The Country Club Sport: The Decline of African-Americans in Baseball

By Elijah Stewart

Jay Alexander couldn't wait for his opportunity to coach college baseball. And what better place to start than his alma mater, Wayne State University, a Division II school in Detroit. Having led the Warriors in hits, runs scored, RBIs in his senior season in 1996, Alexander would return to the school as an assistant coach in 1998 before taking over as head coach 2002.

However, Alexander had spotted one noticeable difference from the team he once played for in the mid 90s.

“I was completely blown away by the lack of African-Americans" said Alexander, who coached at Wayne State for six years. “When I took over, I think we had zero African Americans. I think that’s when I realized ‘wow… we’re just not out there.’”

From that point on Alexander, who is African-American, made a conscious effort to make sure blacks were represented on his team.
“I prided myself to make sure I went out and found African-American players out of state, out of country, whatever it took,” said Alexander, 42. “We had probably the most (black players) on every team I coached. I usually had five to eight African-Americans on my team.”

While Alexander’s harsh realization of his own team was troubling enough it wasn’t until his team took the field that it became even more clear how serious the situation was.

“You go through a whole season and you go through a whole postseason and you don’t see but one or two African-American athletes on the baseball field,” said Alexander who coached Wayne State from 2002 to 2008. “When you know that we can play the game just as good as anyone else. That’s a wild moment”

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According to the TIDES Institute of Ethics and Diversity in Sports, in 2013, just 2.6 percent of players in Division I baseball were African-American. While the number of blacks student-athletes in college baseball has been low for some time now, the numbers have seen a steady decline since 2000, when 6.6 percent of college players were black.

The numbers don’t get much better when you get to the professional level either. This season only comprised 8.3 percent of MLB rosters this year on Opening Day. This would be tied for the lowest number ever recorded by the Institute of Ethics and Diversity in Sports since 1990, their first year of research. In 1990, 17 percent of the players were black.

Alexander spent six seasons at Wayne State for before becoming the head coach at Eastern Michigan in 2008. He was one of just three black Division I head coaches of non-historically black colleges before he was fired by the school in May. After Alexander’s dismissal and the death of San Diego State head coach Tony Gwynn, Presbyterian University’s Elton Pollock is currently the only black Division I coach at a non historically black college.

So where have all of the black players gone and why aren’t they playing baseball on the collegiate and professional levels anymore? That answer’s a little more complicated.

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“It just seems like basketball and football are more conscious for kids to play now, than baseball.” says Fred Royster, a former baseball player at Virginia State between 1982-86. Royster has even seen historically black colleges like his own give scholarships to white players in order to fill out a competitive roster.

Royster remembers growing up in an era where kids grew up idolizing Willie Mays, Hank Aaron or Willie McCovey. Royster says summer mornings in Brooklyn were the same for most
of the kids in the neighborhood during the 70s. You’d wake up, run outside, grab a stick, grab a ball, gather a bunch of your friends, and start the first of what would be a day’s worth of pickup baseball games until sunset. Most kids would imitate their childhood heroes out on the field or in the street.

“Unlike today’s youth who are inside a lot more. In our time we were always outside,” says Royster. “So it wasn’t very hard to get a bunch of us to play.” Now in his 50s, Royster says he sees a generation of kids who’d rather pick up an Xbox controller than a baseball.

“With the advent of the new era with computer age, with the Madden games, and all of those computer games and video games that kids play today; they aren’t really outside.”

But it wasn’t just the kids of the neighborhood responsible for the growing the sport in the inner cities.

In Detroit, Alexander, just 5-years-old at the time, would practice with his father James’ 10 and under “BOY 4” little league team. One particular practice stands out to Alexander as one he’ll never forget.

“I was stepping into the box against 10-year-olds and I got hit and I started crying,” says Alexander recounting the story more than 35 years later. When Jay refused to step back into the batter’s box, James made him run. The session went on for another hour as Jay ran on the side until practice ended. As the kids began to go home, James, a former police officer with Detroit’s gang squad unit, quickly packed up the equipment and headed for his car with Jay trailing behind.

