

The Welcome Theory

An Approach to Studying African American Youth Interest and Involvement in Baseball

*Presented at the Tenth Annual NINE Spring Training Conference,
March 20–23, 2003*

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Brothers Moses and Welday Walker became the first African Americans to play at a Major League level. Both played in 1884 with Toledo of the American Association, the catcher Moses in 42 games and Welday, an outfielder, in 5 games.¹ Moses “Fleet” Walker may have returned to the big leagues in 1887 had not the International League and some players, most notably Chicago White Sox Hall of Fame first baseman Cap Anson, campaigned for their exclusion.

Thus began more than sixty years of African Americans being shunned from the ranks of the Major Leagues. The initially tacit, but increasingly clear, message was that African Americans were not welcome in the white culture of baseball. African Americans made room culturally for the sport and fashioned their own version of big league baseball, but now baseball seems to occupy little space in that culture. There is evidence that African Americans are poorly represented on baseball fields and in baseball stands.² Whether African Americans are or are not welcomed by baseball is unclear but is not the issue here. The issue is whether baseball is welcomed by African American culture and how that is related to the roles to which African Americans were relegated in the early decades of professional baseball.

THE WELCOME THEORY

Several communication and social theories may help explain what appears to be little interest in baseball among African Americans. From a social constructionist’s viewpoint, TV images may serve to reinforce the social messages that African Americans are not likely to find other African Americans at baseball games, and that African Americans do not favor an outing to a baseball game as an opportunity to socialize or to build relationships.³ From the view of semiotics, low numbers of African Americans in the stands and on the ranks

of youth and college teams may symbolize for other African Americans, and society in general, baseball's cultural dearth among certain segments of society. But those theories also may point to a more fundamental one, the "Welcome Theory," whose roots go back to the clash of cultures during the earliest years of professional baseball.

In short the Welcome Theory proposes that certain groups feel as if they don't have a sense of belonging in sports venues or in certain sport and leisure activities. This sense might or might not be related to racial or gender discrimination. It may have to do with the influence of family and friends, access to facilities, and social messages delivered through mass media and other communication forms. As applied to African Americans and baseball, however, the Welcome Theory may have for its foundation the decades of black ball being separated from white ball. Even with the integration of Major League baseball beginning in 1947, the social message that African Americans were unwelcome in predominantly white baseball has a deep history.

Just as Frank Grant, the Walker brothers, and other African American baseball pioneers were made to feel unwelcome in baseball venues (among other venues), African Americans today feel the same sense of unease at certain sporting establishments. Research has demonstrated that African Americans not only feel unwelcome at specific leisure and sports venues (such as country clubs) but also feel their children are better off pursuing certain sports activities over others.⁴ One study found that African Americans felt "most welcome" playing basketball and "least welcome" at a country club. African Americans also perceived basketball as one of the most important leisure activities for their children.⁵

The perception that certain activities are better suited for certain races is not confined to African American culture. Steven F. Philipp offers evidence through his research that such a perception is shared across races. In his study, European Americans also ranked basketball as an activity conducive to participation by African Americans and country club outings as an activity not conducive to African Americans. Philipp says such findings showed that

both racial groups share a very similar basic understanding of where African Americans will find the most racial acceptance during their leisure time. This finding seems to suggest that many, if not most, leisure activities have embedded racial "information" associated with them in some way (i.e., Blacks are likely to "fit" these activities, and not likely to "fit" other activities).⁶

The results may be socially and culturally prescribed sanctions on leisure and sports activities. The targeted group or groups may accept or adjust to those sanctions by adopting sports that are portrayed as the most comfortable

culturally—that is, individuals may adopt a leisure routine based on the level of security that leisure activity provides. This aspect of the Welcome Theory is bolstered by the work of British sociologist Anthony Giddens and his Structuration Theory.⁷ Giddens argues that in structuring their lives and choosing activities, individuals adopt “routines,” or practices, that are comfortable and eventually taken for granted. Such routines help individuals to maintain what Giddens refers to as “ontological security,” the reduction of anxiety and tension and the building of trust. Ontological security, says Giddens, provides social motives, formed by the relationship between “a basic security system, the sustaining (in praxis) of a sense of ontological security, and the routine nature of social reproduction which agents skillfully organize.”⁸ These routines of social reproduction, says Giddens, are grounded in “tradition, custom or habit” and they are “hierarchically ordered as components of personality.”⁹

