Compelling sports stories are often about much more than sports. Typically, these focus on individuals or specific teams and are stories of dominant success or humbling failure, themes captured in the tag line for ABC’s long running Wide World of Sports: “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat.” But as sociology tells us, individual stories should also be seen as grounded in broader social forces. As demographics have changed the face of America, the demographics of professional sports in American have changed as well. The integration of Jackie Robinson in Major League Baseball (MLB) in 1947 marked an increase in the social acceptance of non-white players into the league. Additionally, the passage of the 1965 Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) not only increased the opportunity for individuals to migrate to the U.S. but also provided opportunities for foreign-born and U.S. born minority athletes to play in the MLB. Similarly as globalization increasingly has transformed the U.S. economy, so too has it transformed the business of professional sports. Taking a focused look at Major League Baseball—using two examples, the 2017 All Star Game, and the Division leading, Washington Nationals—illlustrates how changes in professional sports mirror and foreshadow the broader impact of demographic change and increasing globalization.

In 2015, foreign-born individuals living in the U.S. comprised 13.4% of the U.S. population, yet 25.4% of MLB players were foreign-born.\(^1\) Compared to MLB team cities and metropolitan areas, the Washington DC metropolitan area is extremely diverse with 23.2% of its population comprised of foreign-born individuals. Among MLB cities, the Washington DC metropolitan area has the third largest percentage of individuals who are Black (non-Hispanic) and the fifth largest percentage of individuals who are other races (14.0%). However, when it comes to baseball, the Washington Nationals rank second in the league with not only the highest proportion of MLB players born in the U.S. (86.2%) and the second lowest percentage of foreign-born players (13.8%), but is also one of five teams with the greatest number of players who are White (non-Hispanic). Additionally, of the top 10 teams with the largest percent of MLB players born in the U.S. and the smallest number of foreign-born players, 7 teams are in the National League. The Nationals will play 142 of their 162 regular season games against National League opponents, so Nationals’ fans are less likely to see non-white and foreign-born players in both the visiting and home team dugouts than fans in American League cities.

Almost half (40.0%) of starters on the All Star National League team were filled by players from the Washington Nationals, all whom are U.S. born and White. Of all MLB players in both the American and National League who played in more than 65 games leading up to the All Star Game, Washington Nationals players occupy some of the top performance spots. Bryce Harper has the fifth highest number of runs and Daniel Murphy has the fourth best record for number of hits and is the leader for the greatest number of hits per game. Of the top ten players with the highest batting averages, three players are on the Washington Nationals: Daniel Murphy (3rd overall), Ryan Zimmerman (5th overall), and Bryce Harper (8th overall). Additionally, of starting pitchers who have pitched in ten or more games leading up to the All Star Game, Gio Gonzalez has the 6th lowest ERA and Max Scherzer not only has the 3rd lowest ERA, but also the second highest number of strikeouts and the second highest number of strike outs per game. While U.S. born and predominately White players are contributing to the success of the Nationals, this is not the case for all leading divisional National and American League teams. While 86.2% of MLB players on the Washington Nationals are U.S. born and only 13.8% are foreign-born or born in a U.S. territory,

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\(^1\) The U.S. Census Bureau’s 2015 American Community Surveys (ACS) was used to examine the proportion of foreign-born players in the United States. 2017 player demographics and performance statistics were pulled from the online baseball reference encyclopedia (http://www.baseball-reference.com/) and 2015 and 2016 player demographics and performance statistics came from the Lahman Baseball Database and Databank (http://www.seanlahman.com/baseball-archive/statistics/).
29.7% of players on the Los Angeles Dodgers are foreign-born or born in a U.S. territory and 37.0% on the Milwaukee Brewers are foreign-born or born in a U.S. territory. Additionally, American League divisional leaders (Houston Astros, Boston Red Sox, and the Cleveland Indians) reported larger proportions of foreign-born and players born in a U.S. territory on their team (32.1%, 27.3%, and 39.3%, respectively).

