



African-Americans players now standouts in baseball for negative reason

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A light should have gone on in Commissioner Rob Manfred's head as he handled the fallout from the racial slurs and physical attacks on Baltimore Orioles' Adam Jones on May 1 at Fenway Park.

Jones was the sole African-American player on the field for the Orioles at that moment. Second baseman Jonathan Schoop of Curacao was the only other player of color for the Orioles, but Jones is his team's standout star. Once-a-year casual fans with no emotional or historical investment in baseball likely were the guilty parties. No enlightened individual who loves the game, and who has been sated with three Red Sox World Series titles since 2004 is going to give Jones the kind of grief that Jackie Robinson and early black baseball pioneers endured.

Idiots spending hundreds of bucks on tickets and beer, among other inflated ballpark expenditures, would behave like fools let loose at Fenway. If you put them back in time, say, 48 years, no way would they try to get on an Orioles outfield of Don Buford in left, Paul Blair in center and Frank Robinson in right. Robinson in particular would have given back tougher than he received. You could not single out one or even all three African-Americans, even in a supposedly less enlightened, than miscreants did Jones.

In his second year as commissioner, Manfred should have been further disturbed by Jones' singular status in the Orioles' lineup. That's why he needs to take some radical action and approach the NCAA to lobby for an increase in the number of scholarships available to baseball programs.

The strict limitation of 11.7 scholarships to cover a 27-man roster simply discourages African-Americans in pursuing baseball to the highest level. A more fully-developed major-college player will have a greater chance of being drafted, and subsequently succeeding. See the examples of Kris Bryant and Kyle Schwarber.

Baseball has done all its body English, all its RBI Program development, all its hand-wringing over the steep decline in African Americans in this century. But the upward



By his singularity in the outfield, Adam Jones attracted the lunatic fringe in Fenway Park.

domestic talent flow of the ethnic group that radically changed the game for the better starting with Robinson will be cut off if prospective stars can't garner full athletic rides to college.

"Twenty-seven on scholarship," said University of Illinois baseball coach Dan Hartleb. "Do the math. 11.7 divided by 27 and see what the average would be."

Academically-competent students are swamping the U. of I.'s admissions conduits like passengers scrambling aboard lifeboats. The university has long had a sterling reputation in the classroom. Now, students who might have considered other public schools in Illinois are trying to flock to Urbana with the state budget crisis hammering the other institutions. With its impressive endowments and other forms of revenue, the U. of I. is impacted less by the statehouse impasse.

"It's very tough to get academic scholarships at our school because there's so many good students, the money is spread thinly," Hartleb said.

"A typical year for us is to bring in six athletes. You have 35 on the roster, 27 on scholarship. Some schools will recruit 25 kids. They'll run players off. There are programs that will bring kids in and cut them after a year. From an ethical standpoint, there's not a lot of consistency in college baseball.



Rob Manfred needs to communicate with the NCAA about the paucity of baseball scholarships, a hindrance to black players' progression in the game. Photo credit [Arturo Pardavila III](#).

athletes in high school. No athlete will willingly put himself at risk for funding many thousands of dollars of college costs just to play baseball when subsidized alternatives are available.

The choke point at the collegiate level has contributed to the percentage of African-Americans in baseball dropping from 27 percent in the mid-1970s to 7.1 percent on Opening Day, down a percentage point from the past few years and lowest since 1958. A USA Today survey showed just 62 African Americans on all big-league rosters.

Sox have 1 African-American; Cubs have 3

With outfielder Jacob May's demotion to Triple-A Charlotte, the Sox have just one African-American in shortstop Tim Anderson. After Dexter Fowler's free-agent defection to the Cardinals, the Cubs have a large number of black players by today's standards – right fielder Jason Heyward, pitcher Carl Edwards, Jr. and mixed-race shortstop Addison Russell.

The full rides available in football and basketball have simply drained away from baseball traditional multi-sport

Interestingly, black athletes faced a different choice in the mid-20th century. When baseball finally integrated, the ballplayers finally had a competitive outlet in mainstream sports.

