Baseball Participation: A Geographical Mapping of MLB Players

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Explanations on the dearth of African-Americans playing baseball has been explored by Major League Baseball (MLB) and academicians (Cooper, Gawrysiak, & Hawkins, 2012 for review). Cooper et al. (2012) attributed part of the lack of participation in MLB by African-Americans to biological, cultural, social-structural, and psychological stereotyping of the black athlete. Less research has been done on the impact of social class, family structure, and athlete location on elite participation in baseball. This could be problematic for administrators in baseball in the United States (US) as MLB’s initiatives intended to address the issues in shrinking Black participation in baseball by targeting inner cities (Cooper et al., 2012) might not capture a large portion of society that does not reside near urban areas, nor have the means to participate in baseball.

Social class offers categories of people similar chances for achieving power and success in society and is based on income, education, careers, and social capital (Coakley, 2009). Like gender and race, social class has been suggested as impacting motivations for sport participation, the type of recreational activities preferred, and the locations for physical activity (Tischer, Hartmann-Tews, & Combrink, 2011). Within sport, the wealthy and powerful have developed rules, structures, and systems to maintain their interests (Coakley, 2009). While baseball and many early youth sports were organized and developed by communities, churches, and schools, the trend is for more elite and privatized training, which is not available to all because of wealth and income barriers (Coakley, 2009), but also possibly location. While youth baseball participation has decreased throughout the past decade (Warren et al., 2011), an examination of webpages and baseball tournaments suggest that elite training in baseball has become bigger business.

The classic view on a purpose of business is to increase profits (Friedman, 1970), and one way a company positions itself to compete within its industry is to make itself accessible to its customers (Porter, 1996). Therefore, it would be expected that an elite baseball-training academy or specialized coaching would most likely be successful where it had a client base that would be able to meet the training academy’s intent of making profits. An urban area could meet this need, but its client base would still need to be able to afford the services that it provides. A rural area might not have a strong enough demand to sustain an elite academy. An upper-middle class suburb would likely be able to support multiple elite training facilities or coaches. Therefore it is expected that the majority of baseball players will come from these suburbs or middle to upper class cities and townships that can support specialized training and coaching businesses.

Past research has shown that nearly 90% of college baseball players played select baseball as a youth, especially pitchers, catchers and middle infielders (Ogden & Warneke, 2010). Based on an examination of the top college baseball teams, the majority of top US players and teams reside in warm weather locations, which allow for nearly year round play. However, an exploratory check of MLB opening day rosters reveals that several players still come from cold-weather locations. The purpose of this study is to examine how social class and geography play a meaningful role in the preparation of professional baseball players from the US. To meet the aims of this study, a geographical plotting of where MLB players played high school baseball will be undertaken.

To accomplish the purposes of the this study the names, positions, and high schools of all the US players on 2013 opening day rosters were gathered. Using Fusion Maps by Google, the zip code of the high school the player attended was marked as a point on a map. Zip codes are often used as indicators of economic, social, and health characteristics (Christopher, 2013). The total mapped set of pinpointed zip codes was examined for patterns and observations.

Preliminary results suggest a heavy concentration of players from the Southeast, California and the West Coast, and the Northeast. Expectedly, zip code points were clustered around major cities, with very few players actually coming from major cities. Generally, those players who did attend a high school in a major city were able to attend a private
school. Players who attended high school in the Midwest may be found clustered around, but not in, the larger cities (i.e. Chicago, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Kansas City).

As expected, those states and areas with heavier population density contain more points, as is greater density from warm weather states versus midwestern states. The mapping allows a visual depiction of how these clusters are around, but not in, the major population centers. The areas in or around smaller cities such as Lincoln or Omaha, Nebraska, Des Moines, Iowa, Wichita, Kansas, and Peoria, Illinois have produced multiple professional baseball players, and we would suggest that these are large enough cities with enough economic capital to support multiple elite training academies or coaching. Furthermore, within colder climates, such as those in the North, indoor training facilities would nearly need to be a necessity. We would suggest that because smaller and/or poorer areas would not be able to sustain a higher quality baseball facility, these areas are much less likely to produce elite level players. Very few small town or rural points appear on the map, and like the players who actually came from public high schools in cities, the path that these men took to get to the Major Leagues needs to be examined. It would be expected that they either had family characteristics (father played baseball or was a coach) or they developed significantly during their college experience. We would expect, however, that these players would still have been able to afford to play on select travel teams at some point during their youth baseball days, and/or been raised in a middle to upper class family. Additionally, it is worth examining whether the MLB’s inner city programs will have any influence on producing more Black baseball players. These special points will be discussed during the presentation.

Finally, we suggest that further examination of AAA and college baseball players would assist in this examination of the impact of social class and location on participation in baseball. We would expect that this larger data set would see some of the same characteristics and reveal other possible items of interest. Additionally, we would expect that further study of golf, tennis, softball, and soccer would reveal similar mappings, and is worth further explanation. Finally, further examinations on player backgrounds could examine the influence of family background, especially on the role that father’s and significant other male role models played.