

Baseball's New Color Barrier
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Something is rotten in the state of baseball, and I don't mean the O's (although I could). Since moving to Baltimore a year ago, I haven't come across a card shop, batting cage, or group of kids playing ball on the street. The closest batting cage to where I live in Pigtown is BASES, an anonymous brick building in majority-white Linthicum Heights; the closest card shop is a trek to the outskirts of town. Little Leagues in the region are shrinking. Nearby Hagerstown – which sent teams to the Little League World Series in 1950, 1968, and 2008 – [once boasted 13 little leagues. now it has three.](#)

All of this squirming and hand-wringing has led me to ask: What do kids today think of baseball? Where are the institutions that cultivate a love of the sport? Where does baseball fit into this mostly Black city?

Whether the decline or dearth of baseball infrastructure is cause or effect, one thing is certain: non-hispanic Black communities are drifting away from the game. [Out of over 11,000 D-1 college baseball players, 78 percent identify as white, 18 percent identify as another race, and only 4 percent identify as Black.](#) At the highest level, only [six percent of MLB players](#) are non-Hispanic Black; [in the 1970s and 1980s, that number hovered between 17 and 19 percent.](#) This decline follows a national trend that is difficult to ignore. The number of high school aged kids who play baseball, for example, [decreased by an almost 17 percent change](#) between 2019 and 2020; kids who play basketball, on the other hand, increased by a 2.5 percent change.

Last year, [David Justice sat down for an interview](#) with the All Facts No Brakes Podcast hosted by Keyshawn Johnson. The former African American all-star outfielder leveled several charges against the sport.

First, baseball is one of the most expensive team sports in America. This is true. [According to the Aspen Institute](#), the average annual cost of playing baseball is \$660; meanwhile, it costs \$485 to play tackle football; \$427 to play basketball; and \$268 to play flag football. [One former coach at a for-profit baseball company puts it this way:](#) “If you can get 20 teams of 12 players each paying \$2,500 a season, that is \$600,000 in revenue. With part-time coaches making only a few thousand dollars a season...club owners can easily make several hundred thousand dollars a year.” The demographic of his team was mostly suburban and almost all white. “In the United States,” he concluded, “baseball is becoming a mostly white country-club sport for upper-class families to consume.”

Second, MLB doesn't invest in inner cities the way they do overseas. Again, this is true, almost despairingly so. [MLB spends a billion dollars](#) on salaries to professionals and each team spends \$100m per season on baseball academies in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Yet when it comes to developing talent at home, in inner city America, MLB falls short. Since its inception

in 1989, [MLB's Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities \(RBI\) program](#) has “designated more than \$35 million worth of resources to the program at both the national and local level...” Certainly, this program does laudable work, especially the Baltimore organization. International investment, however, dwarfs the work of RBI. To put it in perspective, when one team spends \$100m maintaining a facility in another country, it is already investing 186 percent more *in one year* than the RBI program has in the US for 36 years.

Finally, baseball doesn't carry the cultural cache it used to. Justice summed it up best in the interview: “In high school...Friday Night Lights football – it's packed, it's live. Basketball – the gyms are packed. Go to a high school baseball game. It's 15 people – 14 parents and one girlfriend. Nobody's at high school baseball games. So it's not sexy. It's not sexy. Playing golf might be sexier [than playing baseball] in high school.” The fashion designer Jerry Lorenzo Manuel Jr. [laments the decline of black role models in baseball](#). What happened to Ken Griffey Jr., grinning ear to ear, hat thrown back, blowing a huge, tremulous pink bubble? Where is Gary Sheffield's defiant bat waggle? Who is doing the Ozzy Smith backflip – or equivalent – on the field?

In the coming months, I'd like to explore this topic more fully in several longform installments. When did baseball fall from grace in black communities? What were the socioeconomic factors that lead to baseball becoming “a mostly white country-club sport for upper-class families to consume”? Perhaps most importantly for readers of THE BALTIMORE CHOP, what does this mean for Baltimore, a majority Black city with a big league team ostensibly at the core of its sports identity?

Baseball was once a vehicle for racial justice. It was a centerpiece of black culture – a locus of pride and enthusiasm. Can it be once again?