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Stealing Bases, Not Jobs

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People used to laugh when the "Saturday Night Live" character Chico Escuela said: "Baseball been berry, berry good to me." Although Chico, played by Garrett Morris, was supposed to be a Dominican, his limited English and Latin accent made him instantly recognizable as a general caricature of the foreign players sprinkled throughout Major League Baseball.

On the eve of the World Series, the sprinkle has become a solid block. A new study shows that, as of Aug. 31, a whopping 23% of players on active rosters in the majors were foreign born. That's more than double the percentage as recently as 1990 and about 10 times what it was in the 1920s and '30s.



Sluggo David Ortiz

But you don't hear Americans complaining about *this* group of immigrants. And we're not aware of any U.S.-born hitters accusing the Red Sox home-run champion David Ortiz -- or the other Dominican players here on visas -- of stealing their job. Of course not. They get it, we all get it: Foreign players been berry, berry good to baseball.

The new study, "Immigrants, Baseball and the Contributions of Foreign-Born Players to America's Pastime," was conducted by the **National Foundation for American Policy**, a nonprofit organization focused on trade and immigration issues. Executive director Stuart Anderson told us that the statistics he compiled about baseball point to the benefits of immigration for our society as a whole. (The full baseball report is available today on www.nfap.com.)

For one, he notes, it's no accident that 44% of this year's All-Star Game starters -- and nearly a quarter of the members of the four 2006 playoff teams -- were foreign-born. (The study did not even count the foreign players who were on disabled lists as of Aug. 31, though that might have boosted some percentages even higher.) The dream of coming to this country is a huge motivator for talented people who are willing to work hard in order to make a better life for themselves. In baseball, as in many other spheres of life, the ones who make the journey here tend to be achievers.

Most striking, however, is what the study reveals about the relationship between the soaring number of foreign-born players and major-league salaries. One of the most potent anti-immigration myths says that granting visas to foreign workers drives down salaries for Americans in the same field, be it technology or anything else. Like the cry that "they're stealing our jobs!" this myth ignores reality. In truth, an employer's ability to hire all the skilled labor he needs tends to lead to higher productivity and, ultimately, a growing economy that will create a demand for more jobs, not fewer.

At any rate, research for the study revealed that an influx of foreigners in the fixed market of 750 major-league roster jobs hasn't depressed salaries. On the contrary. As the percentage of foreign-born players doubled after 1990, average salaries quadrupled. Among the factors at work: the visa-holders contributed to more exciting play and higher attendance.

You don't hear whining about foreigners in baseball, Mr. Anderson notes, because everyone understands that "they make the whole enterprise more successful, and everybody benefits." That's the larger history of immigrants in America. "There always will be people on the short end of a dynamic economy," he says. "But the solution of closing the doors is never a good solution."