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Commentary: Tigers tap immigrant power

Foreign-born players improve the game while leading Detroit to World Series

Stuart Anderson and L. Brian Andrew

When the Detroit Tigers swept the Oakland A's to make it to the World Series, the team was led by a diverse group that included many players not born in the United States, most notably Dominican-born second baseman Placido Polanco and Venezuelan-born outfielder Magglio Ordonez. Part of the Tigers success this year has been in incorporating talented immigrants into their team's chemistry. It is also part of a broad trend of foreign-born players coming to the United States.

More than 23 percent of Major League Baseball players on active rosters in 2006 were foreign-born, the highest in baseball history. In fact, the percentage of foreign-born players in the major leagues has more than doubled from 10 percent since 1990. A new study from the National Foundation for American Policy concludes Americans have benefited from our nation's openness toward skilled immigrant baseball players, just as the country has gained from the entry of other skilled foreign-born professionals.

Quality of play improves

A sustained or increased quality of play, to which foreign-born players have contributed, may have helped increase revenues, as major league ballpark attendance rose from 54.8 million to 74.9 million between 1990 and 2005. Foreign-born players have been key components of the Tigers, St. Louis Cardinals, New York Mets, New York Yankees and other 2006 playoff teams.

In the American League this season, seven of the top nine batting averages belonged to foreign-born players, while the leading home run hitter (David Ortiz) and the two leaders in runs batted in (Ortiz and Justin Morneau) were foreign-born. In the National League, two of the top three hitters for average (Albert Pujols and Miguel Cabrera) and home runs (Pujols and Alfonso Soriano) were foreign-born. Dominican-born pitcher Johan Santana led the major leagues in strikeouts, earned run average and wins (tied at 19 with Chien-Ming Wang).

Foreign-born players accounted for 31 percent of the players selected for the 2006 All-Star Game, higher than their proportion of 23 percent on major league active rosters. Seven of the 16 starting position players at the 2006 All-Star Game -- 44 percent -- were foreign-born.

Baseball's feeder nations

The Dominican Republic with 81 players tops the list of country of origin among active major leaguers, followed by Venezuela (45), Mexico (10), Canada (10), Japan (8), Panama (6), Cuba (4), South Korea (3), Colombia (2), and Taiwan (2).

Immigrant baseball players must endure some of the same problems afflicting other parts of our legal immigration system. While foreign-born players enter the major leagues on P-1 temporary visas, which are good for up to 10 years, to obtain green cards (permanent residence) many baseball players must endure long waits that affect other employment-based immigrants.

Increased competition from foreign-born players certainly has not resulted in lower salaries for native ballplayers. Since 1990 average major league player salaries more than quadrupled (in nominal dollars) from \$578,930 to \$2.87 million, while the proportion of foreign-born players in the league more than doubled.

It is said the spirit of competition can bring out the best in people. And regardless of anything else people may say about professional athletes, they deserve credit for the following: Even though only a fixed number of jobs exist on active major league rosters -- unlike the ebb and flow of jobs in the rest of the U.S. economy -- one never hears complaints about "immigrants taking away jobs" from Americans in the major leagues.

Stuart Anderson is executive director and L. Brian Andrew is a research assistant at the National Foundation for American Policy, a research group in Arlington, Va.