

Fading to black: African American baseball presence waning

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minority hires, one seems like an awfully lonely number.

"It's been a concern, and it's been something that I think Major League Baseball needs to do a better job on addressing," Randolph said.

Yes, baseball does. Its good old boy system kept minority candidates out of the dugout and front offices for so long the sport is morally obligated to make sure the managerial pool is racially balanced.

It's hard to fathom today, but it took 28 years from the time Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier before there was a black manager in the major leagues. Robinson said he dreamed of the day a black man would be leading a dugout, but he died before seeing it happen.

Since then, baseball's diversity record has been an uneven one, though Bud Selig deserves credit for trying to increase the numbers of minority managers and general managers by forcing teams to submit lists of them. It's worked up to a point, peaking at 10 black and Latino managers in the 2002 season, but the pendulum seems to be swinging the other way with a grand total of three now.

Baseball, though, has a bigger problem.

In case you hadn't noticed, the sport is no longer a black man's game.

That doesn't mean baseball isn't diverse. If anything, it's more diverse than ever. Two Taiwanese pitchers started in

the playoffs, Latinos make up more than a third of all rosters and players from Japan and South Korea are making their presence felt on the field.

But the number of blacks players in the major leagues has fallen to 8 percent, the lowest since the Boston Red Sox became the last team to integrate in 1959. Last year, the Houston Astros were the first team in 52 years to go to a World Series without one black player on the roster.

And the number of black players in colleges, Little League or on the sandlots is shrinking every year.

Not many teams will want you to manage if you've never played the game.

"The fact (that) fewer African-Americans are playing baseball will ultimately affect all kind of things for off-field positions," said Richard Lapchick, who studies racial diversity in sports. "The decreasing pool is certainly going to be a factor to deal with in the future."

Things have changed a lot in a short time. In 1971 the Pittsburgh Pirates were on their way to the World Series when they fielded a starting lineup that included all black and Latino players for the first time. And black players took up one in four roster spots in the big leagues in the 1970s and '80s.

Somewhere along the way, though, baseball lost its appeal to black youth.

The sport became irrelevant, and baseball owners were too busy building new stadiums with luxury boxes

to seem to care.

Sociologists can debate the reasons, though a few are readily apparent. It's a lot easier to find a hoop than a sandlot in an inner city, and the superstars of the NBA and NFL are the new role models for youths aspiring to get college scholarships or play pro ball.

There was a time when kids asked their parents for a baseball glove. Now they want the latest sneakers.

It might be different if the parents were baseball fans, but there's not many of those, either. Do your own test during the playoffs - count the number of black fans you see when a foul ball is hit into the stands.

It's startling few, even in Washington, D.C., where 57.7 percent of the population is black.

"If the Nationals, with an African-American manager in a city overwhelmingly African-American can't deliver African-American fans then it doesn't auger well for the rest of Major League Baseball's ability to attract those fans," said Lapchick, who runs the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics.

Some well-meaning people are trying to change that, but they started late and face an uphill struggle. Minnesota Twins outfielder Torii Hunter and some other black players have launched an urban Little League program to try to get black youths involved in baseball. And baseball itself opened its first Urban

Youth Academy this year offering free instruction in the inner city of Compton, Calif.

Someday the same kids helped by those programs might be playing in the major leagues. Someday they might even become major league managers.

