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GAME CHANGER

A black man finds he can save young lives by saving baseball in his community

Roscoe Bryant doesn't wait to get things started. While the rest of his players have yet to trickle in, Bryant leads the first kid who shows up for baseball practice, a pudgy yet sturdy 8-year-old named Dennis, onto the infield dirt. "You want to learn how to be a second baseman?" Bryant says. It's less a question than strong suggestion. "Let's go. Get out there and take some grounders." A few minutes later, after Bryant has hit a series of soft groundballs to Dennis, a second child, 6-year-old Arthur, shows up. Bryant welcomes him with a handshake and a greeting: "Hello, little brutha."

As the mothers of both boys make small talk in the park's lone section of grandstands, swapping stories about walking at high school graduation while carrying their newborn sons, Bryant instructs the young athletes on the fundamentals of the game. Dennis is learning — or least trying — to keep his glove down, scraping the ground as the rolling ball approaches, rather than flicking his glove up to his chest and then back down to stab at the ball as it arrives. "Alligator arms!" Bryant belts out anytime Dennis' glove pulls off the ground and the ball scoots through his legs. Arthur is more concerned about gripping a ball that is decidedly too large for his hand and throwing it where he wants it go. Determining where he wants it go is something else Arthur must figure out.

As coach of the Oakland Royals, a youth baseball league in impoverished West Oakland, Bryant is an unusual figure. It's not just because the majority of the kids he coaches have hard lives, with absent fathers and violent street killings outside their doors. Bryant is teaching a sport – baseball – that has all but vanished from black America.

The African-American baseball player didn't used to be an anomaly. At one point in the mid-1970s, African-Americans made up 28 percent of major league rosters. There was a gradual, though barely noticeable, decline throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. But today, as the country operates under its first black president, and as African-Americans dominate basketball and football, and despite the baseball world celebrating Jackie Robinson the way the rest of the country celebrates Dr. Martin Luther King, America's pastime is losing its color. Now just 8 percent of Major League Baseball players are African-American.

Hoping to reverse this trend, MLB runs a youth outreach program, Reviving Baseball in Inner-cities (RBI), and is developing marketing campaigns aimed at bringing African-Americans back to the ballpark as fans. But so far the efforts have had limited success—the number of African-Americans in baseball has continually dropped since RBI started in 1989. David James, national RBI director, notes that he didn't see one African-American child playing in last summer's Little League World Series. "I was cringing every time I was watching," said James, who is African-American.

One reason for this is money. “Little League teams are from affluent communities, where parents are paying for their child to play,” James said. “If you’re in primarily African-American markets that are middle to low-income, those kids can’t afford to play in those respective leagues.”

In the suburbs, little baseball players are showing up to the park with their own $300 bats and $100 helmets, while their parents spend hundreds, even thousands, of dollars for them to play on travel ball teams. And then there are the showcases, entrance into which families pay up to $400 so their teen sons can do a few baseball-related drills in hope of catching the eye of a college or pro scout. “It’s almost become a country club sport,” said Jermaine Clark, an African-American who scouts high school and college players for the Oakland A’s.

The travel ball phenomenon has been particularly discouraging to those from lower-income neighborhoods. Often these teams pull top players from several neighboring cities and spend weekends playing in far-off places. Teams from the San Francisco Bay will travel an hour or two to Sacramento or Fresno. A team in Lakeland, Florida, will head west to Tampa or east to Orlando. Sometimes they fly across the country for tournaments.

For families struggling to pay youth league sign-up fees, footing the bill for one of these teams isn’t realistic. Yet between the high level of competition and the year-round scheduling, travel ball is now considered an essential part of talent development—pricing many African-American families out of the game.

This matters, Clark and others believe, not just because it represents a historical change in the game’s diversity, but because that change has real consequences for kids like the ones Bryant coaches. “Baseball is the sport best situated to develop character,” James said. “Baseball is the sport where you’re going to fail 70 percent of the time. That can teach you things about developing in life.”

When I spoke with Bryant, he noted that the American pro athletes who get in trouble with the law tend to be from football and basketball. Among football players, Michael Vick, Plaxico Burress and Rae Carruth have all gone to jail for violent offenses, while Ryan Leaf and Jerome Simpson recently got in trouble for drug-related incidents. NBA players are routinely getting caught with unlicensed guns after being pulled over for driving at warp speeds.

