

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS



A host of high school players have gotten inspiration from playing on Roger Bossard's finely-manicured field the past decade.

Double Duty Classic games need role models to keep the line moving

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Add another couple of dozen high school stars gaining inspiration playing on Guaranteed Rate Field on July 20 in the 10th annual Double Duty Classic.

There's nothing like trading a dusty, bumpy Park District diamond for the well-manicured greens of Roger Bossard, The Sodfather. The White Sox certainly have struck on a winning formula by both rewarding some 300 deserving prep baseball stars in the DD Classic's history while honoring the memory of Negro League legend Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, a regular at the South Side ballpark late in his centenarian-length life. The kids have gotten live video exposure via CSN Chicago telecasts.

In 2014, with the Chicago Baseball Museum's exhibit-curating assistance, the Sox were able to educate many DD Classic participants via a special program on Double Duty at the DuSable Museum of African-American history. Sox officials took players and parents on tours of DuSable, where they gained perspective on the challenges and triumphs Radcliffe experienced in a baseball world strictly segregated until his final few seasons.

A special CBM section on Double Duty can be found at: <http://www.chicagobaseballmuseum.org/CBM-Double-Duty-Ted-Radcliffe.php>, on the bottom of the homepage.

The DD Classic game will begin at 1:05 p.m., featuring the best inner-city high school players dressed in retro East-West All-Star uniforms to honor past Negro Leaguers and those who played in the historic game at Old Comiskey Park. Admission to the game and parking in Lot B are free. Fans must enter the ballpark through Gate 5, which will have pregame entertainment starting at 11:30 a.m. The game also will be broadcast live on CSN Chicago with WLS-AM's Sox pre- and post-game host Connor McKnight handling the play-by-play.

"This year's event is particularly special as we mark the 10th Double Duty Classic event in our history," said Christine O'Reilly, White Sox vice president of community relations. "Each year, we have seen young men participate in the event, learn and grow from the experience here – not only on the field, but in their careers away from the field and at home. It is so important to us that we continue to share the incredible legacy of the Negro Leagues with the next generation, so that we never take for granted the sacrifice and dedication of those men who played in order to give others a chance to play."

All 29 big-league franchises should stage similar all-star games, and not just one per season, on their fields as part of MLB's fits-and-starts, decades-long effort to stimulate African-American participation in baseball. Playing on the big stage and enjoying that time is the best word-of-mouth tactic to go back home to promote the eventual glamour of baseball.

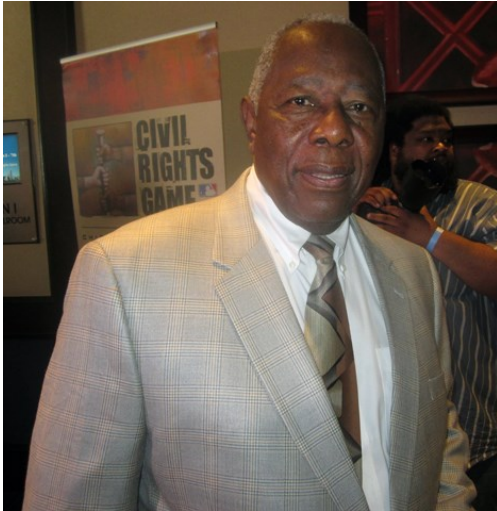
Of course, MLB has to be creative in boosting the paltry 8 percent African-American participation in the game, beyond boosting it at the Little League and high school levels. We've advocated Commissioner Rob Manfred lobby the hyper-bureaucratic NCAA to expand the number of baseball scholarships college teams can offer. The present 11.7 full-ride total per team simply doesn't cut it, so multi-sport African-American athletes instead opt for assured full rides in basketball and football.

Details for the 2017 Double Duty Classic

- Thursday, July 20, 2017, at Guaranteed Rate Field
- FREE ADMISSION - Game Time 1:05 p.m.
- Complimentary parking is available in LOT B (north of 35th Street)
- Gates open at noon
- Live music and entertainment at Gate 5 beginning at 11:30 a.m.
- The concession stands will be open during the game

Another fact not well-publicized in boosting African-American numbers is baseball is the victim of its own scouting success with Latin players.

