

C. JEMAL HORTON

Class a factor in who turns pro and when

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socially respected aren't questioned when they pursue professional careers. But kids in sports dominated by the broke and disenfranchised usually are told they must wait before finally getting financially stable.

I swear, sometimes, it seems as if this country is determined to find reasons to keep poor people in the same miserable existence for as long as possible.

Now, I am going to mention race here for a moment, folks. But only to illustrate a statistical point:

The professional football and basketball leagues in the United States are inherently black. Last season, while all of golf was 84 percent white, according to The Associated Press, 69 percent of the players in the NFL were black. In the NBA, blacks accounted for 76 percent of the players.

And, according to the National Poverty Center, the poverty rate for African-Americans is higher than any other race in the U.S. (24.7

percent, compared with 8.6 percent for whites). Hence, poor people dominate sports such as football and basketball, while rich people lead the way in "country club sports," such as golf and tennis.

Again, the emphasis here is on socioeconomic status, not race. And I have yet to understand why sports dominated by poor Americans have such silly rules about age restrictions.

OK, I do understand it. And, ironically, that, too, relates to economics - the adults in college and professional sports who stand to profit the most financially from "farm systems" claim it's in the best interests of the kids to stay in school longer.

Whatever. At the same time, in other professional sports, multi-millionaire wunderkinds are allowed, if not encouraged, to take on the world.

Eighteen-year-old Sidney Crosby, considered the best hockey prospect in two decades, is being asked to

revitalize the NHL; 16-year-old African American Donald Young, who turned pro at 14, is being touted as the next great male tennis player; and Wie takes the mantle for the LPGA and, perhaps, the PGA.

I know: What about baseball?

While many young and historically poor people (see: Latinos) play Major League Baseball, the Institute for Ethics and Diversity in Sport reports African-Americans (see: America's poorest people) make for just 9 percent of big-leaguers.

But, despite that, at least you're allowed to be a poor American teen-ager and pursue baseball millions without being perceived as someone trying to cheat the system. And, hey, if you're really lucky, you might land a car commercial with the great Michelle Wie.

Whenever she finally does get her driver license.

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Dye ready for long awaited return trip to World Series

By Janie McCauley
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Jermaine Dye never got past the first round of the playoffs during three October runs with Oakland. He spent parts of five seasons losing in Kansas City.

Still, Chicago's right fielder is one of just four White Sox players to take part in a World Series before this year.

Jose Contreras and Orlando Hernandez pitched for the New York Yankees in the post-season, while Timo Perez did so for the New York Mets against the Yankees in 2000.

"Just getting back to where I was my rookie year, this is everybody's dream," said Dye, who played in the 1996 World Series with Atlanta. "We're just living a dream so far. Hopefully we can get that jewelry at the end."

It's been a long road back to the top for Dye. He had hoped to stay with the Athletics, but they couldn't afford his \$14 million mutual option and Dye didn't want to take a huge pay cut to return.

Oakland made Dye the highest-paid player

in team history when he signed in January 2002, six months after the A's acquired him from the Royals in a three-team trade.

Dye wasn't the same player after breaking his left leg — he fouled a ball off himself — in the 2001 playoffs against the New York Yankees. He spent much of that winter on crutches. After hitting .252 in 2002, he felt better going into the following spring training, but then faced two more injuries that threw off his 2003 season.

Dye had arthroscopic knee surgery in April 2003 that forced him to miss 30 games, then he was sidelined for 50 more with a separated right shoulder. He never regained his rhythm at the plate.

He hit .172 with four homers and 20 RBIs that season — all career lows. He hit 23 homers with 80 RBIs in 2004, then had 31 homers and 86 RBIs this season.

He signed a \$10.15 million, two-year contract with Chicago last December that includes a club option for 2007.

"This means a lot," he said.

WSSU, N.C. A&T renew rivalry

By Craig T. Greenlee
HBCU SPORTS PRESS ASSOCIATION

GREENSBORO — One of black college football's most unique rivalries will be renewed for the 2006 season. For fans of N.C. A&T and Winston-Salem State, the game can't come soon enough.

"The tradition is back," said Dee Todd, N.C. A&T's athletics director. "When these schools get together in football, it's like a big family affair. There's respect on both sides, but it's also very competitive. Really, it's like having a second homecoming on the schedule."

Officials from both schools announced at a press conference earlier this month that the Aggies will play the Rams next season on Sept. 2 in Greensboro, ending a seven-year hiatus. With the exception of each school's homecoming game, A&T-WSSU is historically the biggest draw at the gate for both schools.

During the 1990s, the game's average attendance was 18,191.

The revival of this series coincides with Winston's move from NCAA Division II to Division I. The Rams are expected to be accepted as members of the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference, the same league that the Aggies compete in.

"Being 25 miles away and not being able to play this game was sad," said Chico

Caldwell, WSSU athletics director. "Now we're able to play, and we're looking forward to it."

The Aggies-Rams rivalry has special ties that transcend the usual battle for annual bragging rights. It takes about 30 to 35 minutes of drive time to travel from one school to the other.

But proximity is just part of the story. Not only do these schools have a strong alumni base in both Greensboro and Winston-Salem, but there are a substantial number of fans who live in Greensboro and work in Winston-Salem, and vice versa.

A&T and WSSU frequently go after the same athletes in recruiting and many of the players already know each other as training partners during summer workouts.

These ties that bind also include school administrators and coaches. WSSU Chancellor Harold Martin is an N.C. A&T alumnus; Todd graduated from Winston-Salem. Coaches George Small of A&T and Kermit Blount of WSSU are graduates of the schools they now coach. They competed against each other in this rivalry in the late '70s.

"As a player, what I remember most about those games is the atmosphere," Small said. "It was electrifying. It was always a game that you had to get up for."

Blount agrees. "Starting this series again is going to be a good marriage for the long run," said the former quarterback who led the Rams to wins over the Aggies in 1977 and '78. "I've always

felt that WSSU-A&T is one of the best things going in black college football. When I played, we had lots of incentive because we were Division II and we wanted so badly to knock off a Division I-AA team."

Seven years ago, A&T was forced to drop WSSU from its schedule because of administrative mandates. The NCAA issued an edict limiting all Division I-AA programs to play only one game against Division II competition.

To play more than one Division II game would result in a fine of \$25,000. Aside from the Rams, A&T regularly scheduled another Division II school — North Carolina Central — in the season-opening Aggie Eagle Classic. The classic attracted larger crowds, as many as 50,000 in some years.

As a result, WSSU became the odd team out, and the series ended.

The Aggie-Eagle Classic is now history. The last game was played last month, which created an opportunity for the renewal of the annual I-40 showdown. With A&T and WSSU alternating as the game's host, both schools figures to do fairly well financially.

Since the game won't be played at a neutral site, the schools get a bigger portion of the income from parking and concessions, and paying stadium rental won't be as much of a concern.

"It was never a case of if this rivalry was going to be renewed," Todd said. "It was only a matter of when it would happen."

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