



ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

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Baseball Is America's Pastime... and Its Future

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, I have heard spoken on numerous unfortunate occasions the absurdity that American football, not baseball, is America's pastime. Now, I am a committed American football fan myself, so this is not in any way a criticism of football itself. Rather, it is a claim that baseball, in a way that no other sport can boast, best embodies the spirit and history of America. Football may be America's future, but as I have reflected on the incontrovertible truth that baseball is America's pastime, I hope that it will remain America's future.

America's future, however, is uncertain for a number of reasons. Indeed, the entire world faces an uncertain future in the wake of COVID-19 and Russia's invasion of Ukraine. No longer can we rely on the way things used to be for success. In America, many of us in academia wonder about the future of higher education. America also faces economic concerns, social unrest, and political divisiveness. America has an uncertain future, and one must wonder what could unify us once again to bring about positive change and a better future.

In this somewhat unconventional essay, I first propose that exploring something as seemingly trivial as baseball could be a start towards a creative solution. Why baseball? First, baseball reflects America's past. Second, baseball has influenced, and in many ways uniquely shaped, America's present. Finally, a close examination of the successes

and failures of baseball reveal important insights for America's future. In order to demonstrate baseball's ability to transform our future, I tentatively enter into the heated discussion about racism in America. If I can show how baseball could help a contentious issue like racism, perhaps we can make strides on rectifying this injustice. Additionally, if baseball can provide wisdom on addressing this topic, it surely could prove useful in discussions on less contentious issues.



Henry Sandham, *Baseball*

BASEBALL AND AMERICA'S PAST

Baseball is America's pastime most simply because baseball reflects America's past with respect to separation, rule and order, and geography and expansion.

Separation

In a dramatic oversimplification, the American revolution was an attempt to free a nation from what it looked like (England) but from which it was ever-increasingly distinct. As American colonies were developing their own unique culture, they began to seek independence that would allow self-governance and freedom to continue their pursuit of a new society in a new world.

Similarly, baseball took some of the basic notions of cricket and thoroughly Americanized it into the early stages of baseball. Although acknowledging certain roots, baseball nevertheless needed to break free from ties to other games and develop its own governance and culture. Baseball, therefore, mirrors America's story of a search for independence. It sought separation, recognizing that reform could only allow a minimal amount of freedom; complete freedom to become what it thought it ought to be required not just distinction, but separation into something new.

Rule and Order

Following America's successful war for independence, the new nation needed to establish rules for order. The Articles of Confederation, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights accomplished this task, but not all at once. These documents demonstrated the challenges of immediately solving the problems inherent in this new endeavour, so further and later reforms, clarifications, and expansions were necessary. Representatives with personal interest in America's success met to decide how best to govern this new nation. They were not passive spectators to the development of a nation but rather citizens thoroughly rooted in the new nation who desired to see it flourish.

Baseball, too, started with a rudimentary rule book that developed as new and unforeseen circumstances arose in the game. When a situation arose for which there was no rule and no clear arbiter between right and wrong, baseball, like America, wrote amendments and additions to the rule book to address these problems. Moreover, these rules were developed by those who played the game regularly, who had a vested interest in its growth and success. Once again, baseball could take cues from America's history and recognize the necessity of order, written rules, and collaborative changes by those who were most invested in the outcome.

Geography and Expansion

Even the geographical profile of America dictated baseball's rise. Like America, baseball started in New England and moved gradually west. As America moved

more and more into the cities, baseball found its footing in the growing metropolises, although its players—and soon its fans—were from both urban and rural settings. Baseball was truly a sport for all classes. Finally, as Americans increasingly took on factory and office jobs, the need for evening instead of daytime leisure became a premium, so even baseball moved many (then most) of its games from days to nights under the lights. As America expanded in population size, so also did baseball gain more participants and fans. As America expanded geographically westward, baseball followed, spreading this new game far and wide. The story of much of America's growth in the late 19th and early 20th centuries closely parallels the growth of baseball as America's game. Consequently, baseball began to thrive and establish itself as America's pastime precisely because it followed America's model.