When Jay got in the car, James asked his son what he was doing. “I told him I was getting in the car so I can go home,” recalls Jay. “He goes ‘you’re not going home.’ I said ‘why?’ He said ‘you’re not going home until you get back in the box.’

The younger Alexander went back on the field and stepped into the same batter’s box that left him terrified just an hour earlier before heading back home with his father.

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Jay Alexander says fathers within the community like his own, helped expose kids to the sport and often coached or facilitated organized little leagues in black neighborhoods. Men like James were influential in not just passing on the game to the kids of the community but also teaching them life lessons on and off the field to help these kids grow up to be responsible men. Alexander says this is lost now with the growing numbers of single-parent homes and rising divorce rates within the black community. According data released by the U.S. Census Bureau in 2011, black women in the United States are less likely to get married and more likely to get divorced than any other ethnic group.
“So say you have a mom that makes, what $40,000 to $60,000 a year. She’s got a car note, she’s got a house note or rent, and then she has to take care of her kid and it may not be her only kid,” says Alexander. “And if the dad is not around or not paying child support that makes it extremely difficult.”

Alexander and Royster both say the growing costs of the game have made the sport of baseball less inclusive for blacks. Unlike sports like football and basketball the equipment and travel costs to play baseball on the youth level alone make it tough for people with lower incomes to play the sport on a high level.

“For a single parent of course it’s a lot harder, especially a single parent mother; trying to get their kids to practice, trying to pay the amount of money you have to pay,” says Royster. “Because to play little league in those games, it’s not free.”

A quick glance at the prices for baseball apparel at Modell’s would likely put any parent at risk of heart failure. When you tally up the costs of bats, gloves, uniforms, cleats, batting helmets, you’re already looking at more than $1000; and that doesn’t even include catcher’s gear or the travel expenses.

“I call this “The country club sport,” says Alexander. “And what that means is we just don’t have enough money. It has become so money-oriented… you gotta have some pretty steep pockets to be able to afford to play with these teams if you want to get any exposure.”

Without the money to play on travel teams and go to college showcases, Alexander says it’s even hard for good black high school players to get looks from college coaches because rarely do college coaches attend high school games.

“It’s all about the summer,” says Alexander. “So if you go and play in a black summer league where the kids are really good but they can’t afford to play on a good summer league team, nobody ever
sees them. If they can’t afford to go to a showcase, nobody ever sees them”

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Luckily someone saw Corey Ray. Ray attended Simeon High School on Chicago’s Southside, notorious for poverty, gun violence and gang activity. Life in the neighborhood was frightening at times. Metal detectors and cops on guard at school entrances, police raids of school lockers, multiple classmates either locked up or killed every year.

“You knew guys were up to no good,” says Ray. “It was easy to get sucked in and fit into the wrong crowd.”

But with the guidance of his father and grandfather, Ray kept his nose clean. He says it wasn’t too hard considering all of the negativity surrounding him. “It made me push to want to get out,” says Ray. “It made me realize, I didn’t want my kids to have to grow up in a neighborhood like this.”

Ray arrived at perennial basketball power Simeon with the goal of putting the Wolverines’ baseball team on the map; a team Ray says the student body had all but ignored before he got there.

“The first thing I got when I told people I went to Simeon they’d be like ‘oh you must play basketball, or you’re kind of strong you must play football.’” says Ray. No one ever believed I played baseball. No ever believed that I was good at it at all.”

Ray was better than good, by the end of his time at Simeon, Ray was an Under Armour All-American, the no. 4 player in the State of Illinois according to Baseball Report and 33rd round draft pick by the Seattle Mariners. But it wasn’t just Ray’s high school exploits that got him national attention.

Ray was member of the Chicago White Sox Amateur City Elite (ACE) program. The ACE program, funded by Chicago White Sox Charities and run by White Sox cross-checker Nathan Durst, takes kids the ages of 13-18 from the Chicagoland area and helps them get exposure to college coaches and scouts by taking them on travel tournaments and showcases. The program was created to combat the declining numbers of African-Americans playing baseball.
“The purpose of that was to take players from urban high school areas and try and help them get exposure and development,” says Durst, who’s also responsible for scouting draft talent for the White Sox organization. “In order to get them to the top college that their ability would allow them to go to.”

