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11-1-2005

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Ogden, David C., "The Demise of African American Participation in Baseball: A Cultural Backlash from the Negro Leagues" (2005). *10th Annual National Conference (2005): Different Perspectives on Majority Rules* . Paper 29.
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The Demise of African American Participation in Baseball: A Cultural Backlash from the Negro Leagues

Abstract
Sixty years ago baseball was a major business and cultural force for African Americans. But the end of the Negro Leagues and the desegregation of baseball heralded a new era that marked the beginning of a cultural drift between baseball and African Americans. This paper will explore the social factors embedded in the Negro Leagues that gave baseball cultural relevance for African Americans and what is impeding those factors from operating again.

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In 1942 51,000 spectators, most of them African Americans, filled Comiskey Park in Chicago to see the East-West Game, the Negro Leagues' version of the major league All-Star Game (Rader, 1994). Today the percentage of spectators and the percentage of major league players who are African-American have dropped to single digits (Anderson, Trail, & Robinson, 2005; Flanagan, 1999; Lapchick, 2005; Ogden & Warneke, 2005). Such low numbers, some writers claim (i.e. Early, 2000; Flanagan, 1999), signify a fragile connection between African-Americans and baseball, a connection that was rooted in the Negro Leagues.

The Negro Leagues and other all-black baseball organizations became part of the core of African American culture during the first half of the 20th century and embodied African Americans' cultural ownership of a game whose major national organization banned black participation (Peterson, 1970; Rader, 1994; Ribowsky, 1995). With the demise of the Negro Leagues and the absorption of some of its star players by the major leagues, baseball's drift from African American culture began. This paper will provide evidence tying this decades-long drift to the abandonment of the all-black game and will explore how the long-desired and awaited desegregation of major league baseball has led to a cultural selfsegregation by African Americans.

Understanding this premise requires a historical framework and perspective on the relationship between baseball and African Americans. When the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs was established in 1870, one of its premises was that rosters remain all white. But blacks, like Moses Walker and Bud Fowler, were already playing on other white pro teams, albeit their careers on those teams were short-lived; and African American teams, like the Cuban Giants, began forming in the 1880's and playing season-long schedules (Rader, 1994; Ribowsky, 1995). By the late 1930's, professional baseball was a major business enterprise among African Americans (Rader, 1994). Team owners and league officials, such as Gus Greenlee, Cumberland Posey, Ed Bolden and Rube Foster, established a long-standing, albeit economically fragile, industry, closely covered and celebrated by the African American press. Those black baseball entrepreneurs and other owners continually battled white booking agents over control of

profits and eventually succumbed to the integration of major league baseball, as the press and public shifted their attention to Jackie Robinson and the spate of other Negro League players who signed major league contracts in 1947 and in the ensuing few years.

Despite the death of the Negro Leagues and black professional baseball just after 1960, African Americans continued to make an impact at the highest level of competition, despite being denied entrance to that competition for the first 75 years. By 1970 23 % of those on major league rosters were African Americans, players who as children witnessed the first of the Negro Leaguers to enter the major leagues. In 1975 those ranks had swelled to more than 30% (Gmelch, 2005). But as that generation of African American players who followed Hank Aaron, Monte Irvin, Ernie Banks, Willie Mays and other Negro League stars, began retiring, there were considerably fewer to fill their ranks. By 1985 the number had dropped to approximately 23% and by 2000 to 12% (Gmelch, 2005). In 2004 African Americans comprised 9% of major league players (Lapchick, 2005) and the percentage of African Americans playing NCAA Division I baseball in 2002 was lower—7% (Lapchick, 2003). Even lower was the percentage of African Americans on traveling youth teams—4% (Ogden & Warneke, 2005).

While the initial drop in major league participation coincided with the disappearance of the last vestiges of the Negro Leagues, today's African American major league players are confounded by the lack of impact they've had on black interest in the game (Verducci, 2003). Today's African American stars, most notably Barry Bonds, do not have the same cultural aura, possibly in part because they do not bear the cultural legitimacy that the Negro Leagues gave the first generation of African Americans entering the major leagues. The Negro Leagues afforded such legitimacy because African Americans played with and against each other in a social environment that forced them to form their own brand of baseball and institutions that supported that brand of baseball. History and social research have shown the cultural resonance of baseball when it is played among a common social group (see, for example, Riess, 1999). Artisans in the mid-19th century used the game as a fraternal community builder, as did fire companies and other professions (Riess, 1989, 1999). Different ethnicities and races have rallied around the game, and African Americans were no exception. African Americans played the game because their peers did, and because the game sustained a culture. Now African Americans don't see their peers playing baseball in the nearly the same numbers as they do in basketball or football.

The social factors embedded in the Negro Leagues that gave baseball cultural relevance for African Americans and what is impeding those factors from operating again are the foci of this paper.

Presenter

Dave Ogden is associate professor in the School of Communication at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Before coming to UNO in 2001, he was an associate professor at Wayne State College. He served as director of public affairs at the University of Nebraska Medical Center from 1984 to 1988, and has worked as a reporter/news writer for KFAB and Metro Networks. Ogden's research focuses on baseball and culture, with

specific emphasis on the relationship between African-American communities and baseball. Since 1995, he has presented his research at the National Baseball Hall of Fame Conference on Baseball and Culture in Cooperstown, N.Y., Indiana State University's Conference on Baseball in Literature and Culture, and at other national baseball research meetings. His work can be found in some of the latest issues of *Nine: The Journal of Baseball History and Culture*, the *Journal of Leisure Research*, and the *Journal of Black Studies*. Ogden received his Ph.D. in 1999 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.