

Dwindling Number of Blacks Not a "Crisis" For MLB

Written by Jordan I. Kobritz
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Be forewarned: The following comments may not be perceived as being PC (politically correct) in some circles.

It's fashionable, during the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball, to lament the dwindling percentage of U.S. born blacks in the Major Leagues. According to a study by the University of Central Florida's Institute for Ethics and Diversity in Sports, 8.4 percent of players on big league rosters at the beginning of this season were U.S. Thirty years ago, the number was 27 percent.

Some people view the dwindling number of blacks in baseball as a "crisis." Sorry, but a crisis is not having enough to eat; not being able to pay the rent; losing a job; or having a serious illness. In sports, a crisis is a crooked referee in the NBA; an NFL team suddenly without a quarterback; or the NHL canceling an entire season over a labor dispute.

If Robinson – an accomplished athlete in baseball, basketball, football and track – were alive today, he would be appalled at the characterization of the lack of blacks in baseball as a crisis. Jackie was about opportunity - in sports and in life. If blacks were being denied the opportunity to play baseball – or to engage in any other endeavor - as they were in Jackie's day, it would be a crisis; indeed, a tragedy. But that's not the case, at least not in sports.

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What's abundantly clear is that black athletes have chosen to play sports other than baseball. During the past 30 years, the number of black players in the NBA increased from 60 percent to 70 percent, down from a high of 80 percent in the previous decade. The number of black

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players in the NFL increased from 30 percent to 67 percent. Does anyone refer to the situation in those leagues - either the increase in the number of black players or the decrease in the number of white players - as a crisis?

The answer, of course, is no. Nor should they. Choosing to play a sport other than baseball isn't a "crisis," it's the American way: Having choices and choosing what's (perceived to be) best for you. The irony is that baseball careers last, on average, longer than careers in basketball and football. Baseball players make more money – on average - over a career than players in other sports. One conclusion: Baseball has lost the marketing battle for black athletes to other professional sports.

The causes ascribed to the declining number of black players in MLB include the lack of baseball role models for today's black youth; indifference from MLB; cheaper sources of talent worldwide, especially in Latin America; long apprenticeships in baseball's minor leagues vs. instant riches and stardom in the NBA and the NFL; and the lack of baseball facilities in urban centers (in this view, the latter is an effect of fewer youths playing baseball, not a cause).

Not to be overlooked is the fact that society has changed since Robinson's day, and so has the sports landscape. Back in the day, America's youth – white and black – aspired to be baseball players. MLB dominated the sports pages and the public consciousness. The NBA didn't even exist when Robinson signed his first contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers and the NFL was merely an afterthought. Not so today.

And yet, MLB is doing just fine, thank you, with two-thirds fewer black players than existed 30 years ago. Attendance has been on an upward trajectory for twelve straight years. Gross revenue is approaching the \$6 billion mark. Average player salary is \$3 million. And both the NBA and NFL have enjoyed similar success and popularity over the same period.

Today's MLB rosters are more than 30% Hispanic and three percent Asian. Add in blacks, and current big leaguers are more than 40 percent non-white, a far cry from 1947 when Robinson became the first non-white player in baseball. Clearly, opportunity abounds for those who wish to play MLB – or any other professional sport. Jackie Robinson would be proud.

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