Morris Kantor, *Baseball at Night* by ctankcycles is marked with CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

BASEBALL AND AMERICA'S PRESENT

Baseball certainly flourished in its early days by following the course of America's history, but it wasn't long before baseball caught up and changed the landscape of the present and set a course for a new future. Nowhere is this more evident than racial integration in sports. Although Fritz Pollard played in the NFL in 1920, many acknowledge Kenny Washington as the one who broke football's colour barrier, since within a few years the NFL became more and more integrated.

For baseball, racial integration began with Washington's college teammate, Jack Roosevelt Robinson. Jackie Robinson's signing on April 10, 1947, soon followed by playing with the Brooklyn Dodgers, sent shockwaves throughout American society. Schools weren't integrated; restaurants weren't integrated; the very fabric of American life was largely two shades without gray. Blacks and

whites were segregated in most of the prominent arenas of public life—until football and baseball. Although some now believe football has supplanted baseball as America's sport, in 1946-1947 this was certainly not the case. Baseball still dominated the American imagination. Thus, a combination of Washington's injury struggles, Robinson's success, and baseball's supremacy left Robinson—and baseball—as the one who helped pioneer a new America.

The courageous and successful efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. and the rest of the Civil Rights Movement found many more sympathetic listeners because of the integration already seen in America's pastime. The stories of Jackie Robinson and many other players of colour in those early years of integration remain examples of courage and steadfastness. These figures provided later Civil Rights Activists with confidence that change could come, though it would not be easy and without resistance. If baseball could be integrated and make the game better (and it certainly did), then who could possibly object to the same in education and other arenas of American life? Unfortunately, many did, but the Civil Rights Movement was successful, and I believe in large part because of the successful integration of baseball, which stood as a cornerstone of American cultural life. In many other ways, baseball and American life fed off one another, teaching one another, in what one



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might metaphorically call a dance of give and take. Multigenerational porch gatherings around the radio broadcast of the local team developed bonds between neighbours and amongst generations. Everyday numbers became associated with baseball immortality—56 (DiMaggio's hit-streak), 61 (Maris breaking Ruth's single-season home run record of 60), .400 (pursuit of another .400 season batting average after Ted Williams' brilliant 1941 season), 715 (Hank Aaron breaking Babe Ruth's

career home run record of 714). and more. These numbers were the talk of dinner tables, workplaces, and public transportation. They captured the minds of Americans because they captured the American spirit of the pursuit of excellence, of something more, of overcoming obstacles, of achieving goals, of doing the seemingly impossible. Some of the records above were subsequently eclipsed (even more than once), but many believe that others like DiMaggio's hitting streak and another .400 hitter are all in the realm of the impossible—yet still we try. Whether the American spirit compels these efforts, or the transformative power of baseball carries along the American spirit, perhaps all we need to say is that the game became so assimilated into American life that what defined baseball simultaneously defined America.



Nelson Greene, *The Pied Piper of America* – Nelson Greene

BASEBALL AND AMERICA'S FUTURE

Baseball, then, is a reflection of America's past and is intertwined, as in a dance, with America's present. The question remains as to whether or not baseball can and will set the tone for America's future. Although baseball could speak to many aspects of America's future, for the sake of this essay I will explore only one way—racial equality.

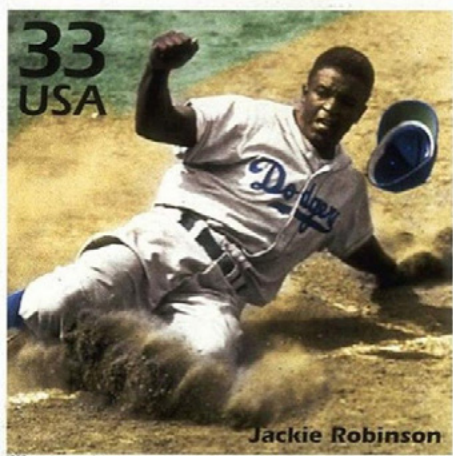
In 2022, America still seeks freedom from the evils of racism. Although many improvements can be celebrated since the Civil Rights Movement, there is still work to be done, but I think the multiracial growth in baseball is evidence that many races and cultures can join together in harmony around a common goal. But not only does baseball demonstrate improvements in racial reconciliation in the present, lessons from baseball will surely teach us about how to pursue racial harmony in broader society.

