

2003

Collective identity and basketball: An explanation for the decreasing number of African-Americans on America's baseball diamonds

David C. Ogden

University of Nebraska at Omaha, dogden@unomaha.edu

Michael L. Hilt

University of Nebraska at Omaha, mhilt@unomaha.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub>



Part of the [Communication Commons](#), and the [Sports Studies Commons](#)

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Ogden, David C. and Hilt, Michael L., "Collective identity and basketball: An explanation for the decreasing number of African-Americans on America's baseball diamonds" (2003). *Communication Faculty Publications*. 62.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/62>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Communication at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Communication Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Collective Identity and Basketball: An Explanation for the Decreasing Number of African-Americans on America's Baseball Diamonds

David C. Ogden, Ph.D. and Michael L. Hilt, Ph.D.
Department of Communication
University of Nebraska at Omaha

A growing body of evidence shows a widening gulf between baseball and African-Americans. African-Americans comprise less than three percent of the players at the highest competitive levels of youth baseball and three percent of NCAA Division I baseball players. African-Americans constitute less than five percent of spectators at some Major League parks and the percentage of African-American players in the Major Leagues has reached a 30-year low. Basketball has become pre-eminent among sports in African-American culture. Baseball assumed that role at one time, with even small African-American enclaves sponsoring and supporting teams during the first decades of the 20th Century. But the cultural shift away from baseball to basketball has been brought about partly through the process of collective identity. Collective identity involves the absorption of cultural traits by an individual in the formation of self-identity. African-American youth are more apt to gravitate to basketball rather than baseball because of the cultural premium placed on the former and various factors that facilitate interest in the sport. A survey of literature on race theory and on leisure studies shows that four factors tied to collective identity influence African-American youths' preference for basketball: encouragement by authority figures to pursue basketball, basketball's portrayal as a form of expression and empowerment, the abundance of black role models in basketball, and the perception of basketball's influence on social mobility. Future research should explore other cultural and social factors which predispose youth to favor certain sports.

KEYWORDS: *African-American, baseball, basketball, collective identity, facilitators, leisure, race, sport*

Introduction

A growing body of evidence shows that African-Americans are under-represented in the stands and on the fields of baseball parks. While African-Americans comprise 12.5 percent of the national U.S. population, only five percent of those in the stands at Major League games during the 1997 season were African-American (Melcher, 1997), and the percentage of blacks on Major League playing fields is the lowest since 1968 (Lapchick & Matthews, 2001). On the surface it appears that basketball is to Black culture what

Address correspondence to David C. Ogden, Arts & Sciences Hall, Room 108-C, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Omaha, NE 68182-0112. Phone: (402) 554-4855. Email: dogden@uomaha.edu.

baseball was more than 50 years ago. There may be numerous processes bringing about this change. One of these dynamics, however, is a cultural shift for African-Americans in what Appiah (2000) calls "collective identity" (p. 610). Through collective identity certain aspects of an individual's culture become part of that individual's self-image and self-identification. Basketball has become a means of expression and freedom in African-American communities, particularly those in the inner city (Boyd, 1997; Early, 2000). Black male youngsters are encouraged by mass media (Kelley, 1997) and authority figures (Harris, 1994) to pursue basketball. Youth baseball coaches and officials report that basketball draws Black youths' attention away from baseball (Ogden, 2002). Fifty years ago, however, baseball captured the imagination of Black youngsters and their communities. Much in the same way as they have used basketball to create cultural space, African-Americans used baseball as a means of collective identity and civic pride, despite Blacks' exclusion from the highest and most lucrative levels of organized play (Peterson, 1970; Ribowsky, 1995).

This article focuses on some of the reasons for the shift from baseball to basketball in African-American culture and among African-American male youths. Although the perspectives offered here are not exhaustive of the possible reasons for that shift, they can serve as a foundation for reaching a deeper understanding of the change.

Baseball and African-American Culture

To gain a sense of the shift in collective identity from baseball to basketball, one needs to investigate the role of baseball for African-Americans during the first half of the 20th century and how that role changed during the last half of the century. African-Americans embraced the game of baseball and formed their own professional organizations and styles for the game. Some Black teams achieved commercial success shortly after the turn of the century in major cities, "where the burgeoning Negro populations insured a faithful nucleus of ardent fans" (Peterson, 1970, p. 68). Most of the profits from those Black teams, however, went into the pockets of White owners and White booking agents. But Black entrepreneurs and baseball veterans, such as Frank Leland and Andrew "Rube" Foster, worked to ensure that Black baseball teams became black-owned businesses. Foster's goal of allowing African-Americans to reap the economic benefits of professional baseball was realized through his control of the Negro National League. Foster envisioned that the league "would not only encourage opportunities for black capitalists but would also generate jobs for blacks on and off the diamond, as scouts, umpires, clerks, and secretaries" (Riess, 1999, p. 200). In 1920, the inaugural season of the league, teams in Kansas City and Indianapolis were drawing as many as 10,000 to Sunday games (Peterson, 1970). Chicago Leland Giants' games drew crowds between 4,000 and 10,000 and the team had its own booster club which met weekly (Peterson, 1970). Rader (1994) estimates that Negro League games drew approximately two million spectators in 1942. In

1947, Jackie Robinson's inaugural year in the Major Leagues, the Negro Leagues' East-West "all-star" game in Chicago was attended by more than 48,000, "perhaps hoping for a look at some future major-league stars" (Peterson, 1970, p. 201).

