% African-American during the 2006 season. There was an average of seven African-American fans at each weekend SEC baseball game in 2006, out of the average crowd of 3,707. In all cases, the African-American fan count was less than 1% of the attendance.

Table 2: African-American Participation in the Mid-Eastern Atlantic Conference (MEAC) and the Southwest Atlantic Conference (SWAC)

MEAC	% of African American Players	SWAC	% of African American Players
Bethune-Cook	21	Alabama A&M	90

Coppin State	30	Alabama State	84
Delaware State	no baseball	Alcorn State	50
FAMU	39	Arkansas PB	no data
Hampton	no baseball	Grambling	80
Howard	no baseball	Jackson State	72
Maryland Eastern	16	Miss Valley St	100
Morgan State	no baseball	Prairie View	84
Norfolk	25	Southern	no data
N.C. A&T	60		
Average among those reporting	31		68

Sources,
<http://www.meacsports.com/>,
<http://www.swac.org>

Additionally, none of the SEC head or assistant baseball coaches were African-American during the 2006 season. The average SEC team had 1.91 African-American players on the forty-man roster with the range from one to four players. The two SEC schools representing states with the highest African-American population, Mississippi State and Mississippi, from a state with a 36.3% African-American population, had zero African-American players.

As presented in Table 3, the focus group identified four categorical areas as reasons for the limited number of African-Americans in college baseball. The reasons noted by the focus group, in order of their perceived importance, were: (1) lifestyle factors, (2) competition for the African-American athlete from other sports and social opportunities, (3) the absence of African-American role models (either active players or coaches), and (4) a limitation resulting from the perception that the African-American athlete is more difficult to coach.

Table 3: Focus Group Conclusions for the Scarcity of African-American Baseball Players

Themes	Description
Lifestyle Factors	African Americans are more interested in fast-paced sports.
Competition	College baseball is out-recruited by more visible sports. The popularity of AAU basketball draws interest. College baseball has less recruiting money.
Role Models	Minority scholarships take away opportunities for African-Americans in historically black colleges and universities. There is a small number of African-American baseball icons. There are not many visible African-American GMs and Managers.
Limitations	The African-American athlete is viewed as less able to be coached and is, therefore, less likely to be recruited.

Discussion:

There have been many theories presented as to why African-Americans are rapidly disappearing from college baseball. One possible explanation could be the relationship between the onset of Title IX, which led to many NCAA I schools reducing the number of baseball scholarships to 11.7 and to 10.0 in NCAA Division II, which may have contributed to the loss of interest in a college sport where full-scholarships are rare. In both NCAA Division I and II, partial scholarships are the rule, not the exception. There is the possibility that baseball has been socially architected out of the mainstream of African-American culture by means of well-intended legislation, such as Title IX. Results of this legislation have been to reduce access for the less affluent to college baseball and to influence athletes with the ability to play multiple sports to select a sport that can lead to a full scholarship.

Well-documented theories, such as Giddens's structuration theory (1979), Ogden's Welcome Theory, and limited access proposals (2003) may have credibility; however, they are difficult to prove quantitatively. It is likely that more than one specific theory or variable has been key in this social shift in baseball.

Several questions must be addressed. Have high-school and college baseball priced themselves out of the African-American athlete's market by requiring participation in select teams for high schools or by limiting scholarship money for the college bound? Has the eagerness of the Central-American baseball player to sign for small bonuses become more appealing to MLB than going after the African-American player? Has the fact that MLB is now an international game influenced the reluctance of the high-school athlete to pursue baseball in college because other sports appear to be less competitive in the athlete's quest for stardom? Is baseball too slow for the fast-paced lifestyle of the inner-city African-American youth? Are white athletes replacing African-Americans in baseball or is the international growth of the game naturally reducing the influence of any one racial group?

Perhaps the most perplexing rationale for the reduction in participation rates among African-Americans arises from the focus group in this study, which stated that the perceived slower pace of baseball has become a deterrent to participation among African-Americans. Baseball has many strategic games within it that are, in reality, constantly changing and fast paced. Therefore, the pace issue may have evolved out of a false perception which has been capitalized upon by those marketing other sports. People may not understand or see these elements of baseball. This issue itself merits further study.

No doubt, the evolution of sport participation is well documented. However, much study is needed before the theories behind the change can be scientifically proven. This author believes the change is primarily the result of a combination of the ramifications of Title IX legislation and the mass media marketing of the perception that other sports are faster paced and more entertaining.

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