Consider the Sox's own star position-player acquisitions in their full-bore rebuilding program. Yoan Moncada and Luis Robert are Cuban. Eloy Jimenez is Dominican. The Sox Latin talent pipeline, severely damaged a decade ago by a bonus-skimming scandal, has been fully restored. Combined with a bit more of an open door to baseball stars in formerly-closed Cuba, the Sox are taking full advantage of the available players with upside.



Baseball really hasn't had an African-American role model since Hank Aaron chased Babe Ruth's home-run record more than four decades ago.

Although Moncada, Robert and Jimenez are people of color, they will not be role models to domestic African-Americans. They don't speak the language and hail from another culture. Prospective pro players want role models like themselves as an attraction. MLB has not really fielded an African-American with such gravitas since Henry Aaron's 1973-74 journey of courage in breaking Babe Ruth's home-run record, a quest so important to the country the post-J. Edgar Hoover FBI protected his daughter at college from threats.

Decades later, the likes of Barry Bonds – an off-putting personality long before his association with PEDs – declined the role-model gig while Michael Jordan, LeBron James and assorted NFL stars acted as pried pipers for basketball and football.

Imagine the pride African-Americans would feel if, say, two of the three top Sox acquisitions were from the same background and spoke the same language, communicating the joy of their good fortune. If such signings proliferated throughout the sport as much as we'd like to see the DD Classic games, baseball would have a fighting chance to attract and keep talent.

The concept is simple. Jackie Robinson inspired several generations of major-league players to follow, like Aaron, Ernie Banks and others. Robinson counseled African Americans as they broke in during the 1950s. High-profile African-American Cubs actually cut into the Sox's traditional fan base via WGN-TV exposure in the 1960s. I can't tell you how many South Side African-American Cubs fans I interviewed in various projects, the fans recalling their loyalty to Banks, Billy Williams and Fergie Jenkins – now all Hall of Famers. Their fanship didn't necessarily translate into paying attendance at Wrigley Field. But you've got to start the attraction somewhere, and role models with star power are the base.

Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf has more than done his part, participating in and regularly endorsing programs at G Rate Field's conference center: remembering Robinson, and honoring Negro Leaguers and African-American youth players. The team's Acade-

my City Elite (ACE) traveling youth baseball program gives inner-city players necessary exposure and access to those partial baseball scholarships. Some 21 ACE players were expected to play in the 2017 DD Classic.

But nothing will substitute for acquiring and promoting top prospects in the manner of Moncada, Robert and Jimenez. It's almost a Catch-22. You cannot have a talent flow without role models. Who will serve as the latter?

One such candidate is Corey Ray, a Chicago native now playing in high Class-A in the Carolina League in the Milwaukee Brewers farms system. The success of 2011 and 2012 Double Duty Classic participant Ray, who was the fifth overall pick in the 2016 MLB draft and an ACE alumnus, is an example that should spark more interest in African-Americans playing baseball.

A special forum discussion for invited guests on the history of the Negro Leagues and African-Americans in baseball will be held at G-Rate Field prior to the DD Classic game. AM 670 *The Score* host Laurence Holmes was scheduled to emcee the forum of panelists, including: Sox Executive Vice President Ken Williams, Sox hitting coach Todd Steverson, Negro Leagues Baseball Museum President Bob Kendrick and MLB Senior Vice President of Youth Programs Tony Reagins.

The first Double Duty Classic in 2008 was the inspiration for the CBM's award-winning documentary "Buck O'Neil and Black Baseball in Chicago" that was shown at the [National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum](#) Baseball Film Festival in September. Sadly, Minnie Minoso and Al Spearman, former Negro Leaguers who were part of that inaugural game, are no longer alive. Their presence at that game, sharing their own stories, added to the rich history of the Negro Leagues best celebrated in MLB by the Sox themselves, who hosted the East-West all-star game from 1933-1960 at old Comiskey Park.

The film featured Kendrick, who along with the Sox has aggressively promoted the legacy of the Negro Leagues. His participation in the July 20 panel helped new generation learn about the historic past that must be remembered. The Sox indeed lead the way in baseball in hosting the Double Duty Classic.