Durst says the program’s main goal is to get kids to college and hope that once they succeed on the college level, they’ll be able to get drafted to the Major Leagues. Durst says the ACE program puts a heavy emphasis on education at an early age so kids understand once they get to high school what kind of grades they need to play in college.

“My hope is that some of these players, who may not like school right now, but understand ‘I gotta go to school, I gotta get good grades, I gotta study hard to do good on the SAT/ACT,’” says Durst. “Because to play at Vanderbilt, you gotta get into Vanderbilt academically.”

The ACE Program was founded by Chicago White Sox Cross-Checker Nathan Durst (middle) in 2007. Photo Courtesy: Chicago White Sox

Durst says he’s seen players from Chicago’s public high schools severely underrated by the media and scouting services because some don’t have the luxury of playing for a travel team that allows them to get in front of college scouts. But since the program’s inception in 2007, 84 players have received college aid to play collegiate baseball.

“They took us to tournaments that allowed us to be seen by college coaches. And not just college coaches but professional scouts as well,” said Ray.
Last season two of their players played in the College World Series. One of them was Vanderbilt’s Ro Coleman, the other was Ray; who started as a freshman in the outfield for Louisville this season after forgoing his MLB draft selection by the Mariners.

“(The College World Series) was great. Something I’ll never forget. I have never played in front of that many fans, on a stage that big, on a field that nice” says Ray who remembers his high school baseball team being lucky to muster up 100 people to come to a game while thousands flooded to see Simeon’s basketball and football teams. “You pull up to the field, and you’re getting off the bus and you’re trying to get ready for the game but you got a little kid asking for your signature or someone’s got on your jersey or hat and they want you to sign it. It’s great.”

Ray says it was at a showcase with the White Sox, that Ray met with a recruiting coordinator from Louisville who said they were interested in signing him.

But there was a time early on where Ray thought he’d have to stop playing baseball.

“My parents didn’t know how I would continue to play baseball because the travel, and the paying for the tournaments and buying new bats every year. It was hitting us heavy,” says Ray. “And the White Sox, they had bats for us, they gave us uniforms, they paid for our tournament. The only thing we had to pay for was if our parents wanted to come they had to buy their own hotel (room) and that was all.”

Ray, who played on one of just two all-black 12-year-old travel team, said playing for coach Robert Fletcher’s team helped him not just become a great player but also taught him life lessons to take with him off the field.

“They taught us to be men, not just baseball players,” says Ray.

Often times, Ray says his team would go to tournaments out of state and wouldn’t get calls from umpires. During a championship game in Memphis against the #1 ranked travel team “The Stix,” Ray recalls his team losing when one of his teammates who represented the tying run was called out at the plate. Ray swears his teammate beat the throw and that loss still sticks with Ray to this day. But he said it was during those kind of difficult times his coaching used as teaching moments.

“We used that as motivation to get better and stronger” says Ray. “We realized we could be the best team in the nation and that it wasn’t about the color of your skin but it’s about being mentally tough and going out there and having fun.”

“In this game of baseball you’re going to get punched in the mouth but you gotta deal with and you gotta persevere,” says Ray. “And that’s not just in baseball that’s in life as well.”
The sad reality is there simply aren’t enough programs like the ACE program to help promote the game amongst the black youth and develop players. Sports columnist and Baseball Hall of Fame voter Rob Parker says if MLB made the same investments in black community that they’ve made in Latin America, the decline of players on the professional level wouldn’t be so drastic.

“Basically what they’ve (MLB teams) done is outsource their jobs,” says Parker. “They’d rather go to South America and Latin America and develop their players there where you don’t have to pay the up-front money you have to pay for players from the United States. Being either black or white.”

Currently all 30 MLB teams have baseball academies in the Dominican Republic for adolescents to develop their skills under the watchful eye of team scouts and trainers. Five teams currently have academies in Venezuela.

