

MLB Profits From New Change in Immigration Law

Written by Diane M. Grassi

Thursday, 15 February 2007 17:58



Ms. Grassi is a guest columnist for The Biz of Baseball.

Major League Baseball (MLB) will celebrate the 60th Anniversary of Jackie Robinson's entry into the major leagues, on April 15, 2007, which ended the prohibition of integration of African American players. However, it is arguable how much MLB has built upon his symbolic legacy, as civil rights hero, since it enjoyed complete integration in 1959.

For it has been documented—especially over the past 10 years, as the 2007 baseball season begins—that MLB has far more in common with American-based multi-national conglomerates than it does with the idea of inclusiveness, where bottom line profits dictate company policy.

Ironically, MLB will also hold an exhibition game on March 31, 2007 in Memphis, TN between the World Champion St. Louis Cardinals and the Cleveland Indians. It is lauded as the inaugural "Civil Rights Game" in the city where the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Yet, for all of Commissioner Bud Selig's interest in diversity in MLB, there are scant African American patrons in baseball stadiums nationwide. Although MLB argues that is not necessarily so, it denies even keeping such statistics.

Such could also explain why MLB does such a poor job of marketing to the African American community, as it is one which MLB, it would appear, simply does not consider valuable. For as

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overall profits rise, "If it ain't broke why fix it?" In turn, why have a civil rights game if there are no African Americans in the house?

There have only been 12 African American MLB managers in the history of the game. The most at any one time was 6 in 2002. Today, after the 2006 dismissals of Frank Robinson of the Washington Nationals and Dusty Baker of the Chicago Cubs, Willie Randolph of the New York Mets and the newly named Ron Washington of the Texas Rangers remain the only African American managers in the major leagues.

Hall of Famer, Frank Robinson, became the first African American major league manager in 1975 and was involved in almost every facet of the game for 51 years, from player to coach to manager to Vice President of On-Field Operations of MLB. Most recently, he was the Montreal Expos manager followed by the Washington Nationals helm, where he led the transition of the two organizations for a period of 5 years.

Frank Robinson was unceremoniously fired as manager by new Nationals management last fall but had at least been promised a community outreach position which he very much wanted. The Nationals management which won its ownership largely based upon its promise to MLB to engage the African American community, chose instead to relieve Robinson entirely of his services.

But Frank Robinson has been repeatedly vocal about keeping the game alive in the African American community, in addition to outspoken Hall of Famer, Joe Morgan, and current Minnesota Twins outfielder, Torii Hunter. Yet, MLB speaks only in platitudes about diversity, bypassing the inner city and working class neighborhoods, seemingly looking for talent everywhere *but* there.

As its own ruling class, baseball owners have invested in multi-million dollar academies and facilities primarily in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. But it is now going even farther abroad into mainland China and even Ghana, subsequent to its interests in Japan and South Korea.

MLB has but one Urban Baseball Youth Academy in the entirety of the United States, located in Compton, CA which opened in 2006. MLB donated but \$1 million towards the project which is

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situated on the grounds of Compton Community College which furnishes its buildings of operations. Hardly what one would call a triumph for American inner city youth, at a time that Bud Selig describes as the "Golden Era of Baseball."

"China is the most important country for the game of baseball as it seeks to develop around the world," according to Randy Levine, President of the New York Yankees. He led a contingent to mainland China on behalf of the NY Yankees and MLB in February 2007 to contract with the Chinese Baseball Association in order to develop baseball, initially constructing fields and financing Little Leagues and equipment. The goal is to eventually provide an academy. Meanwhile, the New York Mets and MLB sent a group to Ghana to formally introduce baseball to West Africa.

But do not mistake such overtures as part of a tour of goodwill ambassadors, as MLB, which still remains the only professional sports organization in the U.S. with a broad reaching anti-trust exemption, does nothing anymore without its eye on the proverbial money ball. It is baseball on the cheap, overlooking America's homegrown kids. It obviously has no compunction nor feels any obligation to develop an American program, investment or facility built, for example, for every offshore program, investment or facility built.

In 2006, more than 23% of players on major league rosters were comprised of foreign-born players which has more than doubled since 1990. Foreign-born players do not include those from Puerto Rico or other U.S. territories or possessions or those born abroad to U.S. parents. The Dominican Republic enjoys the largest number of foreign-born major league players or about 1 out of 7 in 2006, followed by Venezuela. Mexico, Canada, Japan, Panama, Cuba, Colombia and Taiwan totaled just half of those from the Dominican Republic.