Southern public and private colleges were segregated until the late 1960s at the earliest. A number of Northern and Western schools had informal quota systems on the number of black athletes fielded by their football and basketball teams. Future Hall of Famer Alan Page, for instance, was the only African-American player on the 1966 Notre Dame football team that battled Michigan State to a 10-10 tie in one of the most ballyhooed games in history, with color videotape on YouTube. Notre Dame would go on to be named national champion in 13 polls. The same year, Texas-Western (now Texas-El Paso) became the first NCAA basketball champion with an all-black lineup.

Now, the scholarship drought replaces old-fashioned racism as a college impediment, in baseball. Those 11.7 scholarships have to be divided parsimoniously. Even a wunderkind like Mark Prior did not get a full ride off the bat at Southern Cal in 2000.

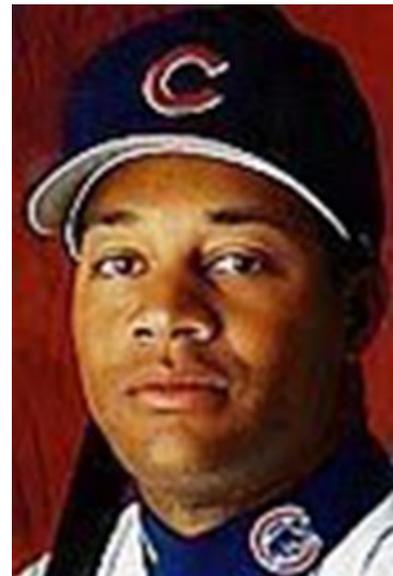
The full weight of the commissioner's position is needed to practice diplomacy with college sports' autocratic rulers and cut through the NCAA regulatory jungle, by far thickest in sports. Manfred needs to find a way to unclog the upward path of prospects. He can't easily market the game with the open spigot of talent flow from the Caribbean and Far East. Many of those players can scarcely speak English, a serious issue when developing appealing role models that can lower the age of the average baseball consumer.

No one to counter Jordan as pied piper

Baseball had no one to counter Michael Jordan, a pied piper for basketball who lured away black players even before they could consider a college sport. Barry Bonds was the logical candidate, but his off-putting, self-centered personality preceded the literal swelling of his head. Bonds returned to the game as a hitting coach, but only "after the horse got out of the barn," in Jack Brickhouse's pet phrase words.

The drop in the number of African-Americans has been swift. As an example, the 2000 and 2001 Cubs had the most number of black players (in addition to many Latin players) in franchise history.

In 2000, Don Baylor, the first African-American Cubs manager, directed Glenallen Hill, Rondell White, Damon Buford, Gary Matthews, Jr., Roosevelt Brown, Corey Patterson and Tarrik Brock in the outfield; Eric Young at second, Willie Greene at third, and Danny Young and Brian Williams in the bullpen. Baylor, White, Buford, Matthews, Jr., Brown, Patterson and Young returned for varying stints in 2001, joined by second baseman Delino DeShields, first baseman Fred McGriff, outfielder Michael Tucker, closer Flash Gordon and setup man Courtney Duncan.



Damon Buford played on the 2000-01 Cubs. Each of the two seasons, the Cubs fielded 11 African-American players. Buford was the son of former White Sox and Oriole Don Buford, who played amid an all-black Baltimore outfield on three consecutive World Series teams from 1969-71.

These Cubs numbers indicate the African-American talent flow was still pretty good at least entering the 1990s. Then came the ascendancy of Jordan and the long-term effects of the scholarship limit.

The White Sox have actively tried to boost interest among minority youth. The South Siders annually sponsor the high school all-star Double Duty Classic and their own traveling youth baseball program. Most recently, team representatives visited the Negro League Museum in Kansas City.

But in the end, far much more has to be done, including changing an NCAA barrier.

Racism is abhorrent in any form, at any time. Yet a sole African American on the field, or sometimes the lack thereof, is time-tripping baseball back to the Robinson era. That is not something Manfred needs to sell if he wants to put his own post-Bud Selig imprint on the game.