By putting these kids in their academies, teams are able to develop, foster relationships, and sign kids at a very young age while circumventing the process of an MLB draft and dealing with high-priced agents for American players.

Parker says creating similar academies in the inner-cities of the United States could do a great deal to increase the number of blacks playing in the Majors.

“Do the Mets or Yankees have a baseball academy set up in Harlem, or Detroit or Chicago? No, they don’t,” says Parker. “How come there is not a baseball academy in Harlem to take kids off the street?”

Programs like Harlem RBI, sponsored by MLB, provide kids in Harlem and The Bronx the opportunity to play baseball in a organized and friendly environment.

But, Harlem RBI has not produced an MLB player. And unlike the MLB academies in Latin America, COO Richard Suoto said Harlem RBI’s main goal is not to produce future Major Leaguers.

Besides giving inner-city kids the opportunity to play in a baseball league often few and far between in low-income areas, Suoto says Harlem RBI’s only goals are to improve kids’ literacy levels and teach them the values of fair play and sportsmanship that can help them later in life.

Royster also puts the brunt of the blame on MLB for the recent decline.
“They’ve only scratched the surface. They haven’t really put in the economic powers to actually get black players to really play,” says Royster. “Major League Baseball is a billion dollar business, they could do a whole lot more.”

Royster also says MLB and society as a whole have done a poor job of promoting the black talent playing currently.

“They just for some reason do not promote the black baseball players,” says Royster. “Major League Baseball should do a better job of promoting their black players. They just have to; because the numbers show there aren’t a lot of black players playing.

Now Royster says megastars from the NBA like LeBron James have turned kids’ field of dreams into hoop dreams.

“There are a lot of men my age, we try to get kids to go outside and play, but it seems like we didn’t do a good job over the years of promoting the black players we had,” said Royster. “Kids aren’t really familiar with what players out there that are really good.”

Durst also credits the NBA for it’s marketing of their athletes.

“I just think that basketball and the NBA does a tremendous job of marketing it’s individual players to really excite the fanbase,” says Durst.

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The truth is MLB seems to have lost a large portion of it’s fanbase, not just black. In fact some may suggests blacks, along with whites, have simply lost interest in baseball. TV ratings for nationally televised games on FOX, TBS and ESPN have been on a steady decline since 2007. The four least-watched World Series’ in television history have come in the past six years according to Nielsen Media Research.

Alexander says a friend who played professional baseball and happens to be white, recently had a conversation with his son who told him he no longer wanted to play baseball anymore.

“He says ‘listen to this dad, let’s say I go through this whole season and I’m playing the outfield, I may get two balls’” says Alexander recalling the conversation. “Then I go play and hit and I may have a chance to get to affect the game a little bit here or there but there’s a lot of waiting around.”

Alexander says the son told his father he wanted to concentrate on football. “There’s a lot of action (in football),” Alexander says the boy told his father. “And if I make a mistake I can come back and correct it right away, instead of waiting four days, five days, six days (in baseball)”
Ray says the slow pace of the game has also led many kids to shy away from baseball. “I don’t know how many times when I tell people I play baseball they say ‘Why? Baseball’s boring.’

“They see it as ‘oh baseball doesn’t get a lot of fans so I don’t want to play that, I want people to see me succeed’” says Ray on the mindset of young black kids today. “‘Oh I’ll never succeed in that because not enough African-Americans play that. I’m going to do what we do. We play basketball or we play football.’”

Alexander says the landscape of college sports also makes it difficult for baseball to compete with basketball and football.

Because football and basketball are the only collegiate sports that earn the schools money, those teams get priority when it comes to scholarship money. Division I football programs are allowed 84 full scholarships; while basketball are given 13 full scholarships for about 15 players. However baseball is allowed only 11.7 full scholarships for a 35-man roster

“If I go into your mom and dad’s house and I’m the baseball coach at said university, if I say you’re my guy. You are the best player, I think you’re going to be a top-5 round draft pick... and I’m going to give you 50 percent scholarship,” says Alexander. “And the football coach from said university just left (your house) yesterday and said ‘you’re my guy and I’m giving you a full ride.’ You’re going to look at me like I’m crazy.”