All major league teams have academies and/or share facilities primarily in the Dominican Republic with a few remaining in Venezuela, where building has tailed off due to civil unrest. But in its latest coup, MLB has gotten an even bigger break from the federal government in a recent change in the Immigration & Nationality Act, which was hardly publicized. Amended by the U.S. Congress in 2006 and signed into law on December 22, 2006 by President George W. Bush, it is known as the "Compete Act of 2006" or the "Creating Opportunities for Minor League Professionals, Entertainers and Teams Through Legal Entry Act of 2006."

The legislation changes the visa status of foreign-born minor league players to be able to use P-1 visas, formerly reserved only for major league players, and an upgrade from the H-2B visas, generally used by temporary foreign-born workers in numerous industries. Each team previously was limited to 26 H-2B visas per season for its minor leagues. Major leagues have

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no numerical limitations with the P-1 visa, valid for a period of 10 years.

Given that over 40% of minor leaguers are foreign-born and that most of them are from the Dominican Republic, this will enable a continuous pipeline of Latin American players. MLB's foreign academies house, feed, school and teach athletic skills to boys as young as 10 years old until they are age 16, who are then allowed to sign minor league contracts. In the U.S., a player must be 18 years old to sign a minor league contract and then must go through the draft system.

Young Dominicans have the opportunity to benefit from more than just baseball skills but preparation for a life in the U.S. as well. They are given a chance to at least temporarily leave a life of depravity. By the same token, very few of these youngsters statistically make it to the major leagues and even prior to their new visa status, hundreds of minor leaguers were brought to the U.S. each year only to be relieved of their services. Hundreds of Dominican players also never return to their homeland and remain in the U.S. as illegal immigrants, primarily surviving in the underground economy of New York City.

What MLB no longer finds useful becomes disposable. Unfortunately, these disposables are people; from retired players who never had benefit of the lucrative contract, true ambassadors of the game such as Frank Robinson, African American youth, and even foreign-born players who are not major league material.

It has been said that Latin players in the Dominican Republic sign for contracts between 5 and 10 cents on the dollar compared to their U.S. counterparts. And with approximately 400 Dominican players signed each year to minor league contracts, MLB can celebrate its unhampered pipeline of such as well as its new surprisingly cozy relationship with the U.S. Congress which it lobbied along with the U.S. State Department, for these immigration law changes.

It may be a win-win for MLB as employers looking for cheap labor and even for those other employers willing to hire them at below market value wages, should these minor leaguers remain in the U.S. illegally upon their termination from their respective clubs. Their visas remain valid only as long as they are employed by MLB and its minor leagues. In addition, there will now be more available H-2B visas available per year for those multi-national corporations sniffing out labor with devalued wages in other industries. And the U.S. Congress gets a feather in its cap from some of its largest donors.

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But it remains a lose-lose for communities across the U.S. which finance sky box stadiums, unable to afford tickets for their families, for games played on the backs of many exploited athletes who never make it to the big leagues and at the expense of our own children, who of little means, are never even encouraged to play baseball by its biggest profiteers.

For there is a proviso in the immigration law which both the U.S. Congress and MLB conveniently overlooked. The policy developed in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Labor and the Immigration and Naturalization Service, now the Department of Homeland Security, granted MLB its visa program, contingent upon foreign-born players only occupying positions on a team that could not be filled by U.S. citizens.

Obviously, the U.S. government and MLB have come to the conclusion that playing baseball should be included among those “jobs Americans won’t do.” Terribly convenient, but sad for the game of baseball, no longer to be considered an equal opportunity employer. Happy Civil Rights Game, Commissioner!

Diane M. Grassi is a contributing writer for The Biz of Baseball.

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Ms. Grassi is a features columnist for Black Athlete Sports Network, Diamond Angle: The Eclectic Baseball Ezine, ports-Central.org and E-Sports Media. Numerous other online publications regularly feature her work such as the New Media Journal; Renew America: the Hawaii Reporter; Veteran’s Today; the Amherst Times, Elite TV among others.

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[Grassi’s complete profile and contact information can be viewed here .](#)

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