

CHAPTER 6

Baseball Bygones

Going Soft on Hardball

On a typical weekend morning in the summertime, in a front yard near you, a father and son will each grab a leather glove and toss a ball back and forth for maybe an hour. They will laugh, they will talk, and most of all, they will bond, all because of this simple and innocent game of catch. Then they'll hop into the car, head to the ballpark, buy some peanuts and popcorn and two colas, sit in the bleachers, and spend the rest of the glorious day watching baseball. This is where it begins, where baseball is passed from one generation to the next, where the love of the game creeps into the blood of the kid and remains until he becomes a father and the cycle repeats itself.

This time-honored ritual is older than Wrigley Field and stronger than the smell of spilt beer at the concession stand. It captures the essence of a sport that in turn captures the imagination of America and strengthens American families. Baseball bonds loved ones and creates simple yet special and priceless moments. Baseball doesn't get any purer than the sight of Senior and Junior enjoying a special moment at the ballpark on a lazy Sunday afternoon, sharing a red hot with mustard, and taking home an everlasting memory, maybe even a foul

ball if they're lucky. This is how millions of kids become hooked on baseball. This is how they start playing baseball. And this is where baseball loses black America, which has turned its back on the pastime with the swiftness and sureness of Jackie Robinson stealing home.

The baseball fields in many parts of urban America are mostly well worn and trampled, not by wide-eyed Little Leaguers toting their Louisville Sluggers and leather gloves, but by glassy-eyed drunks holding their half-empty bottles. That's how Willie Randolph, the manager of the New York Mets, recalled some of the ballparks where he grew up in Brooklyn, which aren't much different than those in other cities. In these urban towns, baseball fields are barely more than glorified public parks badly in need of TLC. With the municipal funding for parks and recreation departments plummeting about as low as a slider, these fields are literally diamonds in the rough, complete with dandelions in the patchy outfield grass and rusted poles holding up decrepit dugouts. There is little money or incentive to repair them, and therefore, little reason for kids to use them. In some urban areas, baseball fields have become urban cow pastures, neglected and unused, just a swatch of dirt and grass that also lacks the one necessity to play the game: bases.

Then there's the absence of the father, which today is sadly a grim statistic in poor black America, where the majority of families are run by single mothers, bless their overstressed hearts. In order to survive and flourish, baseball needs fathers almost as much as kids need fathers. He's baseball's best ambassador, keeper of the flame. He brings baseball into the home, buys the first bat and glove, and introduces the kid to the innocent and wonderful game of catch. He takes pride in his role as a sports father and considers baseball a sworn duty. Throughout suburbia, this is common and widespread. The father is in his kid's life 24/7. But in other households where the father is present, the ball tossed back and forth by the father is either bright orange, or brown

with laces. He's throwing a basketball or football because his generation also tuned out baseball, you see, and he can only teach what he knows and loves. There is the very real chance that baseball has now lost at least two generations of blacks.

Black America, as a whole, doesn't care deeply about baseball and never will, no matter how hard baseball tries to seduce the race. A Harris poll in 2005 confirmed this; only 6 percent of blacks polled selected baseball as their favorite sport, compared to 47 percent for football. The decaying baseball fields in the 'hood and the diminishing number of active fathers who are willing to pass the game to their sons are just two reasons why blacks have tuned out baseball. There are others. "This is the result of a perfect storm created by a lot of different things that took place, and that are taking place," admits Jimmie Lee Solomon, the Major League executive in charge of reinventing baseball in the city.

Solomon is right. Kids can't just show up and start playing baseball. The sport requires equipment, which makes it difficult for young boys to play on a whim and too expensive for the poor. Some kids will have gloves, some won't. Most catchers can't afford a mask. Nobody has a uniform or cleats. And if the bat breaks, the game is over. In basketball and football, all they need is the ball. There's the argument that baseball was expensive several decades ago, when the Negro Leagues were in business, and that never stopped black kids from playing. Well, there were few other athletic options then. Football and basketball hadn't achieved the popularity they enjoy today, and when those sports took off, so did plenty of black kids after them.

Baseball also has no street credibility. Black kids in urban America don't gain status among their peers by playing baseball; if anything, they lose it by messing around with what is perceived as a "white man's sport" or a "Latino sport." Baseball has no transcendent black star who carries clout among black kids. Baseball is also slow

and boring and simply doesn't trigger the imagination of city kids who gravitate to the excitement of basketball and the danger of football. Finally, playing baseball doesn't solve the poverty problem quickly enough for poor kids looking to cash in right away. Nobody can get rich fast by playing baseball. The typical Major Leaguer spends years in the minors before getting called up, and once he makes the bigs, he still doesn't get the set-for-life contract right away. Kids from the city don't read about 19-year-old baseball players pulling \$15 million a year. But they do know what LeBron James makes.

There's also the issue of college scholarships, or the lack of them. Only 11.78 baseball scholarships are allotted per school. Thus, only a handful of players in each Division I school earn full rides, because baseball isn't a revenue-producing sport at the college level. The incentive to play high school baseball in order to attend college for free doesn't exist among poor blacks. This is a big factor that cannot be underestimated or disputed.

"Baseball has become a rich person's game," said Hall of Famer Joe Morgan. "Colleges don't give you scholarships, so you play basketball instead. Or football. If you need a full ride to college, you're going to play basketball. Baseball doesn't do that, so your parents have to be rich enough to pay your way to college, just so you'll have the opportunity to play baseball."

Did we list enough factors working against baseball's effort to generate interest among black kids?

"It's not just the game," said Willie Randolph of the Mets, who became the first black manager of a New York team. "It's also the kids today. Some just aren't patient enough anymore. They don't work as hard as we used to. They'll try baseball for a while, then leave and never come back."

Inside his office at Shea Stadium, Randolph has built a shrine that honors a legacy of a woebegone era. The walls are nearly covered with pictures of Negro League players. Clearly, the history of the black baseball player lives and



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Willie Randolph celebrates with one of his New York Mets players following a win over the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 2006 National League Division Series. Randolph, who is from the Bronx and played and coached for the New York Yankees before becoming manager of the Mets, is the rare exception today as a black player born and raised on baseball in the big city.

breathes inside Randolph, once a standout player himself on every level. He takes pride in the game and his culture and will never forget the people who made it possible for him to make a comfortable living through baseball. But when Randolph walked through his own clubhouse on Opening Day 2007, he saw just two American-born black players. Combined with the Yankees, the New York baseball teams had only three African-American players on their active rosters for Opening Day, and that's counting Derek Jeter, whose father is black and mother is white and who's technically biracial. The Cardinals won the 2006 World Series with two American-born blacks. And

as miniscule as that number seems, it's about average for Major League rosters in this millennium. The number of African-American players was 8 percent in 2006. When Randolph played for the great Yankee teams in the late 1970s, the number was roughly 27 percent. Therefore, the wishful idea that blacks are trying baseball for a while and then dropping it, as Randolph suggested, isn't entirely accurate. Many aren't trying at all.

The source for this can be found in the attitude and culture of the big city. The majority of blacks in the minor and major leagues aren't coming from Chicago or New York City or Los Angeles, the breeding ground for a fair number of pro and college black athletes. They're coming from the middle-class suburbs where the game is organized, or small-town America where there are fields aplenty and the game still has clout among country kids. The same big cities that send scores of players to the NBA and professional football are weakly represented in Major League baseball. These kids aren't involved in the game, nor is there great effort made by adults to get them involved. The playing fields are substandard when compared to those in the suburbs, and the community doesn't have the passion or the patience to teach these kids how to play properly. Therefore, these kids are growing up with other sports. Baseball is badminton to them.

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