

Black baseball heads become rare

(AP) - Dusty Baker is gone. Frank Robinson is finished. Cito Gaston won two World Series for the Toronto Blue Jays but hasn't seen the inside of a dugout in years. And Don Baylor suffered the same fate a few years ago that befalls losing managers everywhere — he was fired.

So now there is one. One Black manager in baseball.

One. The same number there was in 1975, the year Robinson made history by becoming the first of his kind in the major leagues.

One. Not a token one, to be sure. Willie Randolph has some serious credentials, and he just might have his New York Mets on the way to the World Series.

But, in a sport that liked to pat itself on the back in recent years for opening the way to 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. It's the good-old-boy system that kept minority candidates out of the dugout and front offices for so long, now 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



FRANK ROBINSON a third of all rosters and players from Japan and South Korea are making their presence felt on the field.

But the number of Black 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 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.

Some day the same kids helped by those programs might be playing in the ma-



DUSTY BAKER jor leagues. Some day 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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