

## Global trend remakes face of pro sports

By Tim Wendel

A *Sports Illustrated* article this summer documented that the percentage of African-Americans playing Major League Baseball has fallen from 19% to 10% in the past seven years. Sports-talk radio and newspapers reported the drop as an isolated event. About the only connection made with larger trends was that Latinos filled the gap.

But the forces now in play throughout sports soon may affect a great deal more than baseball. According to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida, the percentage of players from outside the U.S. continues to grow in professional baseball, football, soccer and basketball. What we're witnessing is the beginning of the global sports age. This trend could create a harsh new reality for U.S.-born players especially for the African-American athletes who dominate some of those sports.

International prospects can cost pro teams less and often are thought to play a more fundamentally sound game than their U.S. counterparts, says Harry Edwards, a University of California sociology professor and San Francisco 49ers consultant. He predicts that basketball will go the way of baseball as foreign-born players increasingly take over its rosters, now filled mainly with black U.S. players.

"In 10 or 15 years, the question won't be, 'What happened to the black athlete in baseball?' " Edwards says. "The question will be, 'Who needs the black athlete?' "

Sports activist Richard Lapchick disagrees with Edwards' forecast. But he acknowledges that U.S. coaches and players need to "change their style of play, be less individualistic" to compete against this new wave of talent.

From the Bronx to Watts, the personal promise of professional sports has held many neighborhoods together. Even though the dream becomes reality for a tiny percentage of those who play, it provides a structure and a discipline that will be hard to replace if teams fill more of their rosters with international stars. Many community leaders, barely aware of the globalization trend, haven't started to consider what to do.

For those on the outside looking in, it's easy to dismiss how important a game a sports dream can be. The 1994 documentary *Hoop Dreams* followed Chicago teenagers Arthur Agee and William Gates through four years of success and heartbreak playing high school basketball. For the pair, basketball was the only thing that mattered during those years. As adults, though, Agee started a foundation to help children, and Gates became a pastor. But Gates remembers his 15 minutes of fame, even his impossible dream of playing in the NBA, as "a blessing."

For decades, basketball has been a blessing to the black community. Although playing in the NBA always has been a long shot, the percentage of African-Americans at the pro level has held steady at more than 75%, according to the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport. In comparison, black participation continues to fall in baseball and recently dropped to 65% in the NFL a four-year low.

The year *Hoop Dreams* came out, the first 10 picks in the NBA draft were from the U.S., and all had attended college. In 2002, however, Yao Ming from the Shanghai Sharks was the top pick, an Italian forward was drafted at No. 5, and a Brazilian ([news - web sites](#)) center was No. 7. This year, a high school kid, LeBron James, went No. 1, a center from Serbia-Montenegro was next, and a French forward was No. 11.

Former NBA star Charles Barkley wishes "kids, especially black kids, didn't dream so much about playing in the NBA." But he agrees that playing ball kept Agee and Gates in school and kept them close to their families, friends and community.

Edwards says too much emphasis has been placed on sports in the black community, but notes that sports may be "our last hook and handle" to today's youth. Midnight basketball, Saturday football and the local recreational facility "put them back in contact with the clergy, mentors, health workers, counselors, government workers, with people from the economic and corporate sector," he told *ColorLines* magazine. "Without that, we have no way of getting them at all, except through police and judicial action."

Steve Boyd, vice president for the Hoop Dreams Scholarship Fund in Washington, says that the globalization of sports makes "groups like ours even more important." His fund, which began as a charity basketball event, now mentors about 100 inner-city students a year.

"All that kids are bombarded with these days is that sports and entertainment are the only avenues of success," he says. "We're trying to show them that there are a lot of different ways to be a hero."

Maybe young black men will eventually view sports as just recreation and a chance to learn something about life. But it won't happen overnight, and more mentors and role models are needed.

Take James Smith. For 12 seasons, he has been the head basketball coach at Coatesville High School near Philadelphia. His former players include Richard Hamilton, now with the NBA's Detroit Pistons. Smith says basketball is changing faster and more profoundly than its fans and those who dream about playing the game for a living realize.

"Anybody who questions where this is going just has to look at the recent (NBA) drafts," he says. "Basketball is not always going to be the U.S. game."

Smith won't be back at his coaching job this winter. Instead, he's returning to school to pursue a master's in education.

"It's something I've put off for a long time," he says. "But I need to show (the kids) that I can do something else. Be something more."

*Tim Wendel is the author of The New Face of Baseball: The One-Hundred-Year Rise and Triumph of Latinos in America's Favorite Sport*