Smaller African-American communities also used baseball teams as an expression and extension of identity during the first few decades of the 20th century. The south central Iowa community of Buxton, half of whose population of 9,000 were African-American, fielded an all-Black team called "The Wonders." The Wonders played teams throughout the Midwest and became an integral part of that Black community's identity. "Baseball allowed for freedom and expression" for the Blacks in the community (Beran, 1990, p. 91).

Such was the role baseball played in the small hometown of former Major League pitcher James "Mudcat" Grant (personal communication, August 17, 2001). The 1965 American League Pitcher of the Year, Grant gained his first experience in organized baseball with the Lacoochee (Florida) Nine Devils. Grant recalled that the majority of Lacoochee's 500 residents, most of whom were African-American, attended the Devils' games and also traveled to away games: "We would play towns from as far as 100 miles away. But every little town had a baseball team. A lot of kids were playing."

Compared to European immigrants and their children during the early part of the 20th century, African-American youth grew up in a culture which supported baseball. "Black youths did not have to become acculturated into the American sporting tradition because it was already a part of their culture" (Riess, 1999, p. 201).

"There was a time, right after Jackie Robinson, when everybody was interested in the game of baseball," said Grant, "and you had sandlot ball-clubs everywhere. . . . I think the African-American community loved the game, but somewhere along the line we lost interest in appearing at Major League games and Minor League games."

Gerald Early (2000) speculates that loss of interest coincided with the death of the Negro Leagues. The growing number of Negro League players migrating to the Major Leagues heralded the end of black professional baseball. Former Kansas City Monarchs player/manager Buck O'Neill recalls a Monday morning in 1953 when his club sold the rights to Ernie Banks to the Chicago Cubs. Cubs manager Whid Matthews told O'Neill that Negro League baseball was ". . . just about over. . . . I want you to come over and work for us" (Etkin, 1987, p. 12). O'Neill went to work for the Cubs in 1955.

In 1960 the Negro American League sputtered through its last season, and the league's demise precipitated the decline of interest in the game by African-Americans, according to Early (2000). The end of the Negro Leagues, he said, marked "the end of the ability of blacks to pass down the tradition of 'their' game," even if that game was kept separate from the white-controlled Major Leagues (p. 41). As Negro League players finished their Major League careers and their numbers dwindled, the numbers of Black fans also began dwindling (Flanagan, 1999). By the 1990s, one of every

20 spectators at Major League parks was black (Leavy, 1995). That figure was even lower in 1998 at places like Kauffman Stadium in Kansas City, according to a study by the Kansas City Royals management. The Royals surveyed spectators during four games in July 1998 (with one of the games promoted as African-American Heritage Night) and found that 3.2% of those in the stands were African-American (Flanagan, 1999). Said San Francisco Giants Manager Dusty Baker: "One thing I've noticed [is] the lack of fans of color in every ballpark" (Associated Press, 2001, p. 25).

Further evidence of African-Americans' waning interest in baseball is found on the playing fields at all levels of the game. The percentage of African-Americans on Major League Baseball teams has dropped from an all-time high of 25 percent in the early 1970's to 13 percent in 2001. At the college level, African-Americans comprised less than three percent of the baseball players at NCAA Division I schools in 1997 (Lapchick & Matthews, 2001). In youth leagues, the percentage of African-American players is even lower, at least in the Midwest. A survey of 128 youth "select" teams from nine Midwestern states during the summers of 2000 and 2001 showed that less than two percent of the more than 1,400 players were African-American (Ogden, in press). In the communities from which the teams drew their players, 9 percent of the youths under the age of 18 are African-American (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002).

To what extent youth select teams serve as the pool of prospective or future college and Major League players is not known. Select teams, however, supposedly contain the best players of their age group in the community and provide more playing time than other types of youth ball teams. Players usually are chosen by select teams via open tryouts or are recruited because of previously demonstrated skills; and they get many opportunities to demonstrate those skills in "select" baseball. The 128 teams surveyed played between 50 and 150 games each summer. Brian Embery (personal communication, July 14, 2001), who has coached college baseball for almost 20 years (the last 14 as head coach at Emporia State University in Kansas), said some select teams groom players for college competition. He said about one-third of his college players were on select teams as youngsters.

