

Double Duty Classic gets black athletes back in game

By Paul Ladewski

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Every so often, out of either curiosity or the frustration of a bad loss, White Sox general manager Kenny Williams makes an unscheduled visit to a local baseball field to check out the talent.

There are times when Williams isn't sure that he's in the right place to find the best athletes.

"Honestly, I'm very disappointed," Williams admitted in a group discussion prior to the annual Double Duty Classic at U.S. Cellular Field on Friday afternoon. "I'd go to games and not see the athletes that I needed to see play at the highest level.

"But I would turn around and hear a basketball dribble on the court and I'd go, 'Man, there are 10 guys over there that are capable. I'd like to get just a bat and a glove in their hands . . . ' Maybe they won't make it to the big leagues, but they sure have a chance to go to college moreso than they would on the basketball court.

"Then I'd hear the gun go off for a track meet. 'Maybe I need to go over *there*.' Other sports somehow have taken over."

Prior to the high school all-star game, South Side native Michael Wilbon emceed a forum that featured Williams and former Negro League players Walt Owens, Hank Presswood and Ernest Westfield.

Wilbon recalled his childhood days, when baseball was the game of choice for minorities such as himself.

"You look at playgrounds (now), we think of basketball as being the sport for African-American children and soccer as being the sport for Latin children," said Wilbon, a Washington Post columnist and

ESPN commentator. "Baseball was the original sport in our communities."

Since then, baseball has lost some of its appeal especially among the black population. Last year 10.2 percent of major league rosters consisted of black players, the highest number since the 1995 season. In 1959, when the Boston Red Sox became the last major league team to integrate, the rate was nearly twice as much.

In 1991, Major League Baseball began to coordinate the Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities (RBI) program to address the shortage. Williams acknowledged that some progress had been made in recent years, but he declined to venture a guess as to when the big leagues would field a sufficient number of blacks again.

"I don't know," Williams told the Chicago Baseball Museum. "Here's what I do know: Since the RBI program has been put in place, there have been more selections of African-American players in the draft than there were before it was in place. And I mean high picks, first-round-type picks. Where would those kids be if those efforts weren't made?"

"We haven't seen (a substantial increase) at the big league level yet, but I believe we will start to see it because of events like this one. It started from the commissioner on down, because Bud Selig is committed to diversity not only in the front office but on the field."

Thirty-five players took part in game. The rosters included members of the White Sox-sponsored Amateur City Elite travel squad and selected players from around the country.

The event was named in honor of Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, who once starred for the Chicago American Giants in the Negro Leagues. Radcliffe received his nickname because he often pitched the first game of a doubleheader then played catcher in the second one.

Also in attendance were Minnie Minoso, former Negro League and White Sox star, Debra Richards, Radcliffe's great-niece, and Jimmie

Lee Solomon, Major League Baseball vice president of baseball operations.

The East team defeated the West, 12-2, as Harlan High School junior Dontrelle Rush was selected Most Valuable Player of the game.

“If they didn't make the sacrifices that they did back in the day, I wouldn't be here, you wouldn't be here,” Williams told the players of their predecessors. “Understand it, treasure it, pass these stories on. These men and women will not be here forever to tell these stories, so it's your responsibility and my responsibility as well to carry the torch and continue to tell these stories of these great people.”