The Decline of The Black Community's Participation in America's Pastime: A Qualitative Investigation

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The integration of Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947 is viewed largely as a crowning achievement towards alleviating the racial divide between Blacks and Whites in America; that allowed for many Negro League (NL) stars to make their living playing MLB. However, a result of MLB's integration was the demise of the vibrant, economically, and socially viable NL, and subsequently the game of baseball slowly slipped away from the consciousness of the Black community. According to Peterson (1970), there were no more than 35 former NL players in MLB by 1949. With MLB now representing the only major professional baseball league, MLB saw increases in Black player participation that peaked in 1975 at 27% (Ogden & Rose, 2005). However, since that time the percentage of Blacks in MLB has steadily declined. Richard Lapchick and his colleagues illuminate this declining trend in their annual Race and Gender Report Card for MLB. In the 2008 edition, they state: "The 8.2% African-American player total in 2007 was the lowest percentage in more than 20 years of the publication of the Report Card" (p. 3).

Recently, there has been considerable mainstream media attention given to the declining trend of Black player participation in Major League Baseball (e.g., Early, 2007; Helyar, 2007; Verducci, 2003; Wilbon, 2007). Current MLB stars C.C. Sabathia, Torii Hunter, and Gary Sheffield have also been outspoken on the subject; with Hunter going as far to say that "ten years from now you'll see no Blacks, at all" (www.espn.com).

While current trend analyses and anecdotal evidence attempts to explain the declining trend of Black player participation in MLB, very little research has been done that investigates specifically why the Black community's involvement in the game of baseball has waned in the past several years. David Ogden and his colleagues' predominately conceptual research (2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2005a, 2005b) into these issues has been an exception. In the time since the demise of the NL, basketball has taken the place of baseball as an integral part of the social fabric and collective identity of the Black community (Ogden & Hilt, 2003b, Ogden & Rose, 2005b); and once NL baseball left, the Black community began to segregate themselves from the MLB product (Ogden, 2005a). Ogden (2003a) concluded that "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” (p. 119). Ogden and his colleagues certainly added substantially to the explanation of this declining trend with their recent work. Their efforts are notable for there conceptualizations, case study analysis, and application of theory. Our study aims to examine similar topics, and build upon this important line of research by conducting interviews with various stakeholders within the Black community to determine their perceptions of this decline.

The purpose of our qualitative study is to address a distinct need to develop a clearer understanding of, and appreciation for, what factors have caused and perpetuated the diminishing percentages of the Black community's overall participation (e.g. physical participation, attending games, watching baseball on television, consuming baseball related media, etc.) in MLB, and the institution of baseball as a whole. Because of the dearth of scholarly inquiry on the subject, this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature by systematically investigating this trend via a qualitative approach. Qualitative interviews were determined to be the most appropriate means to collect data because it allowed us to garner an in-depth understanding of some of the potential factors contributing to the declining participation of the Black community in the game of baseball. We identified a purposive sample (Patton, 1990) before beginning the interview process that consisted of members of the Black Community from various educational, professional, and sport playing backgrounds. Included in our sample was the head baseball coach at a Historically Black University, Black baseball players that eventually quit the game, parents of a Black youth currently playing baseball and current Black NCAA Division I baseball players. Preliminary findings from our analysis of the data revealed the following themes: a) financial constraints, b) general lack of interest in the game itself (e.g. too slow, boring, difficult), c) lack of physical space, d) lack of access, e) no Black superstar players to identify with anymore, and f) poor marketing to the Black community and of Black players on behalf of MLB. This study aims to better guide the discourse on the declining trend of the Black community's participation and consumption of the game of baseball. By conducting qualitative interviews on the subject, we have been able to identify key concerns and issues to address in order to better explain this phenomenon from the perspective of members of the Black community. These insights will allow for further and more streamlined studies in the future to help sport managers better understand and explain this declining trend and the effects of it both socially and economically. Sport marketers may also find this information useful in an effort to better develop strategies to regain the Black community as a reliable audience for the MLB product.