The “Decline”: Major League Baseball Scouts’ Perspectives on the Decline of African-Americans in Baseball

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Introduction
Each year Americans are reminded of the waning representation of African-Americans in Major League Baseball (MLB) through national media outlets (Nightengale, 2012). On Opening Day 2014, only 7.8 percent of the players on all rosters were African-Americans (Nightengale, 2014). Whereas between 1972 and 1996, African-American representation in MLB never dropped below 18.7 percent, at our current historical moment, Black players are seeing their numbers in the sport decrease precipitously. The decline of African-Americans in MLB has also captured the attention of scholars in the academy. Lapchick, Domínguez, Martínez and Rogers (2014) noted in the most recent Race and Gender Report Card, “Although the total percentage of players of color has steadily risen over the years, there has been a concern in Major League Baseball about the relatively small and declining percentage of African American players” (p. 2). While MLB has made significant efforts “in the areas of inclusion and diversity” (Lapchick, Domínguez, Martínez & Rogers, 2014, p. 1), with regard to hiring minorities in front office positions, the league has not been able to increase African-American representation above 10 percent more recently.

Review of Relevant Literature
Theories abound about the decline of African-Americans in baseball. Some scholars contribute the decline to integration and the subsequent destruction of the Negro Baseball Leagues (Lanctot, 2004; Early 2000). For Lanctot (2004) and Early (2000), Blacks lost a cultural center with the demise of the Negro Baseball Leagues and could not pass on the importance of baseball and its oral traditions on to the next generation. Other scholars attribute the waning participation of African Americans in baseball to the increasing popularity of other sports (Comeaux & Harrison, 2004; Ogden & Rose, 2005). For Comeaux & Harrison (2004), Blacks have competing interests in the form of basketball and football and therefore choose not to play baseball because of the perceived instant success in these two sports. Klein (1993; 2006; 2011) attributes the decline of African-Americans in baseball to MLB’s neglect of Black players and its pivot to Latin America, where major league teams have invested significantly in the academies. Glover (2007) attributes the decline at the recreational level to youth baseball policies, which privilege White children over African-American children. Cooper, Gawrysiak and Hawkins (2012) use the equal opportunity in baseball theory to demonstrate that African-American participation in baseball is “predicated on the presence of social-structural opportunities for potential participants” (p. 19). Cooper, Gawrysiak and Hawkins conclude that the underrepresentation of African-Americans in baseball can be partly explained by potential players perceiving very few opportunities for success in the sport. While there is no shortage of scholars with their ideas on the decline of African-Americans in MLB, there have been no studies as of this writing that examine this issue from the perspective of scouts.

Purpose and Research Questions
The purpose of this study is to examine the decline of African Americans in MLB from the perspective of former and current scouts. Scouts are indispensable to the sport as they evaluate players and make recommendations to managers and general managers regarding prospects. Scouts can be considered the gatekeepers of the sport, not the least of which in how they evaluate players and their overall influence in MLB front offices. This study is guided by two research questions:

1. To what do former and current scouts attribute the decline of African-Americans in MLB?
2. How do scouts believe MLB can increase African-American representation in the sport?

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Method
This study utilizes a qualitative research method that uses in-depth interviewing to capture the scouts’ perspectives on the decline of African Americans in MLB. According to Veal and Darcy (2013), qualitative researchers are not beholden to “quantitative representativeness” (p. 403) and can therefore choose from a host of sampling methods, one of which is the snowball method. Participants will be selected through a snowball sampling method that includes personal contacts and industry connections of the researchers and other individuals who have accepted invitations to participate in the study. As of this writing, the research has been IRB approved at the university level and the researchers have interviewed 3 participants and received confirmation from 12 more MLB scouts. The authors will interview the remaining participants over the phone or in person depending on financial resources. The data will be analyzed using the grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The four researchers will transcribe the data verbatim and use ATLAS.ti to analyze the data.

Practical Implications
Several practical implications for understanding the decline of African-Americans in MLB exist in this study. From these findings, practitioners and recreation service providers hopefully will be able to target baseball programs to African-Americans more effectively. For example, in 2014, the Cincinnati Reds opened the fourth baseball academy in America “after seeing the success of such facilities in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico” (Fay, 2013). The academies in the Dominican Republic, Venezuela and Puerto Rico have been largely responsible for the influx of Hispanic players in MLB (Klein, 2011). Also, MLB’s Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities (RBI) program has had some success in recruiting players from the inner cities; for example, 14 RBI alumni were drafted in the 2013 MLB Player Draft (mlb.com). The findings from this study also may have implications for understanding racial minority underrepresentation in sport organizations through what Cunningham (2011) refers to as “multi-level perspectives” (p. 79), which among other things, include institutional practices, stakeholder expectations and drivers of decision-making. Simply, the scouts, who are also stakeholders within MLB, may provide information regarding the league’s organizational practices, recruitment policies and beliefs about diversity.