"Most good Division I schools are stockpiled with kids who have grown up playing competitive baseball," said Embery, who coached a select team for 12-year-olds in 2001. "The kids have traveled a lot and played against the best teams in the country, and that's what I try to do with my group of kids."

But inner city youth baseball leagues don't offer nearly the amount or level of competition that select teams enjoy. Teams in inner city leagues, such as those sponsored by Boys' and Girls' Clubs and YMCA's, usually play 10 to 15 games per summer and against each other instead of out-of-town competition (Ogden, 2002).

Basketball is much more evident in inner city neighborhoods, said Omaha YMCA activities director Ivan Chambers (personal communication, Nov. 19, 2001). Chambers has managed inner city youth leagues in both basketball and baseball.

"Kids come out of the woodwork for basketball," he said. But for baseball, "the interest is not there. We can offer it, but we may get three or four kids to participate, and that's not enough for one team, much less a league."

Basketball may not be the only influence on African-Americans' sagging interest in baseball. A survey of coaches and officials around the Midwest indicates that there are other considerations. Ogden (2002) interviewed 27 youth baseball coaches from six states about, among other topics, the underrepresentation of minorities on their teams and opposing teams. In addition to basketball, the most common reasons for the lack of racial diversity were the paucity of baseball facilities in Black neighborhoods, the cost of playing select baseball, the lack of parents' interest in the sport and the lack of community support. But the cultural process by which basketball has replaced baseball as a pre-eminent sport in black culture remains the most important point of inquiry in this article.

Basketball and African-American Culture

More than two-thirds of the 27 coaches said that African-American youth prefer to spend their time on the basketball court rather than on the diamond (Ogden, 2002). Such observations are backed by literature which discusses the influence of black culture on the formation of self-identity by African-American youth. Basketball has become an integral part of that Black culture.

Hartmann (2000) argues that basketball "has become a crucial social space for the development of an African-American identity and aesthetic" (p. 240). Hartmann describes sport as "contested racial terrain," in which the development of racial identities is either nurtured or hindered (229-230). Sports serve as an area for social and racial resistance, Hartmann claims, and is where African Americans define themselves and their race's relationship to society. Sport "is not just a place (or variable) whereby racial interests and meanings are either inhibited or advanced but rather a site where racial formations are constantly—and very publicly—struggled on and over" (p. 241). Pitted against sports' role as a means of racial expression and assertiveness is the reinforcement of racial stereotypes through sports and sport-related commercial messages' which depict black men as threatening or aggressive (Wonsek, 1992). For the most part, African-Americans consider basketball a forum for nurturing cultural identities, interests and meanings (Hartmann, 2000).

Basketball is part of what Appiah (2000) calls the collective identity for African Americans. Basketball, like jazz or hip-hop, "belongs to an African-American, whether she likes it or knows anything about it, because it is culturally marked as black" (p. 612).

Boyd (1997) also likens basketball to jazz in describing the sport as "a cultural space where aesthetics, politics and an overall sense of Blackness could be communicated to both marginal and mass audiences" (p. 134).

Basketball has become a pillar in the construction of modern black culture, according to some race theorists. "Basketball, for black males at least, not only embodies dreams of success and possible escape from the ghetto, but in a growing number of communities pickup games are played for money much like cards or pool" (Kelley, 1997, p. 204).

Research by Philipp has shown that African-Americans identify themselves with basketball over other sports. In Philipp's study (1998b) of adolescents' perception of peer-approved leisure activities, basketball ranked at the top of the list for African-American boys. Hutchison (1987) observed leisure activities in 13 Chicago parks and found that basketball was the most often played sport among Blacks (although the data were not considered significant or central to the study). Additionally, Wilson and Sparks (1996) found that Black adolescents put more cultural stock in African-American basketball stars and the apparel they advertised than did White adolescents. The researchers said that wearing clothing and apparel endorsed by Black icons of basketball gave African-American youth "a sense of cultural power and belonging" (p. 421). In such a way, basketball becomes part of collective identity, influencing African-Americans' self-perception and the ways others perceive them. These personal images may perpetuate that collective identity and act as continual reinforcements of basketball's status in Black culture and the sports' part in the "racial label" for Blacks. Such racial labels, said Appiah (2000), mold identity, "the process through which an individual intentionally shapes her projects—including her plans for her own life and her conception of the good—by reference to available labels, available identities" (p. 608).

