

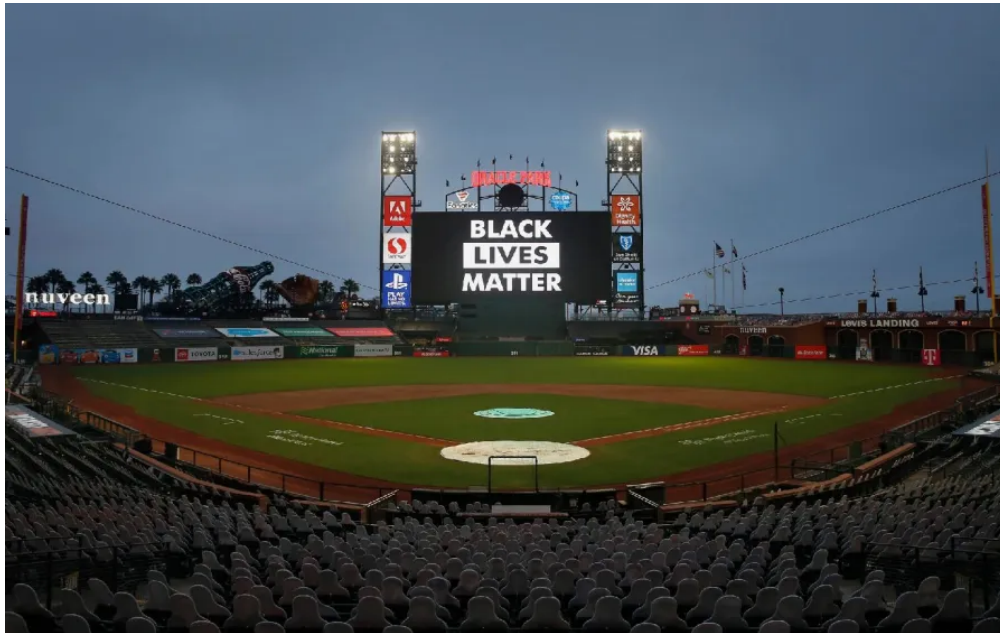
**SOCIAL JUSTICE** **BASEBALL** **BLACK LIVES MATTER**

# Making Black Lives Matter On and Off the Diamond

*It's time for Major League Baseball to put some substance behind its intentions and match words with deeds.*

By Peter Dreier and Dave Zirin

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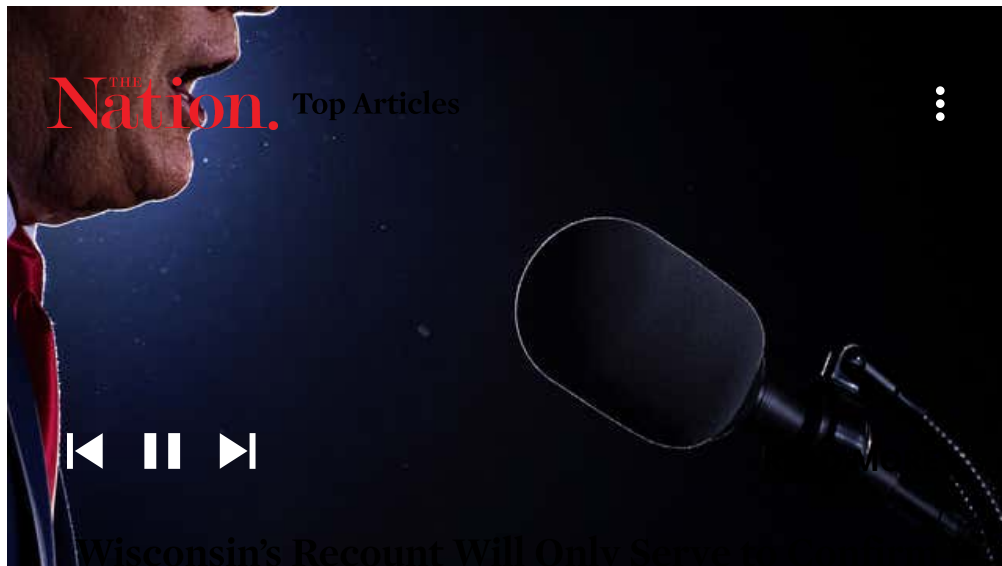
Oracle Park on August 26, 2020, in San Francisco, Calif. (Lachlan Cunningham / Getty)

**T**he election of Donald Trump and the upsurge of protest against police violence has catalyzed a new wave of activism among professional athletes. Colin Kaepernick, Megan Rapinoe, LeBron James, and Sean Doolittle are

among the growing number of athletes who have been using their celebrity platforms to speak out. Players on championship baseball, football, basketball, and soccer teams have refused to attend White House ceremonies with Trump. Entire leagues were shut down last month when players went on a political strike for Black lives following the police shooting of Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wis.