“It’s a country club sport, you can’t get into school without paying $25,000, $35,000 after getting a scholarship,” says Alexander.

Alexander also points to the growth of AAU basketball as one of the key factors in the decline of black baseball.

“They’re like the old football days,” says Alexander of AAU basketball programs today, “They don’t want you playing baseball when it’s basketball time.”

Alexander has been approached by city officials in Detroit about helping the black youth get more involved in the sport. Alexander says the city hopes to build indoor baseball facilities for kids. But Alexander is worried with such heavy commitments to basketball, kids won’t have the time to play anyway.

“Basketball is huge in the city of Detroit,” says Alexander. “So it’s like ‘am I going to not play basketball?’”

“Everybody around the city knows what the best AAU team are. But nobody knows what they best baseballs teams are,” says Alexander.
Durst says he’s also noticed how basketball has pretty much taken over the time and attention of many young black athletes in Chicago as well.

“In this day and age, everything is so specialized; and at a certain age a player who played multiple sports at 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, once you hit 14 or once you get to high school you see a lot of specialized sports where you’re only doing one thing and you’re doing it all year round,” says Durst. “So especially for us, we lose a lot of players to basketball in the Chicagoland area.”

Durst says his teams are often lacking in size because the bigger athletes in the city tend to lean towards basketball. Durst says he’s now hoping to peel off some of the 10th and 11th men on basketball teams and introduce them to baseball with hopes showing what’s possible if they decided to spend their time on the baseball diamond.

“Maybe (the 12th man on a basketball team) would be a superstar in baseball,” says Durst. “I don’t want them to pick one or the other, I prefer they play both. What I would really like hopefully is that potentially 6-3, 6-4 basketball player that might not be able to be a 3, that might be have a chance at division I, but he might be a division I baseball player potentially if he sticks with baseball.”

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Baseball’s diminishing popularity amongst the black community is certainly troubling. The continued declining numbers of African-Americans playing in college and the majors suggests radical change isn’t around the corner. But this past summer’s Little League World series showed hope could come down the road.

13-year-old female phenom Mo’ne Davis captivated the sports world and beyond by leading Philadelphia’s Taney Dragons to the Little League World Series. The African-American teen’s stellar performances on the mound in front of a national audience earned her the cover of Sports Illustrated, an appearance on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, and a trip to the White House to meet President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama.

While Davis’ was the biggest star of this year’s tournament, she wasn’t the only one to show America’s pastime may not be dead amongst blacks after all.

Chicago’s Jackie Robinson West became the first all-black team in three decades to win the Little League World Series U.S. Championship; while finishing second overall in the tournament. This is quite the accomplishment considering many of the kids came from Chicago’s Southside; the same troubled background as Louisville’s Corey Ray.
“I think a great thing for the African-American race was Jackie Robinson (West) winning the National Championship” said Ray. “Because (blacks) can see that African-Americans do play baseball and they are competing not just locally but on a National level.”

Alexander also agrees that exposing blacks to baseball is one of the biggest keys for reigniting interest in the sport.

“We have to get more exposure in the inner cities to baseball. I don’t think we do a very good job of exposing ourselves to baseball.” said Alexander.

But in order to showcase a sport, you need real-life examples of people playing for people to jump on board. With fewer players starring on the Major League Level, exposing blacks to the game to sport grows more tricky.

But Parker has a more optimistic outlook. With MLB currently suffering from the after effects of the “steroid era,” Parker says the decline of African-American sluggers is temporary. With iconic hitters like Barry Bonds and Derek Jeter having exited the game, Parker says it’ll only be a matter of time before the next great hitter captivates the heart of the country.

“I just think they’ll be another guy that will come around or a couple of stars and maybe they’ll play for some bigger markets and maybe they win a championship and people will hold on to that,” says Parker.

“It’s just a matter of time.”