The cultural branding of basketball in and of itself may act as a "facilitator" to African-Americans' involvement in the sport. Raymore (2002) defines facilitators as factors that "enable or promote the formation of leisure preferences and to encourage or enhance participation" (p. 39). Constraints, on the other hand, inhibit or thwart interest and participation in leisure activities. Raymore says facilitators (and constraints) can be intrapersonal (individual traits and beliefs that result in predisposition to an activity), interpersonal (groups or individuals who encourage participation in an activity), or structural (institutions or belief systems that promote involvement in an activity). When applying Raymore's concepts to literature on race theory and Black masculinity, facilitators appear to be acting on all three levels in the ways African-Americans internalize basketball and assume it as part of their collective identity, and in the ways groups and social systems have labeled basketball as a forum and spectacle for the Black athlete. A review of such literature shows that facilitators are operating within and through the following factors: the encouragement and compulsion of Black youths to pursue basketball as a sport and leisure activity; the predominance of Black role models in basketball; Black youths' use of basketball for self-expression and empowerment; and, Blacks' views of basketball as a vehicle for social mobility. Each of these factors will be examined.

Encouragement and Compulsion of Black Youths

African-American males have numerous sources of interpersonal facilitators, according to several studies. Parents are one of them, and Black studies scholars have underscored the importance of African-American parents in the transmission of culture to their children (Collins, 1990; Harris, 1994; Spencer, 1991). A study by Philipp (1999) places that importance in the context of basketball. In his study of racial acceptance and leisure activities, Philipp found that African-American parents, when asked to judge the importance of specific leisure activities for their children, ranked basketball third, just behind going to a zoo and visiting a museum. In a study by Harris (1994) not only did African-American parents support their children's participation in basketball (more so than White parents), but African-American males were more likely than White males to be encouraged by non-family members (friends, coaches and teachers) to play. Results of the study indicated that teachers and coaches felt Black youths had greater athletic skills than Whites and were better suited for basketball. Solomon et al. (1996) also found that Blacks receive special attention, albeit of a different nature, in basketball. Solomon, et al. studied two NCAA Division I teams and found that the coaches tended to give more praise to their European-American players, but more instruction to African-Americans. Those coaches were asked to identify players who they expected to perform at the highest level. Seven of the eight players selected from both teams were African-American.

Hall (2002) claims that such expectancies can be found on a broader social level in the form of stereotypes of Black athletes who can "run faster, run longer and jump higher than Whites as a consequence of genes. Hence their basketball superiority" (p. 114). Such stereotypes, argues Hall, result in blacks' overachievement in basketball, and whites' underachievement. "While legitimate science has yet to conclude whether Black athletes possess innate physical qualities, the White basketball player performs in a world that is apparently already convinced of the stereotype" (p. 115). Such widespread beliefs foster basketball's influence on collective identity and act as structural facilitators for African-Americans.

(W)e expect people of a certain race to behave a certain way not simply because they are conforming to the script for that identity, performing that role, but because they have certain antecedent properties that are consequences of the label's properly applying to them. (Appiah, 2000, p. 609)

While interpersonal encouragement and social expectations can impact self-expectations, there may be less direct ways of channeling blacks on to the courts. Limitations on sports facilities and programs have been cited as constraints on the leisure choices of African-American youth, especially those in the inner city. Kelley (1997) notes that public support for inner city facilities began a rapid decline in the 1970's, and youth have been forced to carve out their own play areas from the urban landscape. In some cities much of that play area has been devoted to basketball.

Baseball diamonds in the urban cores of Omaha, Chicago and other Midwestern cities have been neglected and are often not suitable for play (Ogden, 2002). One of the more ironic examples is the site of Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. Now a high rise apartment complex and occupied mostly by minorities, the site's youth softball diamond was transformed into basketball courts. Following that trend, many inner city high schools have eliminated baseball programs (McKinley, 1999). The result is what Phillips (1976) calls an "unequal access" to sports facilities and instruction, with inner city youth limited in their sports choices, compared to suburban youth, who have more and sometimes better facilities available (Ogden, 2001). "It is my thesis," said Phillips (1976), "that good black athletes are concentrated in those sports to which blacks in general have access (in terms of coaching, facilities, and competition). Good white athletes are dispersed across more sports because they have access to a wider variety of sports" (p. 49).

Basketball as Expression and Empowerment

Philipp's work has demonstrated that basketball is a favorite sport among male and female black adolescents (1998b) and that African-American parents think basketball is important for their children (1999). Placing such cultural currency in the sport may relate to the way Blacks use basketball to express their collective identity. Gerald Early (2000) views basketball as a vehicle by which Blacks in general express their rebellion against social and economic oppression. This expression and empowerment may be played out in a number of ways, but two examples found in the literature are the racialization of leisure spaces (Philipp, 2000) and the internalization of personality style using basketball-based symbols and items (Hoberman, 1997; Linnett, 2002; Majors, 1990; Majors & Billson, 1992; Stabile, 2000).