Giddens claims that routine hierarchies are established early in life and that parental figures play a major role in providing such guidance.¹⁰ Other research also shows the importance of parental influence. As discussed earlier Philipp found that African American parents send clear messages to their children about which leisure activities are most important and appropriate.¹¹ A study of high school basketball players found that almost half the African Americans in the sample cited their fathers as providing extensive support for playing basketball, and one-third of the African Americans said the same about their mothers. The study also found that African American males were significantly more likely than white males to be encouraged to play basketball by coaches, teachers, and friends.¹²

Other role models, specifically professional athletes, may influence the entrenchment of leisure routines and the feeling of belonging through those routines. For African Americans most of the role models are basketball players. Almost 80 percent of players in the National Basketball Association are African American. 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 endorsements. Charles Barkley, Michael Jordan, Allan Iverson, and other athletes and celebrities are cast by mass media as the major, if not the only, success stories among African American males, so it is not surprising that “they, by default, become role models for black youth.”¹³

Mass media may offer other subtle reminders of which leisure venues are most appropriate for certain social groups. Television broadcasts of games bolster the impression that the vast majority of baseball spectators are white. An

analysis of crowd shots from thirteen Major League games televised in 2002 showed that those shots focused on few minorities.¹⁴ Of the 137 shots surveyed, more than 85 percent featured white spectators only, while African Americans were shown in 5 percent of the shots. Hispanics were seen in 4 percent of the shots and Asians in 1 percent.

This small number of minorities may reflect the actual number in the crowds. A survey of spectators attending a three-game series (of which one contest was promoted as “African American Heritage Night”) at Kauffman Stadium to watch the Kansas City Royals showed that 3 percent of those in the stands were African American.¹⁵ Additionally, the percentage of minorities in the crowd shots may be a consequence of the criteria and style used by the sportscast producers and camera operators who select such shots. But whether the crowd shots result from such criteria or whether they accurately reflect the racial composition of spectators at those televised games may be irrelevant to the portrayal implied by such shots. That portrayal embodies a social view and symbolic reality of who spectators are and who they are not.

The crowd shots provide a source from which to construct perceptions of baseball spectators. Such “biased representations of objective reality in symbolic expressions and the consequent development of distorted subjective reality provide the basis for future social action and thus perpetuate the existing social order.”¹⁶ Crowd shots as symbolic reality may feed the notion that Major League baseball parks are not places culturally conducive to minorities or places where minorities gather to socialize. Of the 137 crowd shots in this study, only 1 shot was solely devoted to showing a group of African Americans together.

Such representations may be one way mass media are helping to shape African Americans’ level of comfort and feelings of acceptance in leisure places like ballparks. In the sense that these shots provide a comfort zone for whites but not necessarily for African Americans, the leisure activities portrayed by the shots may carry what Philipp earlier referred to as “embedded racial ‘information’,” which suggests that certain races belong in certain sports venues.¹⁷ For the information to have such an effect, it must also be historically embedded, as Philipp notes. He argues that

feeling uncomfortable, not accepted or “unwelcome” can likely be associated with historic patterns of discrimination in some important way. These perceptions, when shared by large numbers of individuals within a society, probably point to the institutionalization of discrimination within that culture.¹⁸

Although Jackie Robinson’s entry into Major League baseball in 1947 heralded the acceptance of African Americans at the highest level of the game, it

did not necessarily signify the acceptance by African Americans of the integrated version of the Major Leagues or of the eventual demise of the Negro Leagues. Monte Irvin, the Newark Eagle turned New York Giant outfielder, noticed the difference between African Americans' support of baseball before integration of the Major Leagues and their support after integration. Irvin used the example of the 1941 East-West game, which was the Negro Leagues' version of the All-Star Game.