Bryant thinks the lower crime incidence among baseball players has a lot to do with the mental discipline and calming effect the sport has.

“In football, a guy has the ball, what’s your solution? Smash him,” Bryant says. “You can’t transfer that skill on the job. The boss pisses you off, tackle him? No. But if your boss throws you a curveball, I’m going to sit back and I’m going to learn how to hit it.” If someone is giving you a hard time at school? “Instead of getting angry real quick, you regain your composure. Like stepping out of the batter’s box.”

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With his wiry 5-foot-7 frame, Bryant looks as though he could weigh the same as he did in high school – though these days that's probably due more to stress and cigarettes than to burning calories on the wrestling mat. His features are pointy and small, enlivened by an infectious smile that makes Bryant seem younger than his 48 years.

Bryant has managed to keep the Royals running for seven years, even expanding the operation to four teams for age groups ranging from 7 to 14. But the job has not been without challenges.

While West Oakland is home to only about 7 percent of the city's population, it's where roughly 20 percent of the city's 100 or so murders occur every year. Drugs, gangs, joblessness, absent fathers, failing education systems are all pervasive.

Because most of the kids' parents can't afford the $150 sign-up fees and the necessary baseball equipment — gloves, cleats, bats — Bryant is as much a fundraiser as he is a coach or a general manager.

Even finding a safe field to play on can be tricky. The Royals stopped practicing at nearby Lowell Park after a shooting in the outfield in the middle of practice. "We haven't been back since," Bryant says.

It's not the only firearm incident to interrupt a Royals practice. Bryant once confiscated a gun from a 12-year-old firing at the schoolyard where the Royals were practicing. The next day, the boy's mother showed up furious. "This lady just cussed me out up and down," Bryant recalls. "I thought she was going to get physical with me because I checked her son."

Still, Bryant has remained optimistic. At practice, he can look toward any part of the field and see a player who's found solace in baseball. As the 8-and-under team wrapped up practice, the 12-year-olds gathered in shallow right field before their practice began. Ronnie, dressed in a grey t-shirt and grey shorts, with a barrel chest and braded hair falling down around his ears, slowly swings his bat from the left side—a motion common among baseball players working on their hitting mechanics while envisioning solid contact with a moving ball. "He comes from a really torn family," Bryant observed.

But since finding baseball—or maybe it was baseball finding him, it's what he "eats, drinks and breathes," Bryant says. It's the kind of consolation Bryant expects the Royals to offer a boy who's future otherwise appears bleak.

"Here is where he is welcomed, here is where he is the man, here is where he is loved," Bryant says. And it's where Ronnie finds his self-worth, his identity. "Here he's not just another one of these kids on the block."

Starting a baseball team wasn't the natural route for Bryant. Growing up a wrestler and a cross-country runner in Ohio, his baseball experience was mostly limited to his dad buying him a glove when he was little and teaching him how to play catch, which they would do from time to time. He says he should have gone to Ohio State University to wrestle, but instead he enlisted in the Army after high school. It's what his father did, so he followed suit. "Like most Midwestern boys, I wanted to grow up to be like my father," Bryant says. "That was my role model."

Before founding the Royals, Bryant and his wife at the time, Lehi, would open their house to kids in the neighborhood, who would come over to use their wrestling mats, jump on the trampoline or work out with free weights. Bryant took a particular shine to a 15-year-old named Thomas Simpson, who was from around the corner. Having noticed Bryant's 10-year-old son, Roscoe III, was a fast runner, Thomas and some friends one day invited him to play football at the park across the street. From that point on, Thomas became part of the family. "He took Little Roscoe under his wing, I took care of him," Bryant says. Then, one afternoon in 2004, Bryant heard gunshots.

He rushed outside to find Thomas lying in the street, soaked in his own blood. "I went over to help him, but there was no helping him out," Bryant says. "He got hit in the heart, he got hit in the stomach, and some kind of way he got turned around and they shot him in the back. We tried to revive him, but there was no coming back. He basically died in my arms."