Mass media have helped to popularize the notion that Blacks have used basketball courts as sanctuaries of resistance and self-determination in an otherwise oppressive and hostile inner city. Shoe and clothing companies, such as Nike and Reebok, portray Black basketball players in pick-up games against a backdrop of chain-link fenced playgrounds and urban decay (Kelley, 1997). Some ads offer menacing portrayals of Black men and use "street talk" as a type of verbal brandishing and as an expression of dominion in the inner city. For example, a Nike commercial featured an athletic-looking African-American man in Nike attire emerging from a subway, with a voice-over announcing, "Ya gonna get a lesson about intimidation" (Wonsek, 1992).

In introducing its new brand, called RBK, Reebok produced commercials to associate the shoe and clothing line with a "hip-hop urban basketball scene" that featured Harlem's Ruckers Park street team (Linnett, 2002). Street ball as a source of personal expression and empowerment is also glorified by some sportscasters, whose narratives often include stories of African-American college players whose basketball skills are first noticed on a ghetto playground (Kelley, 1997). The accuracy of such depictions remains to be verified, but several writers provide evidence of the sense of ownership

African-Americans feel toward the game and toward the places where it is played. Philipp (1999), in his study of 421 families, found that African-Americans felt that playing basketball was an activity that best "fit" their leisure styles and preferences. Boyd (1997) said that African-Americans have used basketball to "create a space of resistance and free expression that announces a relative notion of empowerment, while at the same time acknowledging the racial and class hierarchies that still dominate sports and society as a whole" (p. 133).

Young Black males further internalize the cultural role of basketball by incorporating basketball-related apparel and paraphernalia into their interpersonal styles and approaches. Wilson and Sparks' study (1996) of Black and White adolescents' reactions to Nike basketball shoe TV commercials showed that the Black respondents "appeared to feel there was a distinctively Black 'style' of dress and demeanor, as well as basketball playing style" (p. 417). Wearing such apparel was more important to Black than White youths in giving them a "sense of cultural power," establishing their position in a peer group and reinforcing their masculine identity (p. 421).

Such apparel become props in what Majors and Billson (1992) call "cool pose." Cool pose is marked by expressive behaviors, involving choices in clothing, language, leisure and even walking style. Such behaviors allow young Black males to assert their individuality and distinctiveness and achieve recognition in the face of social and economic obstacles. Being cool, says Majors, means rejecting activities not culturally sanctioned, such as camping or going to a museum, and embracing those activities which are sanctioned. Thus, basketball looms large as an indicator of coolness.

Faced with a lack of resources, facilities, services, goods, information and jobs, black males who live in poor black communities have taken a previously white-dominated activity and constructed it as an arena in which they find accessible recreation, entertainment, stimulation, and opportunities for self-expression and creativity. (Majors, 1990, p. 112)

Black Role Models in Basketball

Of the major professional sports, basketball has the largest percentage of African-American players. Almost 80% of the players in the National Basketball Association are Black, compared to about 13% in Major League Baseball (Lapchick & Matthews, 2001). The kind of media coverage and portrayals of those basketball players may have as much to do with influencing young Blacks to pursue basketball as does the quantity of those players. Some of the National Basketball Association's most publicized players have become embodiments of expression and empowerment via their on-court presence and commercial endorsement. Michael Jordan's style has been portrayed as "quite flamboyant and highly conscious of spectacle," while Charles Barkley's style exudes individualism and resistance to authority (Boyd, 1997, p. 133).

Allan Iverson has also cashed in on basketball as cultural capitol. He has become one of the foremost pitchmen for Reebok, which uses Iverson's cultural aura as much as the man himself. In an ad campaign launched in

summer 2001, Iverson didn't even appear in the TV spots, which feature a young man aspiring to be Iverson and which only show visual references to the NBA star, including a jersey with his name on the back. "The gist of this spot for the fan is, sure, you can wear his shoe but can you fill them?" said Jason Peterson, creative director at Berlin Cameron [the ad agency handling the campaign]" (Thomaselli, 2001, p. 8). Iverson is also the ad frontman for RBK, Reebok's apparel venture in 2002 (Linnett, 2002).

Athletes and celebrities like Iverson, Boyd (1997) suggests, are cast by mass media as the major, if not the only, success stories among African American males, so it is no wonder that "they, by default, become role models for black youth" (p. 140). Research has shown the importance of such role models, particularly for aspiring Black athletes. In one study more than 70% of the 129 Black college athletes surveyed reported having a sports idol during their pre-teen years; and all those sports idols named by the survey respondents were Black (Castine & Roberts, 1974). Wilson and Sparks (1996) found that young African-American males used celebrity Black athletes as "reference points" in defining their own masculinity (p. 415). "Overall, Black respondents appeared to identify with, support and adulate the celebrity athletes, at times seeing the athletes as role models" (p. 413).

