

Pro baseball outsources its Black players

By George E Curry
Special to Sentinel-Voice

When someone mentioned baseball in the past, certain names immediately came to mind: Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Buck O'Neil, Willie Mays, Don Newcomb, Frank Robinson, Roy Campanella, Monte Irvin, Joe Black, Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, Elston Howard, Bob Gibson, Lou Brock and Willie Stargell — all African-Americans.

The 2007 baseball season got underway over the weekend and this year, 60 years after Jackie Robinson broke major league baseball's color barrier, there are fewer African-Americans on the playing field than two decades ago.

Last year, only 8.4 percent of major league players were Black, compared to 19 percent in 1995, according to the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sports. Meanwhile, the percentage of Latino players has increased to 29.4 percent, Asians are 2.4 percent and Whites are 59.5 percent.

Because major league baseball has set up training camps in Latin America, making it cheaper to scout and sign budding players, some critics, such as former Hall of Famer Dave Winfield, says professional baseball is "outsourcing" Black talent.

"There is a greater hunger among Latin athletes in the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, Cuba to make it in baseball,"

Winfield told Reuters news service. "Baseball combs the world for prospects and revenues. It cannot afford to forget the fans and prospects in the U.S."

On some teams, Black players are all but forgotten. In 2005, for example, the Houston Astros, was the first team since the 1953 Yankees without an African-American player.

Compare that to 1971, when the Pittsburgh Pirates fielded the first all-Black and Latino starting lineup: Al Oliver, first base; Rennie Stennett, second base; Jackie Hernandez, short stop; Dave Cash, third base; Manny Sanguillen, catcher; Dock Ellis, pitcher; Gene Clines, left field; Roberto Clemente, center field and Willie Stargell, right field. That was the same year the Pirates won the World Series.

Newsday columnist Shaun Powell wrote earlier this month: "Come Opening Day, there might be more Blacks in the Rush Limbaugh fan club than on the field for both New York teams combined."

Powell continued, "In fact, every time the memory of Robinson is honored with a ceremony, there are more elderly Black faces paying homage than young ones."

"The enduring legacy of Robison is not powerful enough to convince young Black kids to stop dribbling or put away their footballs. To them, baseball is left to middle-class White kids and poor Latin kids."

That's true even for Robinson's old team. Last

year, Kenny Lofton was the only African-American on the Dodgers.

And even on teams that have African-Americans, they tend to be "stacked" in certain positions. They are underrepresented in certain so-called "thinking positions" — especially pitcher, catcher and third basemen. For example, only 3 percent of pitchers and almost no catchers are Black. By contrast, 28 percent of outfielders — a position that relies on speed and quick reactions — were African-Americans. That's nearly three times the African-American representation in professional baseball.

Though few people expect Blacks to make up 27 percent of major league baseball ever again, many feel the numbers can increase if more emphasis is played on training, recruiting and nurturing Black players when they are young. After all, that has been the key to attracting so many Latino players from south of the border and abroad.

While some bemoan the

loss of African-American players, the combination of Black and Latino players reached 40.5 percent last season, just shy of the 42 percent high in 1997, the 50th anniversary of Robinson's debut.

As major league baseball keeps striking out with Black players on the field, it is hitting homeruns, in some cases, when it comes to Blacks and Latinos in the front office.

This season, 20 percent of major league baseball's managers are people of color: Willie Randolph (New York Mets), Ozzie Guillen (Chicago White Sox), Ron Washington (Texas Rangers), Lou Pinella (Chicago Cubs), Fredi Gonzalez (Florida Marlins) and Manny Acta (Washington Nationals).

Of the 30 major league teams, African-Americans were 16 percent of the coaches in 2006, up 1 percent

over the previous year.

Whites still dominate as team physicians. From 2005 to 2006, White team physicians increased from 93 percent to nearly 95 percent. African-Americans decreased from 4 percent to 3 percent.

In radio and TV Broadcasting, Whites continued to hold 79 percent of all positions. African-Americans held 3 percent of those jobs last year, down 1 percent

from 2005.

There are still no Blacks serving as CEO or president of any major league team. Except for one Latino, all team owners are White.

Baseball is called America's pastime. It is past time for major league baseball to do a better job of developing tomorrow's Willie Mays, Hank Aarons and Frank Robinsons.

George E. Curry is NNPA News Service.

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All bids so received will be submitted to the Board of Commissioners at its meeting at 12:00 noon on Wednesday, May 16, 2007, for recommendation and or approval of bid award. The HACC reserves the right to waive minor informalities, to reject any or all bids, and to accept the bid deemed to be in the best interest of the HACC.

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