For the near future, though, the trend is not good. There

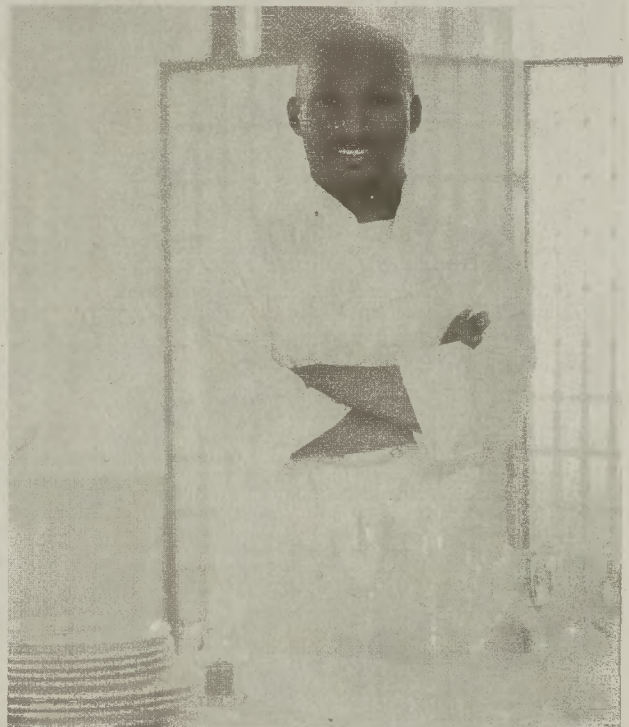
are plenty of black candidates for the four open jobs now, but the talent pool soon will begin to dwindle. Teams that already have enough excuses not to hire minorities now will have one more.

Baseball needs black managers, and it needs more black executives like Ken Williams, who put together the White Sox team that won

the World Series last year. A bigger worry, though, is figuring out what happened to black players and black fans.

Because baseball needs them even more.

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the court, in a game situation since last winter, and he too is working his way back into form during pre-season play.

"I'm taking this opportunity right now in the pre-season to get my stuff back," said May. "I haven't played in a long time and playing these back to backs...and longer minutes, seeing how my body adjusts is key for me."

"For all of us, Meek, myself, Gerald [Wallace], who missed a lot of games last year, we're still getting back into the swing of things," said May. "Gerald is better off because he did finish the season last year, but we all missed a lot of games."

"I thought Emeka started off good," said head coach Bernie Bickerstaff, who reiterated that the players haven't been able to bang and work during the offseason the way they need to in real games. "They just need minutes. When you've been out

like that you need minutes. You need stamina and you need minutes."

Okafor played 21 of 48 minutes on Monday, May 17. As the pre-season continues, each is sure they will get where they need to be.

"I feel good, my legs feel fine, I feel like I have my rhythm, I feel like I have my timing," said May. "There's little things each of us can do everyday to prepare ourselves a little bit better, and those are the things we're

still finding out."

"Everybody's trying to get re-acclimated to each other," said Okafor. "Everyone's just getting their wind and getting into game shape, and getting their feel back altogether."

"We're a bunch of young guys. We'll come around. No need to get worried, it's pre-season. Every game we're making some type of progress. As far as myself, I'm feeling better game by game. We'll see with time."

Nationals coaches in limbo

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON - Randy St. Claire will stay on as the Washington Nationals' pitching coach in 2007, first-base coach Davey Lopes is leaving, and the rest of the coaching staff won't know its status until a new manager is hired. St. Claire's return, announced Monday, guarantees some continuity for what could be an overhauled and inexperienced pitching staff.

"They say we're trying to rebuild, build for the future, so it always makes it a little uncertain with what's going to go on," St. Claire said in a telephone interview from his home in upstate New York. "But with young arms, there's a lot to anticipate, so it's a fun time to be working with these young kids."

Lopes was hired by the Philadelphia Phillies as first-base coach and outfield/baserunning instructor.

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Sunday, October 15 Gospel Show Harrison Auditorium \$7.00 5 PM	Thursday, October 19 Library Sciences Archives Annual Picture Party NC A&T Campus Open 18th, 19th & 20th 8:30 AM
Monday, October 16 Pep Rally Holland Bowl Rain Site - Moore [Free] 6 PM	College of Arts & Sciences Alumni Breakfast NC A&T Campus Stallings Ballroom 8:30 AM
Tuesday, October 17 Comedy Show Corbett Sports Center \$10.00 Student \$15.00 General 7:30 PM	School of Education Alumni Homecoming Reception Hodgen Hall Lobby
Wednesday, October 18 Homecoming Harrison Auditorium \$7.00 6 PM and 9 PM	Young Alumni Dance Sheraton-Four Seasons Guilford Ballroom \$20 - \$25 7:30 PM - 11 PM
JET College Package Tour 10 AM - 4 PM Memorial Stadium Exhibit Hall	Mu Psi Chapter Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Dinner Sheraton-Four Seasons Imperial Ballroom 7:30 PM - 9 PM