Basketball as a Vehicle for Social Mobility

Many African-American youth see basketball as the fastest way to a career in professional sports, or the "best and shortest trip out" of an undesirable socioeconomic situation (Ogden, 2002, p. 330). As previously mentioned, coaches, teachers and significant others emphasize basketball's role as a means of social status for Black youth. Black youth more so than White youth are encouraged to play the game; and the same study found that Black youth are also most likely to see their high school basketball careers as avenues to the pros (Harris, 1994). Such views serve as evidence of how sport has become "racialized" to the point where African-Americans see basketball, among other sports, as a means for young people to attain "larger scale opportunities and possibilities for social mobilization and change" (Hartmann, 2000, p. 244).

Black youth may not consider other sports as providing those opportunities simply because Blacks may not feel accepted or "welcome" in those sports (Philipp, 1999). As Early (2000) notes, Blacks "must often attend sporting events surrounded by a sea of beer-swilling whites. This can be a little unnerving" (p. 47). According to one study of African-American adults, nearly half said they experienced racial discrimination, such as in the form of stares or comments, at leisure venues (Philipp, 1998a). But even with basketball, opportunities for African-Americans are limited. Although considered to be the "black sport par excellence" (Hoberman, 1997, p. 6), basketball as a route of socioeconomic ascension is more myth than reality. Hoberman (1997) says black youths, both lower and middle class, are bombarded via media with the success stories of Black athletes and hear little

about achievements of Blacks in such areas as medicine, law and education. What Black youths find is that college basketball scholarships are not easy to attain (Majors, 1990). As Edwards (1973) notes, for every African-American male "taken from the ghetto by an athletic scholarship, there are hundreds of other lower class youths who have wasted their lives futilely preparing to be a sports star" (p. 99). The chances of playing professional ball are slimmer, so encouraging Black youngsters to pursue basketball as a way of improving socioeconomic status "is, in reality, a disservice to them because it fosters improbable expectations for athletic careers" (Harris, 1994, p. 49).

Discussion

Encouragement from authority figures, a large group of role models, and the perception among black youth that basketball is an avenue to empowerment and social mobility are perpetuating basketball's prominent label in black culture and its status in the process of collective identity. Baseball was the prominent label for African-Americans 50 years ago. The baseball talent of the Negro Leagues, described by Chalberg (2000), Peterson (1970), Rhodes and Butler (1975) and others, evidently was recognized by large numbers of African-Americans, based on the attendance at Negro League games. It appears that Blacks felt "welcome" at those games and did not have to worry about being in the midst of a predominantly White crowd. But African-Americans' baseball attendance and participation (at least at the highest levels of youth and adult competition) has dropped or is significantly lower than the percentage of African Americans in the general population.

This presents public relations and marketing challenges for baseball organizations, particularly professional teams. Such challenges cannot be overcome simply through attempts to diversify the fan and player base and thus to diversify marketing approaches. Those attempts will fail if the larger challenge is not recognized, and that challenge is to re-establish baseball on, in Hartmann's words (2000), the "racial terrain" of African-Americans. Some organizations are attempting to address the issue. A program, called Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities (RBI) and supported by Major League Baseball and administered by the Boys and Girls' Clubs, provides short summer leagues for inner city youth, and some Major League clubs have been involved in such efforts. Major League Baseball has also opened a baseball academy in Los Angeles for inner city youth. Such community relations give inner city youngsters greater exposure to the game, and may plant a seed of lifelong interest. But that is less likely to happen if there is little parental or family interest in baseball and Blacks do not feel ownership in the game or welcome in the sport. Considering evidence of the lack of ownership African-Americans feel in baseball (Ogden, in press), increasing the number of African-Americans who watch games via media or live attendance could be daunting. According to youth sports officials like Ivan Chambers, Black parents are more likely to steer their youngsters toward basketball, as are other adult figures in Black youths' lives (Harris, 1994).

Beyond the promotional implications lie deeper questions. What is the relationship between ethnicity and marginality (socioeconomic status) in effecting differences in leisure and sports interests? Part of the answer may lie in the dynamics between, what Raymore (2002) might call, the interpersonal (significant groups or individuals) and the structural (institutions and dominant belief systems). From the interpersonal standpoint, ethnicity prevails, as exemplified by the cultural importance families and peer groups place on basketball (Philipp, 1998b, 1999; Wilson & Parks, 1996). From the structural perspective, marginality becomes prominent in shaping sports interests, as evidenced in studies of coaches and authority figures for youth (Harris, 1994; Solomon et al., 1996). Access to facilities may serve as another example of marginalization's influence on sports preferences. As Phillips (1976) notes, such access often dictates sports choices for youth. Phillips' argument is supported by research showing that Black adolescents in the highest levels of competitive baseball are more apt to play on suburban teams, which are based in areas with higher-income households and better facilities than in the inner cities (Ogden, in press).

