



McCormack Thought Leadership Spotlight

Widening The Path to America's Pastime:

By Will Norton and Kyle Bamberger

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As we watch the covid-19 version of the 2020 MLB season, analysis abounds on the future health of Major League Baseball. From the eroding foundation of trust seen during restart negotiations between ownership and players, to pace of play and the financial impact covid-19 has had on farm systems and franchise bottom lines, the next decade of league activity will be closely watched by those who love the game.

An evolving – and increasing - issue of long-term importance, one that is more salient now than ever before, relates to the league's ability to create and sustain meaningful and diverse development pathways from urban, low-income pockets of the United States, areas that experience disproportionate and significant barriers to entry into 'America's Game'.

Kyle Bamberger, an MLB area scout and MBA/MS graduate of UMass Amherst's Mark H. McCormack Department of Sport Management, recently completed a field research study analyzing this topic. The purpose of this research was to critically examine the lack of representation from urban, low-income communities in the game today, and identify systemic barriers to change.

The study's methodology included demographic research, analysis of the most recent US Census data, and open-ended interviews with ten MLB employees from nine different teams. The MLB team employees were sampled from a variety of roles within their respective clubs, combining front office, player development, and scouting backgrounds.

Key takeaways and recommendations stemming from this research are outlined below:

1. Shortage of Feeder Programs is Prohibiting Long-Term Participation

MLB Urban Youth Academies have increased interest in cities through the support of the league. However, this study concludes that "pay for play" and "showcase" systems are effectively eliminating participation during a key transitory phase of player development, between middle-to-high school baseball. Those from low-income backgrounds do not have the opportunity to play at the highest prep baseball levels, and are being priced out of the showcase events that drive exposure.

2. 'Learning Ability' is the Most Valued, and Stereotyped, "Makeup Trait"

The study revealed a strong relationship between qualities of "makeup" which are perceived as positive, and stereotypes about whether low-income players possess said qualities. One positively viewed developmental trait is 'the ability to learn', or intellectual upside. Whether it be a player's ability to receive feedback or apply growth techniques on their own, industry professionals surveyed in this study emphasized the clear importance placed on one's ability to learn within the player development and evaluation process. For a variety of systemic reasons, there seems to be an unfortunate engrained belief that disadvantaged players from low-income areas will rate lower on this 'ability to learn' trait, thus limiting the club's confidence in pursuing long-term investment in the player's development.

3. Lack of Resources Lengthens the Learning Curve

Not being able to afford registration for a showcase, or the common living expenses inherent in Minor League Baseball, are obvious barriers to upward mobility. Other income-related barriers include access to healthier food choices in key

development periods, supplements, nicer equipment, top level coaching that only the elite travel teams enjoy, and premier indoor facilities with advanced technology that allow for greater skills development year round. Lacking these resources at the amateur level very often means a lengthened learning curve at the collegiate or professional levels, where performance is expected and coaches/scouts are unaware of the context surrounding access to resources.

Where does Major League Baseball go from here? Management recommendations stemming from this research are outlined below:

1. Continued Resource Allocated to Youth Programs

The RBI and Urban Youth Academy projects have begun to generate more popularity for baseball in key growth areas. Half of the study's contributors from MLB teams referenced the RBI program as a positive program for kids in low-income areas. Complacency is the concern here; there is room for more funding, more resources and increased presence in more cities around the country. The league can provide these added resources, as can the many non-profit organizations who provide baseball to underserved areas. The league partnering with organizations such as Baseball Miracles increases support and efforts in collecting the necessary resources to boost participation from young athletes.

2. Prioritization of Democratized Feeder Programs

The difficulty that exists in transitioning youth players to college or pro prospects due to the "pricing-out" effect of travel ball is a glaring takeaway of this study. Whether it be the league, or stakeholders in the private sector, institutions stepping up to allocate resources towards feeder programs that can support low-income players in their transition to highly-competitive amateur ball needs to become a priority. This priority must become more intentional. Programs like L.E.A.D. help young men through this transition while also helping them overcome challenges they may face off the field.

3. MLB-Sponsored Programming

Major League Baseball and its 30 teams could help players from urban, low-income areas get exposure to college coaches and professional scouts via direct subsidization. One tactical recommendation is to combine the model from teams like the Washington Nationals or Philadelphia Phillies, who have made impacts in their local communities by investing in urban youth academies, with a sponsored travel team model like the MLB Breakthrough Series, in order to build teams in cities comprised of low-income players. The sponsored travel team model is a potential recommendation for improving the system. Recruitment here needs to become more purposeful.

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