Where I live in Southwest Missouri, USA, we have an overwhelmingly white population. Many other rural areas

tell the same story. Our lack of diversity in population throughout much of the country makes interracial interaction in many places infrequent. Recently, I was reading *The Hidden Brain* by Shankar Vedantam and *Blindspot* by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald. These two books highlight many studies that demonstrate the dangers of implicit bias, especially when we live in areas dominated by one race. These books and studies like them suggest that persons can be consciously against racism and believe in equality, but our “hidden brain” identifies white skin with normalcy and therefore looks with confusion or suspicion on anything outside of normal. Though many speak of racism as something in the past, these implicit biases at minimum can create unintentional inequalities.

In looking at American sports, certain biases, both conscious and unconscious, have existed for quite some time. From stereotypes of black quarterbacks to white receivers in the NFL, or to assumptions that NHL players are white, many professional sports, though improving, are still trying to catch up to baseball's successful integration. For example, a recent search for the highest annual salary for the 2022 season reveals nine of the top twenty as persons of colour. Compare this to seven of twenty in the NFL, zero of twenty in the NHL and twenty of twenty in the NBA. It would seem that if our goal is equality and diversity, then baseball, better than any of the other major American sports, could provide us with answers. What, then, are these answers?

First, we must keep doing the right things, even if change is not immediately evident. Baseball largely pioneered racial integration in sports, and it therefore has simply benefited from more years of learning from mistakes and making strides towards equality. One of the sad lessons of American racism is that racism seems unable to be overcome in a single generation. Nothing excuses our terrible history, and no appeal to time is a satisfactory answer to one who suffers the injustices of racial discrimination. But in the fallen world in which we live, baseball can teach us that a prolonged, concerted effort toward a



goal can and does bear fruit. Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Hank Aaron set the stage for Ken Griffey, Jr. and the generations of black players to follow. If we keep pressing on toward a goal, we can see change and justice.

Second, we must continue to encourage and provide opportunities for integration. Baseball has been a sport for all classes. Youth baseball programmes, the relatively minimal cost of beginner level equipment, and the ability to play the sport in any open field made baseball a game all could enjoy, not just the wealthy. Likewise, until recently, baseball was also a game that families could afford to attend together in person. White families, black families, other families of colour all cheering for the same team, the same players, in the same stadium, proves to be a unifying experience. As mentioned above, much of the unconscious racial bias stems from being too surrounded by people exactly like us (race, class, interests). By uniting fans in this way, we have yet another context in which we are helpfully integrated.

Third, we must find creative solutions that advance integration and reconciliation without the loss of minority cultures. One lesson of failure that baseball can teach us for the future relates to the demise of the Negro Baseball Leagues. There is no denying that Jackie Robinson's debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers was a massive move toward racial reconciliation in America. But the manner in which MLB took players from the Negro Leagues left the Negro Leagues with no future. We must pursue solutions to racial reconciliation that do not hurt predominantly minority communities.

CONCLUSION

The social issues in our world today are complex and require thoughtful and creative solutions. Perhaps things we enjoy like baseball, precisely because they have been so connected to our past and present, can provide us with some ideas for the future. In this essay I have only sketched a possible way forward and outlined some ideas for what this process could look like in general and for the particular issue of American racism. My hope and prayer is that in the days and years to come we can see the kingdom of God advance in justice and righteousness so that all human beings can live a life of human flourishing.

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