The concentration of high-level youth baseball in suburbia relates to another important question. What constraints and facilitators are operating to drive leisure and sport preferences of youth? Additionally, can one factor serve as a facilitator in one sport and as a constraint in another? For example, the availability of facilities could be a constraint for Blacks desiring to play baseball (since the best of those facilities are in predominantly White neighborhoods), but a facilitator for playing basketball. The feelings of acceptance in various leisure venues could also be both a constraint and facilitator. That feeling is a constraint for African-Americans in most cases, as Philipp (1999) has pointed out, and especially so in baseball, where more than 95 % of the male adolescents who play at the highest levels of competition are white (Ogden, in press). But the feeling of acceptance is also a facilitator for African-Americans' involvement in basketball, since both Blacks and whites in Philipp's study perceived basketball as a sport in which African-Americans are welcomed and "fit."

Peer influence may be another facilitator for blacks and involvement in basketball. Hutchison (1987) points out that black and white youths favor peer group activities. Black peer groups place considerable stock in basketball (Philipp, 1998) and individuals often use basketball's accoutrements to stake their places in such groups (Wilson & Sparks, 1996). Providing opportunities for such affiliation is one of the keys to the enjoyment of sport for adolescent males, according to Watson and Collis (1982). A sense of competence in the activity (see also Boyd & Yin, 1996) and the opportunity for self-expression through that activity may be other keys. "(T)o the degree that any leisure activity permits a sense of 'competence and self determination' to be attained, it then becomes intrinsically motivating" (Watson & Collis, 1982, p. 86).

To reduce the relationship between basketball and African-Americans to an equation of facilitators and constraints may be oversimplification. But such an equation does beg the question about whether basketball as a leisure

choice among Blacks is one of self-selection, one which stems from racial discrimination in other sporting venues, or a combination. If Black youths simply don't have an interest in baseball, to what degree is the dwindling numbers of Blacks in college and professional baseball a social concern? If it is a concern or if there is racial bias in the system through which young players work their way up to the higher levels of competition, what measures should be taken to ensure equal exposure? How can African-American youths be provided the same opportunities to play high caliber baseball, like that played on suburban-based youth traveling teams? What are the roles of parents, youth coaches and community support organizations in providing such opportunities?

Future research should focus on Black youths' interest in attaining higher levels of competitive play and on their level of interest and knowledge in the game. Such research should include other racial groups, especially Latino and Asian youths, in identifying sports role models, whether friends or family encourage sport participation, favorite "leisure" or pick-up sports, amount and type of sports spectatorship, and current involvement in organized sports leagues, among other points of inquiry. With more Latinos and Asians on major league rosters, results could determine the effect (if any) on those youth and how interests of each racial group relate to differences in leisure behavior. In addition, a comparison of those responses of youths from low-income households and those from higher-income households could partially address the marginality perspective.

Studies on sports interests among adolescents not only have significance for leisure scientists and urban planners in anticipating issues and needs, but can also be important for professional sports organizations and their related broadcast interests. Such research can be used to forecast future players, spectators and users of leisure spaces.

References

- Appiah, K. A. (2000). Racial identity and racial identification. In L. Back & J. Solomos (Eds.), *Theories of race and racism* (pp. 607-615). London: Routledge.
- Associated Press (2001, August 25). Bonds says camaraderie not essential. *The Omaha World Herald*, pp. 23, 25.
- Beran, J. A. (1990). Diamonds in Iowa: Blacks, Buxton, and baseball. *The Journal of Negro History*, 75(3-4), 81-95.
- Boyd, M. P., & Yin, Z. (1996). Cognitive-affective sources of sport enjoyment in adolescent sport participants. *Adolescence*, 31(122), 383-395.
- Boyd, T. (1997). The day the niggaz took over: Basketball, commodity, culture, and black masculinity. In A. Baker & T. Boyd (Eds.), *Out of bounds* (pp. 123-142). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Castine, S. C., & Roberts, G. C. (1974). Modeling in the socialization process of the black athlete. *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 9(3-4), 59-74.
- Chalberg, J. C. (2000). *Rickey & Robinson: The preacher, the player, and America's game*. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc.
- Collins, P. H. (1990). *Black feminist thought*. London: Harper Collins Academic.
- Early, G. (2000). Why baseball was the black national pastime. In T. Boyd & K. L. Shropshire (Eds.), *Basketball Jones* (pp. 27-50). New York, NY: New York University Press.