The 1941 game was played on a scorching Sunday afternoon. Still, there must have been fifty-two thousand people there. . . . At the time, Comiskey Park held only fifty-thousand people, but you could always do business with the fire department, so they'd let people sit in the aisles. . . . There were a few whites scattered throughout the stadium, but mostly it was blacks of all backgrounds, all shapes and sizes, men and women and children. Black people used to love baseball. I wish I knew what happened to that love for the game.¹⁹

James "Mudcat" Grant, the 1965 American League Pitcher of the Year and one of twelve African Americans who posted 20-win Major League seasons, also laments the decline in interest among blacks: "There was a time, right after Jackie Robinson, when everybody was interested in the game of baseball, and you had sandlot 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."²⁰

Gerald Early believes that the demise of the Negro Leagues was a major factor in African Americans' loss of interest in baseball. He said the end of the Negro Leagues marked "the end of the ability of blacks to pass down the tradition of 'their' game" as distinct from the white-controlled Major League game.²¹ *Kansas City Star* sportswriter Jeffrey Flanagan agrees, saying that as Negro League stars finished their Major League careers and their numbers dwindled, the number of African American fans also began to dwindle.²²

Whether Major League baseball's denial of African Americans during the first half of the twentieth century resulted in African Americans' growing denial of baseball in the second half of the century remains uncertain. But there is mounting evidence that African American youth do not welcome baseball as much as they do other sports as a leisure activity.²³

To understand why African American youth often do not choose baseball as a leisure activity demands an understanding of how youth make such decisions. As has been discussed previously, social relationships and social support may factor heavily into those decisions. One of the keys to the enjoyment of sports for youths, according to one study, is opportunities for affiliation with their peers.²⁴ Leisure researcher Ray Hutchison has pointed out that youths

gravitate toward activities endorsed by their peers. For African American youth, basketball is the sport most likely to be endorsed.²⁵

Researcher John Phillips argues that sports preferences by youth are also greatly influenced by what the community has to offer, or more specifically, what access to recreational facilities is available.²⁶ For African American youths in the inner city, basketball hoops are more prevalent than baseball diamonds. The small number of African Americans who play at the highest levels of youth baseball are more apt to play on teams based in suburban areas, where baseball diamonds are more plentiful than in the urban core.²⁷

For African American youth, the lack of baseball facilities and the lack of interest in baseball by peers may serve as what some leisure scientists call “constraints” to involvement in the sport. Constraints are factors that thwart or inhibit interest in leisure activities: “Lack of interest, for example, is frequently viewed as the result of intrapersonal constraints . . . that lead to nonparticipation.”²⁸ Participation in baseball for African Americans means overcoming constraints of peer and parental influence, scarce fields, and little racial representation in the stands and on the field.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND YOUTH BASEBALL TODAY

A possible effect of such constraints for African American youths and baseball can be seen in their numbers at the college and high school levels and at the point where many of today’s high school and college players begin: youth “select” baseball. “Select” baseball is supposedly the highest level of competition at various age brackets. Several organizations, such as the United States Sports Specialty Association (USSSA), sponsor regional and national youth tournaments. Teams select players via competitive tryouts or invite “all-stars” from other teams or leagues. Most select teams play at least 50 games each spring and summer, and some play as many as 150. Many teams travel throughout the United States.

During the summers of 2000 to 2002, 177 teams from eighteen states were surveyed at tournaments in Omaha and Kansas City. Of the almost 2,000 players on those teams, 3 percent were African American.²⁹ In the communities represented by those teams, 9 percent of the youth are African American.³⁰ In some communities the percentage of African Americans on high school teams has been no higher. In 1999 at Phoenix’s South Mountain High School, where African Americans comprise 25 percent of the student population, the baseball team had one African American.³¹

In 2001, 3 percent of the baseball players in NCAA Division I were African American. In Major League baseball 13 percent of the players are African

American, a percentage that is nearly identical to the overall U.S. population but that is at the lowest point in the Major Leagues since 1968.³²

Such numbers are a contrast to the times remembered by Monte Irvin and Mudcat Grant. The historical connection, however, should be considered in any examination of the current level of African American involvement in baseball. In what ways, if any, are the history of discrimination in the Major Leagues and the end of the Negro Leagues linked with the low numbers of African Americans at the nonprofessional levels of baseball? Are the low numbers the aftermath of that discrimination? The aim of this article has been to pose those questions, not to answer them. The questions cannot be answered without a great deal more research and analysis of the changes in baseball's role in African American culture.

How African Americans, particularly youth, perceive baseball today is little understood, anecdotal information aside. Future research should explore influences on youth in making choices regarding leisure and sports activities. Research also needs to determine more clearly what, if any, residual effects exist from the decades of discrimination in Major League baseball. With the growing internationalization of Major League baseball rosters, there could be fewer slots in the future for all U.S.-born players.

NOTES

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