



## ***Manfred lobbies NCAA for hike in baseball rides to cut choke point for African-Americans***

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred, a national power broker in his own right, may not be strong enough to loosen a stricture in the hyper-bureaucratic NCAA.

But at least Manfred is taking his cuts to whack at the final choke point of declining African-American participation in baseball – the tight 11.7 scholarships allowed for each college baseball team. Factoring in 25 to 27 players, the math does not promote complete athletic scholarships for almost all baseball players, prompting many African-Americans to instead choose far more plentiful full rides in football and basketball.



**Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred (left) and Chief Operating Officer Tony Petitti have lobbied the NCAA for an increase in baseball scholarships. Manfred photo via [Arturo Pardavila III](#). Petitti photo via [Haverford College](#).**

Tony Reagins, senior vice president of youth programs for Major League Baseball, said on July 20 Manfred and Tony Petitti, MLB's chief operating officer, have recently spoken to the NCAA about loosening the scholarship limits that have frustrated college coaches and encouraged the African-American decline, now representing just 8 percent of big-league players.

The Chicago Baseball Museum has repeatedly advocated a commissioner's effort to approach the stuffy NCAA to increase scholarships – a tough task given college baseball's relatively minor status in the revenue-generating flow into college programs. Some colleges have actually dropped their baseball programs in the past two decades.

Making Manfred's and Petitti's quest go further uphill is the necessity to accommodate Title IX's requirements to offer a full range of women's athletic scholarships. As the 1971-vintage Title IX became entrenched, baseball programs had to take a hit in the number

of equivalent full scholarships allotted. Teams had the equivalent of 13 full scholarships until 1991.

The atmosphere in which Reagins discussed the top MLB brass' efforts was appropriate. He was one of the panelists educating a White Sox Conference Room full of high school players just before the 10<sup>th</sup> annual Double Duty Classic at Guaranteed Rate Field. The Sox and MLB have dramatically built up traveling youth programs in the past decade. But some of the players will have nowhere to continue their careers if they cannot get all or most of their college costs deferred by scholarships.

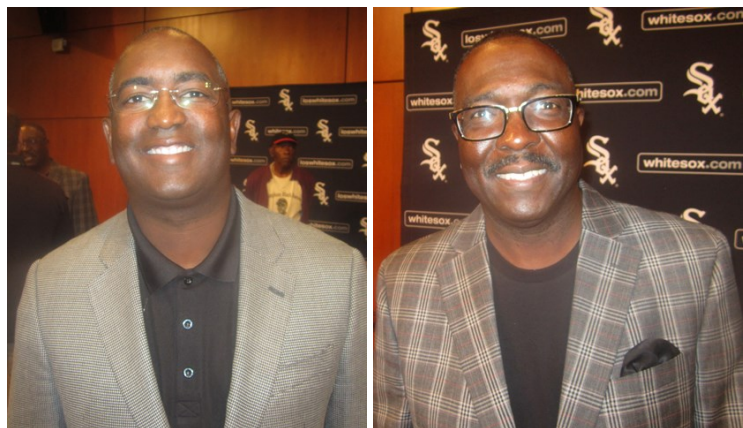
The scholarship issue did not come up in the panel discussion. But Reagins was forthright afterward.

“11.7 is a number that is a challenge,” said Reagins, a former general manager of the Los Angeles Angels of Anaheim. “It’s something we’re definitely aware of. If you look at college baseball, especially the Division I level, 70 percent of the players drafted are from college. Three percent of Division I players are African-American. That’s a big challenge, a big gap, but it’s an opportunity. We’re working on it.

“Quite frankly, we need the NCAA to partner with us on this. It’s going to take time because of various reasons. It definitely impacts the African-American ballplayer.”

The Manfred-Petitti reach-out to the NCAA has not received much publicity. Media attention is focused on the here-and-now of big-league teams’ games and player acquisitions. And it’s unclear if or how MLB could direct financial support to increasing scholarships. Additional rides cannot come at the expense of women’s programs.

“The best solution would be to make scholarships available to every player on (a college team’s) roster, whether it’s broken down, full ride, 50 percent, 75 percent,” Reagins said. “Our game should not be limited by scholarships. I think there will be continued discussions with the NCAA.



**MLB official Tony Reagins (left) and Negro Leagues Museum President Bob Kendrick both believe the 11.7 limit on college baseball scholarships hampers African-Americans’ upward movement in the game.**

### **Scholarships final squeeze on upward path**

Multiple “choke points” affect the upward talent flow of African-American baseball players in an era where basketball has been glamourized since Michael Jordan’s heyday and football always offers plentiful routes to college for talented athletes.

The first is the jump in dimensions from Little League fields to regulation-sized diamonds at 13. Some players drop out because of this increase. The long-term decrease in

two-parent homes – fathers traditionally passing baseball down to their sons – haunt all ages. Costs to participate in traveling teams knock out a good portion of athletes. The demand to specialize in one sport by high school also is a factor.

Ken Williams, the Sox executive vice president and another panel member, declined to comment on Reagins' report about the MLB brass' efforts. One of two generations of Williamses who played major-college sports, he apparently has heard of previous unsuccessful efforts to increase college rides. No one can doubt if Williams, once in charge of drafting players as Sox GM, is skeptical of progress.

Williams' former Cubs counterpart, Jim Hendry, often complained about the 11.7 limit. Prior to his North Side front-office career, Hendry was head coach of Creighton University, leading the hometown college of the Ricketts family to the 1991 College World Series.

Even a stud pitcher like Mark Prior did not get a full ride starting out at the University of Southern California. Prior, now the Padres' roving minor-league pitching coach, recalled standing in the financial-aid line, and picking up the equivalent of partial scholarships when several other players left the Trojans.

### **Museum boss Kendrick weighs in**

"It's something from the outside looking in, I have paid attention to," said Bob Kendrick, president of the Kansas City-based Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and still another DD Classic panelist. "When you look at the proliferation of the other sports, particularly football and basketball, the one common denominator they have is full ride scholarships, and lots of them.

"So when you've got a good young athlete, coming from economically difficult circumstances, if I'm their parent, I'm going to start to steer that athlete toward the sport that provides the best opportunity for he or she to get that full scholarship. Given the choice, that's human nature. They do get pushed away from our sport.

"It creates a systematic problem that certainly hurts our sport at the collegiate level. There's a growth opportunity that comes at the collegiate level as opposed to that route that goes through the minor leagues."

Kendrick recalled how many Negro Leaguers fine-tuned their skills at the collegiate level when their big-league counterparts did not commonly attend universities. They played at the predominantly black colleges that were much more prominent in providing an upward path in the segregation era of Jim Crow in the South and strict quotas on African-American athletes in northern and western schools.

Further lobbying of the NCAA by Manfred and Co. should be supplemented by activism by African-American stars. While MLB is active in developing youth programs, they have not yet fully tapped the stories of their former stars. The Sox themselves could enlist the likes of Hall of Famer Frank Thomas and Bo Jackson, both Auburn products, to show the advantage of the collegiate experience in grooming a star big leaguer.

At the very least, if MLB itself cannot fund increased scholarships due to the shred of remaining amateurism rules, then perhaps they could put the lean on some of their stalwart corporate sponsors, burnishing their image to the consumer. Dealing with the NCAA might be like fighting City Hall, but their haughty power brokers have an eminently human trait: money talks.