- Edwards, H. (1973). *Sociology of sport*. Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press.
- Etkin, J. (1987). *Innings ago*. Kansas City, MO: Normandy Square Publications.
- Flanagan, J. (1999, June 29). Baseball continues to ponder how to attract black fans. *The Kansas City Star*, p. C2.
- Hall, R. E. (2002). The bell curve: Implications for the performance of Black/White athletes. *The Social Science Journal*, 39(1), 113-118.
- Harris, O. (1994). Race, sport, and social support. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 11(1), 40-50.
- Hartmann, D. (2000). Rethinking the relationship between sport and race in American culture: Golden ghettos and contested terrain. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17(3), 229-253.
- Hoberman, J. (1997). *Darwin's athletes: How sport has damaged black America and preserved the myth of race*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Hutchinson, R. (1987). Ethnicity and urban recreation: Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics in Chicago's public parks. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 19(3), 205-222.
- Kelley, R. D. G. (1997). Playing for keeps: Pleasure and profit on the post-industrial playground. In W. Lubiano (Ed.), *The house that race built* (pp. 195-231). New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Lapchick, R. E. & Matthews, K. J. (2001). *Racial and gender report card*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Center for the Study of Sport in Society.
- Leavey, W. (1995, June). 50 years of blacks in baseball. *Ebony*, 70, 36-37.
- Linnett, R. (2002, January 28). Reebok rebrands for hip-hop crowd. *Advertising Age*, pp. 3, 27.
- Majors, R. (1990). Cool pose: Black masculinity and sports. In M. A. Messner & D. F. Sabo (Eds.), *Sports, men, and the gender order* (pp. 109-114). Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Books.
- Majors, R. G. & Billson, J. M. (1992). *Cool pose: The dilemmas of black manhood in America*. New York, NY: Lexington Books.
- McKinley, J. (1999, October 10). Out of the ball park: For Black Americans, baseball loses its luster." *New York Times*, pp. 43, 48.
- Melcher, R. A. (1997, May 19). Foul ball for blacks. *Business Week*, p. 8.
- Ogden, D. C. (2001). African-Americans and pick-up ball: A loss of diversity and recreational diversion in Midwest youth baseball. *Nine: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture*, 9(2), 200-207.
- Ogden, D. C. (2002). Youth select baseball in the Midwest. In W. M. Simons & A. Hall (Eds.), *The Cooperstown symposium on baseball and American culture, 2001* (pp. 322-335). Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Ogden, D. C. (in press). Baseball and blacks: A loss of affinity, a loss of community. In E. J. Reilly (Ed.), *Across the diamond: Essays on baseball and culture*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, Inc.
- Peterson, R. (1970). *Only the ball was white*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- Philipp, S. F. (1998a). African-American perceptions of leisure, racial discrimination, and life satisfaction. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 87, 1418.
- Philipp, S. F. (1998b). Race and gender differences in adolescent peer group approval of leisure activities. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 30, 214-232.
- Philipp, S. F. (1999). Are we welcome? African American racial acceptance in leisure activities and the importance given to children's leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 31, 385-403.
- Philipp, S. (2000). Race and the pursuit of happiness. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 32, 121-124.
- Phillips, J. C. (1976). Toward an explanation of racial variations in top-level sports participation. *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 11(3), 39-55.
- Rader, B. G. (1994). *Baseball: A history of America's game*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Raymore, L. A. (2002). Facilitators to leisure. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 34, 37-51.
- Rhodes, L. & Butler, J.S. (1975). Sport and racism: A contribution to theory building in race relations? *Social Science Quarterly*, 55, 919-925.
- Ribowsky, M. (1995). *The complete history of the Negro leagues*. New York, NY: Carol Publishing Group.

- Riess, S. (1999). *Touching base: Professional baseball and American culture in the Progressive Era*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.
- Solomon, G. B., Wiegardt, P. A., Yusuf, F. R., Kosmitzki, C., Williams, J., Stevens, C. E., & Vayda, V. K. (1996). Expectancies and ethnicities: The self-fulfilling prophecy in college basketball. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 18(1), 83-88.
- Spencer, M. B. (1991). Parental values transmission: Implications for the development of African-American children. In H. E. Cheatham & J. B. Stewart (Eds.), *Black families: Interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 11-130). New Brunswick, CT: Transaction Publishers.
- Stabile, C. A. (2000). Nike, social responsibility, and the hidden abode of production. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 17(2), 186-204.
- Thomaselli, R. (2001, August 6). Slam dunk sans superstar. *Advertising Age*, p. 8.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2002). *U.S. population by age, city, 2000*. Retrieved February 2002 from www.census.gov.
- Watson, G. G. & Collis, R. (1982). Adolescent values in sport: A case of conflicting interests. *International Review of Sport Sociology*, 17(3), 73-90.
- Wilson, B. & Sparks, R. (1996). "It's gotta be the shoes": Youth, race and sneaker commercials. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13, 398-427.
- Wonsck, P. L. (1992). College basketball on television: A study of racism in the media. *Media, Culture and Society*, 14, 449-461.