

BASEBALL

BASEBALL; *There Goes the Street, There Goes the Team*

By Robert Lipsyte

June 11, 1993



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June 11, 1993, Section B, Page 9 Buy Reprints

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Racism has its franchises, too. For the first half of the 20th century, major league baseball teams stayed put. From 1950 to 1970, 10 of the 16 original clubs relocated, mostly to other cities, and the determining factor in the move seemed to have been the tilting of the neighborhood around the ball park from white to black.

The statistics that support this theory were presented yesterday to the fifth Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and the American Culture by Professors Alan Sager and Arthur Culbert of the Boston University Schools of Public Health and Medicine. "We'd been studying urban hospitals," said Sager, "and we found that race was the biggest predictor of hospital relocations and closings. People are remarkably sanguine about such wholesale hospital closings although they are personal catastrophes. Baseball teams moving may not be so catastrophic, but they certainly offer dramatic episodes of this important phenomenon."

In a season when Marge Schott's face still hangs like a nutter's moon over the Cincinnati Reds' dugout, when black baseball stars are too cunning or craven to protest the discriminatory patterns of their front offices, and when African-Americans fill only about 5 percent of the stadium seats sold.

"There are different kinds of racism," said Sager. "What the sociologists call 'institutional racism' is not necessarily venomously motivated, like Marge Schott's remarks, for example, but may be linked to deeper feelings about race in which causes and effects are hard to separate.

"Did night baseball make fans more afraid of coming into black neighborhoods? Were black fans perceived as poorer, thus less able to buy tickets? Did the density of black neighborhoods preclude building more parking lots? Did those teams, particularly in the National League, which were more aggressive in bringing in black players, feel they needed to move to create a geographical counterweight to make their fans more comfortable?"

Sager, who speaks so carefully he seems to be posting his words by hand on a scoreboard, asks more questions than he answers. Why, for example, he wonders, are urban blacks so disaffected from baseball? Could the history of these relocations from their neighborhoods be a reason? Or is it how they are treated at the ball park, by security guards, by other fans?

Why, Professor Sager, is all this important enough for the attention of a public health researcher?

He pauses long enough to check three runners. "Baseball may serve as a social thermometer. Think about how we want this country to look 20 years from now. Don't we want people living together comfortably, more equitably, more able to enjoy things together in public? Along with public schools and mass transportation, an easily accessible, inexpensive, pleasant day in the bleachers raises the standard of living of all but those who wall themselves away from the world."

But aren't those the ones who have the power to move ball clubs? People like Marge Schott?

Sager sighs. "People like her have become unstuck from their moorings. She has trouble thinking of many of us as people. But if taxpayers are expending large sums to keep ball clubs in their cities through tax abatements and other subsidies, shouldn't we have some assurance they won't move? Shouldn't we have equity in the teams? Should the cities themselves own the teams?"

Sager and Culbert, in their study, analyzed several other variables besides neighborhood racial composition about the 10 teams that moved. They factored in the age of the stadium, the won-lost standing of the club (by games ahead or behind) and by income (through annual attendance). Of the four factors, it was race that most accurately predicted whether a team would stay or go.

Of those who stayed, the average percentage of blacks in the surrounding neighborhood was 17.6. Of those who left, the percentage was 44.1. That figure would have been far higher without the Boston Braves, the first team to move away, in 1952, and the Pittsburgh Pirates, who moved across town in 1970 because the university wanted the land. Both the Braves and the Pirates were playing in neighborhoods with a black population of less than 1 percent.

The Yankees have been rooted since 1923 in their stadium, in what is now an overwhelmingly Hispanic neighborhood. Sager said that ethnicity had not been used as a predictor in this study, but that the Yankees represented something else -- the power of ownership to rally public support and to "blackmail" a city into subsidizing it.

"If they hadn't been able to do that," said Sager, "the Yankees would be playing in a Jersey swamp by now."

Sager is a 46-year-old former Brooklyn Dodger fan who grew up in Rego Park, Queens, and remembers being gratefully sick in bed listening to the radio when Jackie Robinson stole home in the 1955 World Series. Beyond the statistician's romance with predictive variables and ordinary-least-squares regression, it is such memories that fuel such studies. Why, Professor Sager, should we care?

"Maybe," he said, pausing only to take the signals, hear the crowd, gauge the wind snap of the banners, "we want to think that baseball is somehow different. I want to."

A version of this article appears in print on , Section B, Page 9 of the National edition with the headline: BASEBALL; There Goes the Street, There Goes the Team