A year later, Bryant started a baseball team, bringing together an assortment of West Oakland boys who all had something in common. "Every kid had seen someone killed or had a family member killed," Bryant says.

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It is said that when Jackie Robinson, a black man born in the Jim Crow South and reared in Southern California, ran out to take his position at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn on April 15, 1947, he started a chain reaction throughout the rest of American society that ultimately ended segregation. Within a few years of Robinson entering this realm previously reserved for whites, of him enduring the racial slurs bombarding him from the crowds and the intentional spikings from opponents, Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat. Not too long after that, Jim Crow laws ended. Then the Southeast Conference, a conglomerate of Southern universities with storied football programs, eventually allowed blacks on the field. All the while, as the civil rights movement unfolded, blacks were populating the major leagues in droves. Within 30 years of Robinson's debut, the average major league team had six or seven black players.

Robinson's impact on the game, and ostensibly the country, is so revered that the league has retired his jersey number, 42, meaning that no major league player is allowed to wear it again—except on April 15, when every player wears 42 in major league games played on that date.

Though the major leagues were whitewashed for the first half of the 20th century, black baseball thrived in that era. The so-called Negro leagues fielded professional teams from New York to Kansas City to Birmingham, Ala. As the name suggests, these leagues were where blacks played professionally. They were run by blacks and largely supported by black communities. Below the professional Negro leagues, there was a network of amateur baseball for African-Americans. Most black communities had teams and supported them the way small towns today support their high school football teams.

Robinson's crossover is a pivotal moment in baseball lore, but there was a downside to it. As much as it did to integrate the game at the time, it may just have been the first step in disconnecting blacks from baseball.

Other African-American players soon followed Robinson into the major leagues, including many of the game's all-time greats. A few months after Robinson's debut, Larry Doby arrived as the second black major leaguer. Willie Mays, considered by many baseball historians to be the best all-around player the game has ever seen, entered the league in 1951. Three years later, Hank Aaron began a career that would end with him hitting more home runs than other player in major league history—generally regarded as the most hallowed record in American sports.

With the best black players migrating to the white-run league, Negro league baseball was losing its star players—and its lifeblood. The effect trickled down, as major league franchises also began pulling younger black players from the lower-level Negro leagues to play in the minor leagues—the developmental system that continues to feed players into Major League Baseball today. African-American baseball leagues on all levels quickly deteriorated. The last Negro League World Series was played in 1948, as one of the two major Negro leagues folded shortly after. The other league was gone within a decade. As black communities lost their baseball teams, they lost the infrastructure for their kids to play the game.

"Once they started taking black ball players from the Negro Leagues, they started destroying an entity that was run primarily by blacks," said Lou Butler, who runs Oakland's Babe Ruth league. "Like with everything that happens, there's a good and a bad."

The dwindling presence is felt by some of today's African-American players. And it can prove an explosive topic when addressed publicly—especially when a black player is talking about it. Torii Hunter, an African-American outfielder for the Los Angeles Angels, was lambasted—mostly through the Internet—for comments he made to the USA Today about dark-skinned Latinos being "imposters" who are often confused for black American players. Hunter was accused of being a racist. It was a misuse of the word, he later said, that overshadowed a bigger point he was making about African-Americans having a tough route to the major leagues because of the scarcity of college baseball scholarships. Still traumatized by the backlash, Hunter declined to discuss the state of African-Americans in baseball with me.

This shift that began with the disintegration of the Negro Leagues has been exacerbated by other factors. It has a lot to do with economics—from the rising cost of youth baseball to one of Hunter's concerns, the disparity in college scholarships available in different sports. Division 1 college football programs are allowed to have up to 85 student-athletes on full-ride scholarships. Baseball programs at the same schools are limited to the equivalent of 11.7 full scholarships to be distributed among their 40-player rosters. So someone wanting to play baseball beyond high school either has to anticipate paying much of his own way through college or hope to be drafted by a major league team. The football scholarship "is a much smarter career move than a minor league paycheck," said Rob Ruck, a sports history professor at the University of Pittsburgh.

