Blackballing the Inner City

Alan P. Sager still remembers the disappointment he experienced as an 11-year-old in 1958 when the Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles. "I don't think I ever recovered," he laments.

Years later as a health policy researcher, Sager examined the reasons that inner-city hospitals move or close. The study, published in 1983 when Sager was a professor at Brandeis University, found a close correlation between the hospitals' decision and changes in the racial composition of the neighborhood from white to black. Sager went on to teach public health at Boston University.

But all this time he never forgot that trauma from his youth. And he often considered the possibility of exploring a similar parallel between race and the seemingly steady exodus of urban baseball teams from inner-city neighborhoods. Earlier this year he and Arthur J. Culbert, another baseball aficionado and associate dean of student affairs at the Boston University School of Medicine, used vacation time to combine data from such authoritative sources as *The Sporting News Dope Book* with U.S. census data that had been incorporated in the original hospital study. This compilation yielded information about stadium age, team standing and average annual attendance as well as race—variables that Sager and Culbert hypothesized might have influenced a decision to relocate.

At the Cooperstown Symposium on Baseball and the American Culture in upstate New York—an academic forum at which papers are presented on such esoterica as the effect on baseball of the advent of night games—the two academics put forth their findings. The most powerful statistical predictor among the four variables examined turned out to be race.

The study noted that when the Boston Braves migrated to Milwaukee in 1952, almost 50 years had elapsed since the Baltimore Orioles had become the New York Yankees in 1903, the last time a team had made such a move. In contrast, from 1950 to 1970—a period when many blacks were moving north—10 of the 16 baseball teams changed neighborhoods or cities.

By necessity, the sample was a small one, and it does not provide conclusive proof that race was the only reason owners decided to take flight. Sometimes it clearly was not: the Pittsburgh Pirates changed locale in 1970 because the land was sought by a nearby university.

Management, of course, did not announce that teams were pulling up stakes because a neighborhood was populated by blacks. In fact, Major League Baseball, which represents the owners of the 28 major-league teams, finds little credence in Sager and Culbert's findings. "We would think that most clubs would have moved for economic reasons," says Richard Levin, a spokesman for the organization. Levin suggests that the advent of travel by jet and the fact that some cities were no longer able to support two teams were more likely explanations.

If that were the case, Sager responds, attendance should have had a stronger predictive value in the analysis. He adds that larger cities had two teams, so the average population per team was about the same as for cities that only lodged a single club.

Race, as Sager hypothesizes, also seems to serve as a better variable than personal income or other factors that might suggest that fans feared venturing into a poor neighborhood. He makes his case by listing examples of long-abandoned sports arenas that were always at the very least blue-collar: "Sportsmen's Park in St. Louis, Schibe Park in Philadelphia, the Polo Grounds in New York: these are areas surrounded by row houses, apartment buildings, densely packed dwellings. These are not upper-income areas."

When Sager presented his paper, he said that few in the Cooperstown audience seemed surprised. Baseball has carried its share of racial baggage: Marge Schott, the owner of the Cincinnati Reds, is still under suspension because of disparaging remarks about blacks, and Al Campanis, a Dodgers executive, was fired in 1987 after stating on television that blacks were less fit than whites to hold management positions in the sport. Two people at the symposium remarked to Sager that the once-owner of the Minnesota Twins, Cal Griffith, had said how glad he was to have escaped a predominantly black city when the team left Washington, D.C., in 1960.

If they can find the time, Sager and Culbert plan to bring their research up-to-date. Sager muses that the original trend may have moderated somewhat as cities have provided incentives for teams to stay—sometimes even in black neighborhoods. Local and state coffers have paid for the construction of massive stadiums surrounded by huge parking areas and expressways. The ballpark has become less of a neighborhood fixture. "The number of residents within a quarter mile of the stadium is vanishingly small," Sager says. "The nearest resident may not be able to walk to the stadium." The arena might just as well be occupying the kind of sprawling suburban tract that has provided refuge from urban change for other teams. —*Gary Stix*

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