During the 2017 MLB All Star Game, 7 of the 10 offensive hits by the American League players were generated by foreign-born players with Robinson Canó hitting a home run in the top of the 10th inning adding to Miguel Sanó’s top of the 5th inning hit allowing for Jonathan Schoop to score. The one run earned by the National League team was a single home run by Yadier Molina (who is from Puerto Rico). However, of the 7 hits by the National League team, 6 were produced by U.S. born players. At face value, why does there appear to be such a difference between these two teams regarding player demographics and performance?

Both the American League and National League have similar proportions of foreign-born players within their leagues

In the current 2017 MLB season (excluding players in the minors), 27.4% of all MLB players in the American League are foreign-born and 27.1% of all players in the National League are foreign-born. However, of the players on the National League All Star team 15.2% are foreign-born with foreign-born athletes only comprising 10.0% of All Star starters. Almost forty percent (39.5%) of players on the American League All Star team are foreign-born with foreign-born players filling 30.0% of the starting positions. In addition to the underrepresentation of foreign-born players on the National League All Star team, there is also a lack of diversity among the National League All Star players. For example, 78.8% of all players on the National League All Star team are White (non-Hispanic) compared to 42.1% of players on the American League All Star team. There is also a greater proportion of MLB players who are Black (non-Hispanic) on the American League All Star team versus the National League All Star team (13.2% and 9.1%, respectively).

But who played in this year’s Summer Classic?
Compared to 2017 American League All Star players, National League All Star players have higher number of mean runs (52.25 vs. 51.09), hits (93.40 vs. 88.82), mean number of hits per game (1.15 vs. 1.128), and batting average (0.307 vs. 0.298), and a lower pitching ERA (2.181 vs. 2.683) and a higher mean number of strikeouts (97.77 vs. 91.13). The core group of All Star players who are responsible for the higher offensive statistics on the National League: foreign-born players.
In the first half of the 2017 MLB season foreign-born players in the regular season and foreign-born players who played and started in the All Star game are out performing U.S. born players with regard to mean number of hits, hits per game, batting average, and strikeouts.

Foreign-born players on the National League All Star team have a higher mean number of runs, hits, hits per game, batting average, and lower ERA, and higher mean number of strikeouts per inning compared to foreign-born players on the American League All Star team and U.S. born players on both the American League and the National League.

So with such powerful offensive output why did the National League lose in the All Star Game?

The National League has the talent; they just did not start nor include foreign-born players in the All Star Game. Why are foreign-born players largely missing from the National League All Star Game roster and what can be contributing to the underrepresentation of foreign-born players?

One factor is the All Star Game selection process. The selection process is a collective and collaborative effort that includes fans, players, coaches, and managers. Performance and skill should be driving player selection, however to what extent does player personality, popularity, and television ratings play into the selection process? Are foreign-born players in the National League not as popular as foreign-born players in the American League? Is there less fan support for foreign-born players in the National League? Are foreign-born players in the National League not as good as foreign-born players in the American League? Does the proportion of the foreign-born individuals living in MLB team cities factor into fan selection of All Star players?

While answers to these questions need further examination, what have we witnessed and learned over the past few weeks as we watched Aaron Judge shatter not only Joe DiMaggios most home runs by a rookie record as well as pieces of the Marlins Park as he put up 47 home runs in the annual Home Run Derby? We are reminded of the diversity and passion of the sport for both U.S. and foreign-born athletes. In addition to making contributions on the field during the All Star Game, since 2007, a majority of the Home Run Derby winners and All Star Game MVPs were non-white, more than half (54.5%) of the Home Run Derby winners were foreign-born, and 36.4% foreign-born players have earned the All Star Game MVP since 2007 with Robinson Canó winning the award this year.

As we embark on the second half of the 2017 MLB season, it is important to remember that baseball is a diverse sport played by athletes born in the U.S. and athletes born abroad. Foreign-born MLB players not only add expertise, skill, and knowledge to the game, but they have played a major role in shaping America's national pastime. With $8.4 billion in revenue in 2015 and an estimated 35 million avid U.S. baseball fans, foreign-born MLB players have contributed to the economic success of the industry and have played a key role in serving as ambassadors of diversity, while shaping the identities of the cities and states in which they live. The respect and recognition that we give to our foreign-born players in the MLB should be reciprocated to all immigrants in our daily lives.

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