Latin Americans dominate baseball. While only a few dozen of them played in the National and American Leagues before 1950, fully a quarter of major leaguers (and half of those in the minors) are now Latinos.

African-Americans, by contrast, are headed in the opposite direction. Filling 27 percent of big league rosters in 1975, they have plummeted to less than one-tenth in the 21st century.

In "Raceball," Rob Ruck, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, tells the fascinating story, unknown even to many die-hard baseball fans, of how "people of color" created a trans-national baseball world decades before Jackie Robinson broke through the Major League baseball color barrier. And, in an analysis fraught with implications far beyond sports, he shows how the "shared struggle" of Latinos and Blacks became a "more fractured fight."

Owners grudgingly paid players

Linked together at first by exclusion, Ruck indicates, Latinos and African-Americans made Cuba "the baseball world's hub" in the early 20th century. In the 1930s, he claims, only a bit hyperbolically, the Pittsburgh Crawfords, of the Negro National League, with Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and "Cool Papa" Bell on the roster, "might have been baseball's best team ever."

And in 1946, Jorge Pasqual, a well-connected and well-heeled businessman, who sported a diamond studded clasp shaped like a miniature bat, recruited White as well as African-American and Latino players to his Mexican League at the very moment big leaguers were threatening to unionize.

The owners of Major League baseball beat back the challenge by grudgingly granting their players a $5,000 minimum salary, per diems during spring training, and a pension plan.

A curse and a blessing

The integration of Major League Baseball, Ruck reminds us, was a "curse" as well as a "blessing." When Negro League players were signed to contracts, Negro League teams were not compensated. One of the few businesses open to Black entrepreneurs, the Negro League was, for all intents and purposes, gone by the 1950s.

In the 1970s, Ruck indicates, ballplayers won the right to sell their services to the highest bidder, as "free agency" replaced the "reserve clause," which tied players under contract to their teams in virtual perpetuity, and major league baseball instituted a draft of high school and college athletes.

Salaries skyrocketed. Latin American players became more attractive because they were cheaper. In the late 1980s, Pedro Martinez and Sammy Sosa signed for a few thousand dollars, while a first-round draft pick could command a million dollars.

Black, Latino tensions escalate

Tensions between Latino and Black players escalated. Gary Sheffield, a veteran African-American player who had hit over 500 home runs, suggested that some teams preferred Latinos because they were easier to control than Blacks.

Tori Hunter, an outfielder for the Minnesota Twins and Los Angeles Angels, contended that "people see dark faces out there and the perception is they're African-American. They're not us. They're imposters." Financial disparities between African-American and Latino players, he added, were driving Blacks out of baseball.

By the late 20th century, African-Americans had gravitated to basketball and football, probably because they were more fast-paced and action-packed. A mere six percent of Blacks, Ruck reports, now name baseball as their favorite sport.
Trying to revive interest in sport

With programs like RBI (Reviving Baseball in Inner-Cities), the Office of Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig is trying to ignite interest among African-American youth. But, RBI is a pale imitation of the baseball academies in the Dominican Republic, which now supplies an astonishing number of major league ballplayers.

The "hard truth," Ruck observes, in a poignant conclusion to a provocative book, is that, unlike Latinos, for whom the game is still embedded, albeit fragilely, in local communities, African-Americans no longer "play and watch baseball with infectious joy."

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