For those who do go the baseball route, the payoff can be enormous. With a gross income of $7 billion between the league and its 30 franchises, Major League Baseball doesn't lag far behind the $9 billion industry that is the National Football League—the current king of American sports. (The NBA generates $4 billion annually.) And with MLB and its franchises entering into massive television contracts (The Los Angeles Dodgers recently sold for $2 billion because of potential television revenue), professional baseball is more profitable than ever. Two of baseball's best African-American players, Matt Kemp and Prince Fielder, each recently signed contracts worth at least $20 million a year.

These big contracts are signs that baseball is, as Jermaine Clark, the A's scout, put it, "top heavy" with blacks among its best players. But, even though a few are making vast sums, with fewer African-Americans overall in the game, black kids have fewer role models to relate to. Some teams, such as the New York Mets and the Chicago White Sox at the start of the 2012 season, don't have any African-American players. Enoch Hawkins, a television cable installer in Oakland and a rare African-American baseball fan, said he couldn't get his black friends to watch last year's World Series with him. "They said to me, 'why do I want to watch that? Black people don't play baseball."

The more that has become a reality, the more MLB has sought players outside of the country to fill the talent vacuum. Foreign-born players now make up 28 percent of major league rosters, largely due to MLB's heavy investment in developing talent in the Dominican Republic and Venezuela. Each of the 30 franchises runs a baseball academy in the Dominican Republic, recruiting and housing recruits. Baseball essentially replaces school, with the main classroom time spent teaching the Spanish-speaking boys enough English to get by if and when they head to the United States.

Lou Butler understands why MLB teams would invest in foreign talent. They do it for the same reason Jackie Robinson and eventually other blacks were allowed into the league. It had nothing to do with race or altruism or diversity, Butler says. It made economic sense. "If you're an owner of a team, you're a business man first."

The key to reviving baseball in African-American communities is for that same kind of investment in Santo Domingo and Caracas to be made in Detroit and Baltimore and Oakland. If we had similar academies here, Butler notes, we might see a lot more African-Americans playing baseball.

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Economics isn't the only force driving blacks away from baseball. In fact, there may be a less measurable, yet more powerful culprit.

Last year, before joining his teammates in stretches before a game at the Oakland Coliseum, a few miles down the road from where Bryant's Royals play, A's first baseman Brandon Allen (who was traded to Tampa Bay this year) leaned back on the dugout bench. He spent a moment mulling the question of what it was like to be a rare African-American in professional baseball. But he didn't have much to say on the matter. He said he was just a country boy from Texas who grew up playing the game. When it came time seven years earlier to choose between professional baseball or college football, Allen, a 6-foot-2 left-hander with a jawline beard and shoulders that fit snugly through a doorway, opted to hit baseballs rather than quarterbacks.

It didn't matter that most young African-Americans would have chosen football, dismissing the game that their great grandfathers and grandfathers played religiously but their fathers failed to embrace. The lineage remained intact in Allen's family. "My dad played, my granddad played," Allen said. "The game, it's just tradition in my family. It's what we do."

It's the same story with Allen's former teammate, A's second baseman Jemile Weeks. He and his older brother, Rickie, an all-star second baseman with the Milwaukee Brewers, learned the game from their father, who learned from his father—a former Negro League player. The two best African-American major leaguers of the last 20 years, Barry Bonds and Ken Griffey Jr., are sons of former major league stars.

It's not uncommon for professional baseball players of any race to be the sons of former players or of baseball coaches. And that's why some believe blacks are under-represented in baseball. "A right of passage in my home growing up, and what I did with my son, Dad coached in the leagues, Dad was the one who taught the son how to play catch," said James, the national RBI director. "Unfortunately, the reality in a lot of African-American communities across the country, it's a single-parent household raised by the mom. So there's no male to step in and take that role."

Baseball is America's most romanticized sport, and as such, the father-son relationship in baseball is often dramatized, perhaps overly so, in movies and literature. But in urban areas, the absent father just might show that this relationship plays a very practical role. Nearly two-thirds of African-American children live without fathers, twice the rate of all children in the country.

Eddie Heard could be considered one of the more fortunate boys from his neighborhood. Though he grew up poor, near West Oakland's Acorn projects, his father has always been in his life.

