

# Probing Question: Does baseball still reflect America?

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Ah, the pleasures of spring. Blooming tulips and singing robins herald the rebirth of nature -- and baseball. Across the country, the season's first official pitches are thrown and the crack of ball against bat is heard. Ballparks re-open, many of them, such as Chicago's Wrigley Field, shrines to "America's pastime."

But those who swoon for the game are dwindling in numbers. Baseball long ago yielded its top-sport status to football. Twice as many sports-loving Americans name football as their favorite sport (29 percent) versus baseball (14 percent), according to a December 2006 Harris Interactive poll.

Though its star has faded in recent decades, historically baseball has played a dominant role in America's national imagination and lexicon. In the 1940s, it was truly the country's pastime, according to "Baseball, an Illustrated History," by historian Geoffrey C. Ward and filmmaker Ken Burns.

Baseball was not only a major topic of everyday conversation, it also influenced the way we talked, commented Mark Dyreson, professor of kinesiology and history, who studies connections between sport and nationalism.

"Language has always had multiple dialects," he noted, "but in America, from about the 1880s to the end of the 1950s, the dominant metaphor was baseball. When U.S. presidents used sports analogies, it was often a

baseball analogy. When the public talked about issues, baseball was often the dialect and everybody spoke it."

In 1941, as America's entrance into World War II loomed, the Feather River Bulletin of Plumas County, Calif., declared: "Baseball is more than a National Game. It is America's anchor. It keeps the ship of state fast to its moorings in a balanced life ... American boys play ball. 'Play Ball' is their battle cry, not 'Heil Hitler.'"

These days, does baseball still reflect America?

Yes and no, said Dyreson.

Today, the sports talk around the office water cooler is rarely about baseball, and when people use sports language to talk about issues, "slam dunks" and "end runs" are at least as popular as "grand slams."

A look at the changing ethnic composition of players in baseball's major leagues yields another complicated answer. The emergence of Latino and Asian players in recent years suggests an increasing diversity mirroring the U.S. population at large. The number of African-American players, however, has been steadily dropping since the 1980s. About 10 percent of current major leaguers are African-American, noted Dyreson, compared to 50 percent of pro-football players and 70 percent of NBA hoopsters.

According to Harris pollsters, African-Americans are the least likely group to claim baseball as their favorite sport. Ironically, one explanation for this falling interest, said Dyreson, is that Major League Baseball so adeptly markets the game's connection to America's history. "Nostalgia for the American past doesn't sell well to the African-American community -- and rightly so," said Dyreson. During the 1940s, perhaps baseball's glory days, the baseball establishment bitterly fought

integration. In 1947, when Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play in the major leagues, he endured plenty of racism: separate and unequal facilities, taunts and death threats. In the South, such treatment met African-American players into the 1960s.

Baseball has other reasons for its dwindling popularity. Beyond the ever-increasing competition from other sports, one strike against the game has been ongoing labor problems, said Dyreson. The 1994 baseball strike was the third in 22 years and led to baseball becoming the first sport in history to lose its post-season to a labor dispute.

Another strike against America's pastime may be the sheer pace of today's society. How many times have you heard people complain that baseball is boring? Blame TV, Dyreson said. Many fans find faster-paced games like football and basketball are better-suited for television. Baseball shines on radio, as a listener can do other things and still enjoy the game playing in the background, Dyreson suggested.

In the 1950s, he adds, everybody played baseball. Now, soccer reigns. American adults choose football to watch, but when it comes to playing, the choice is soccer. "More kids and adults play soccer than any other sport," said Dyreson.

But don't count baseball out yet, he said. America exported the game to Latin America in the late 19th century and today in countries like the Dominican Republic and Mexico, baseball enjoys tremendous popularity. Most Latin American youth grow up playing the game, which has become their national pastime. One-third of today's major leaguers are Latino, Dyreson pointed out. With the country's Hispanic population expected to represent one-quarter of all Americans by the year 2050, baseball may be poised for another renaissance as America's favorite game.

Source: By Lisa Duchene, Research Penn State

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