Baseball is the most conservative and tradition-bound of the major team sports. Moreover, the number of Black athletes on major league rosters has declined precipitously—from 18.7 percent in 1981 to 7.8 percent this season.

So it shocked the sports world when baseball teams joined the strikes for racial justice.



## Trump's Humiliating Defeat

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Baseball has struck out in promoting Black Americans at the management level. Only three of 30 MLB managers are Black—the Astro's Dusty Baker, the Dodgers' Dave Roberts, and Tigers' interim manager Lloyd Glenn McClendon. The

Miami Marlins Michael Hill is the only Black general manager. There are no Black people among the 30 principal owners of MLB teams.

Perhaps it is no accident that MLB is Black Lives Matters (BLM) backwards.

Despite the legacy of social justice icons like Jackie Robinson, Roberto Clemente, and Curt Flood, MLB has typically chosen to symbolically bathe in that history rather than confront the present. That is why it was welcome news last week when MLB, in conjunction with the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA), announced a \$10 million donation to the Players Alliance, a new organization of more than 100 current and former Black players who want baseball to take action for racial justice within and outside the sport.

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Because the announcement was somewhat vague about how MLB and MLBPA will partner with the Players Alliance, we propose 10 initiatives (not all of which require money) to translate these good intentions into action.

- Following LeBron James's lead, players should participate in and help fund voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, particularly in Black and brown communities that face ongoing voter suppression efforts.

- The baseball establishment should do the right thing and elect Curt Flood into the Hall of Fame. Flood, one of the greatest defensive outfielders in history, hit .293 with 1,861 hits in just 12 full seasons. He would have posted Hall of Fame eligible numbers had he not been banished from baseball at age 32, at the height of his career, because he sued MLB over the reserve clause. He lost his case in the U.S. Supreme Court, but he laid the groundwork for ending the system of indentured servitude and ushering in free agency. All pro athletes owe Flood a debt of gratitude.
- MLB should remove the name of ardent racist Kennesaw Mountain Landis from the annual MVP award. Landis, baseball commissioner from 1920 to 1944, consistently opposed racial integration. The sport didn't field its first Black player until three years after he died.
- Baseball should eliminate the shameful sweatshop conditions—low pay and chronic workplace injuries—in the Costa Rican factory, jointly owned by MLB and Rawlings, where all MLB baseballs have been manufactured for years.
- To rebuild Black support for baseball, MLB should do more to help financially-strapped cities and inner-city schools restore and expand baseball fields, pay for baseball coaches in public middle schools and high schools, and fund Little League and other youth programs in communities of color. They should also encourage the training of Black

and brown minor and major leaguers to become Little League coaches and middle-school and high-school coaches after they retire.

- Major league teams, whose billionaire owners laid off over 30,000 stadium workers when the coronavirus cancelled the season, should provide health insurance during the pandemic to these low-wage stadium employees—who take the tickets, serve the food, sell the merch, park the cars, and clean the stadiums—most of whom are people of color.
- Players and their union should support efforts by workers to unionize—which improves pay and working conditions (including unnecessary dangers due to Covid-19) among the nation’s most vulnerable people, who are disproportionately Black and brown. Let’s see players, who owe their high salaries and benefits to the union, expressing their solidarity with other workers on social media and even on picket lines.
- MLBPA should insist (in their next contract negotiations) that teams stay only in union hotels. But they shouldn’t be asked to stay in hotels where workers are on strike to avoid the embarrassment of having players cross a union picket line, as the Dodgers and Yankees did during the 2018 playoffs and World Series in Boston.
- The MLBPA should help minor league players unionize. Still subject to major league teams’

absolute control, they endure pay and working conditions that's a far cry from how the public perceives the lives of professional athletes. Last year's starting monthly salary was \$1,100 and the average player earned about \$7,500 a year because they are only paid during the playing season. Players often lack the money to eat three square meals a day.

- Baseball should train and hire more Black and brown managers, coaches, and general managers in the minor leagues to create a pipeline into the major leagues.

If Major League Baseball wants to live up to the memory of Jackie Robinson, who was an activist as well as an athlete, it needs to do more than offer rhetoric that Black Lives Matter; it must match its words with deeds.

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