But Heard didn't learn baseball from his father. He happened to find the sport on his own. One day, when he was 9 years old, Heard was wandering around the neighborhood and stopped at Lowell Park — the same field where a Royals practice would be interrupted by a shooting in the outfield — to watch some older boys practicing baseball. The coach, now-deceased Ralph Grant, yelled over to the kid behind the fence to ask if he wanted to play. "I said, 'yeah,' and he threw me a glove and told me to get out there," Heard said.

Heard, who would become one Bryant's original Royals players, immediately became enamored with the game. Now standing 6-foot-4, Heard is handsome and confident, if a tad arrogant. Coaches and teachers rave about his intelligence and propensity for learning. As quarterback, he led the school's football team to consecutive city championships, and he has a college football scholarship awaiting him. But pro baseball scouts love his 90-mph fastball enough to consider drafting him and offering a tempting sum out of high school. Heard considers himself a baseball player first, though opportunity is likely to determine which sport is in his future. "My heart is with baseball," Heard says. "But football is the mistress."

Before he ever played on a team, Heard spent many a night at the Oakland Coliseum, watching the A's play as his mom worked concessions. That's where Bryant first noticed Heard, hooting and hollering for the hometown team from the centerfield bleachers and regularly appearing on the jumbotron. The two met a couple years later, when Bryant was starting the Royals and Heard was getting kicked out of games and off of teams for his unrestrained mouth. "Eddie at 11 years old knew more about baseball than the people who were coaching him, and he knew it," Bryant says. "So he really gave them the blues." Bryant gave Heard a spot on his team, and over the next few years watched him become one Oakland's best amateur players. And more restrained with his outbursts.

While Heard became a local star, it became evident to him that he was an anomaly in his neighborhood. Most of his friends stuck with basketball or football, shunning baseball.

"I don't know if it's short attention spans, or if they have a 'can't do' attitude," Heard says. "Kids will swing a bat, and if they can't hit at first, they say, 'I can't hit' and give it up."

That "can't do" attitude is exactly what Bryant tries to stomp out of kids to whom he introduces the game. He says a young boy can easily be discouraged when trying to learn how to hit or pitch, since the game's slow pace and high failure rates require a patience and resilience that children often don't develop on their own.

Of the kids who do play youth baseball in urban areas, there is a huge drop-off after 12 years old, when the field gets larger — the distance between the mound and home plate jumps from 45 or 50 feet to 60 feet 6 inches — and the difficulty intensifies.

Bryant is particularly focused on keeping his players in the game through that difficult transition—which he thinks mirrors the kind of challenging transitions that a person has to face in life. "The lessons you learn on the baseball diamond are very transferrable to real life," Bryant says. "You have the patience. You have the social skills. You have the problem solving. You have the paying attention to detail."

Two boys who started in the Royals as fifth graders, Roscoe III and Keith Britton, are now both seniors at Skyline High School—and both plan on going to college and playing baseball. Likewise, if it wasn't for sports keeping Heard focused on school, Bryant thinks he could easily be ruling the streets, ascending the ranks of a criminal organization. Now, "he can do whatever he wants," Bryant says. "Sky's the limit with him."

Lately, Bryant's view on baseball seems to be gaining support. Six years after Major League Baseball opened its first stateside academy in the gang-infested Los Angeles neighborhood of Compton, a second one opened in Houston, and ground has been broken on facilities in Philadelphia and Miami. MLB is also looking at sites in six other cities. The early results are promising, with more than 100 alumni of the Compton academy having been drafted by major league franchises in the last five years. Another 150 boys and girls have gone on to play college baseball or softball.

It's the latter number, the one that represents opportunity for higher education and seeking a better life, that Bryant is striving for. If one of his players makes the big leagues, it's a bonus. But Bryant takes more pride in being able to point to his son or Eddie Heard — boys making a safe passage to adulthood in a world that doesn't let anyone do so easily — and say baseball is making a difference in their lives.

Whether it means African-Americans will flock back to the sport—well, that's out of his hands. "I'm hopeful, but I don't know," Bryant says. "These kids can play. They all have a chance. Will they go pro? I don't know about that. But if they continue with it, and if they stay on the right road, I think most of these kids can get a college degree out of this."