

'Oil Can,' others, look to reverse exodus of black ballplayers

[Comment](#) [Email](#) [Print](#) [Share](#)

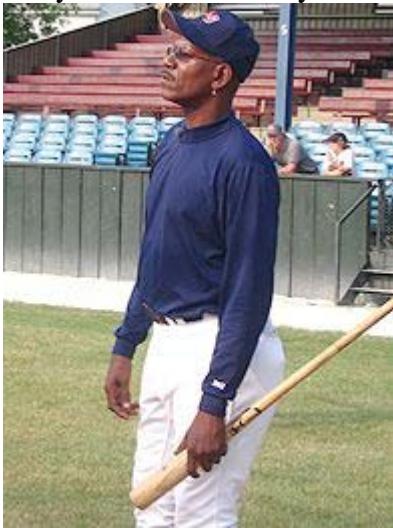
By John Helyar

ESPN.com

[Archive](#)

Dennis "Oil Can" Boyd looks more like a well-traveled jazz-band leader than an apostle of African-American baseball. Resplendent in a green jump suit, his upper shirt unbuttoned to expose his chest, he could be pulling into another town for another one-night stand. Instead, on this late afternoon in June, the 47-year-old former big league pitcher is rolling into the parking lot of 88-year-old Wahconah Park in Pittsfield, Mass.

Head south now to Richmond, Va., and consider an unknown face in an even more remote province of the national pastime. It belongs to William Forrester Jr., who is giving a postgame pep talk to a team of 16- to 18-year-olds. They will soon represent their mostly black Richmond youth league in a tournament.



John Helyar Oil Can Boyd was a pitcher, but he's going to bat now for baseball in black America.

These are the faces of hope for reviving baseball in black America?
Could be.

Rather than pulling saxophones and keyboards from the back of his black SUV last month, Boyd and his barnstorming companions grab bats and gloves. In a few hours, the Oil Can Boyd Traveling All-Stars will play Team USA, which has arrived at Wahconah on a gleaming bus, not in a caravan of cars. The college hotshots are preparing to represent their country at the Pan American Games in Rio de Janeiro. (Team USA finished with the silver medal, losing to Cuba in the championship game last week.) Boyd is trying to focus attention on the disappearance of black ballplayers in this country, and to raise money for his ultimate goal. He and his sidekick, former major league second

baseman Delino DeShields, are attempting to transition from players to being owners . . . of a league of their own.

Forrester, meanwhile, is fighting through the doubts his young players have about their talent and their futures in the game. The competitive balance in baseball tournaments for this age level often is the exact opposite of AAU basketball affairs. Inner-city black baseball teams more often than not get stomped by white suburban teams, and that's what Forrester's Richmond club is up against right now. As one of the original players in this particular 41-year-old Richmond circuit, as well as its current leader, Forrester has his own doubts, too. He's in a come-from-behind battle every day to keep black teens playing baseball and keep his Metropolitan Junior Baseball League (MJBL) solvent.

But he keeps at it; and he tells the assembled kids, sitting on the outfield grass in their dirty uniforms, they must, too. Forrester says he knows for a fact that one of the other teams is confident it will stomp the Richmonds.

"They're looking at us as a doormat," he says, launching into a pep talk that concludes with, "If you guys want it, it's there for the taking."

Afterward, one of his players walks up to Forrester with a message for the team of dispecters.

"Tell 'em it's *on*," the kid says.

The efforts of Boyd and Forrester might not prove, in the end, to be the most effective way to reverse what over the years has become a mass exodus of blacks from baseball. But working largely outside the sphere of Major League Baseball, as they both are, they offer a different sort of non-institutional approach to the issue. Only 8.4 percent of players on Opening Day big league rosters were African-American this season -- according to U.S. Census estimates as of July 1, 2005, African-Americans make up 12.25 percent of the U.S. population -- compared to a high of 27 percent in 1975. And only 6.5 percent of Division I college baseball players were black in the 2005 season, according to the numbers in the most recent study by the University of Central Florida's Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport.



It's been a muddy go of it at times for Bill Forrester, shown here on an inner-city diamond in Richmond.

Little wonder, then, that Major League Baseball's celebration of the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's Brooklyn Dodgers debut earlier this year was accompanied by an undercurrent of concern at a new kind of color line.

"It's a legitimate problem," commissioner Bud Selig has said. "We're trying to do something about it."

Major League Baseball's initiatives include the new Urban Youth Baseball Academy in Compton, Calif., and the 16-year-old RBI (Reviving Baseball in Inner Cities) program, which has subsidized youth baseball programs in 200 cities.

But critics charge that the game's "official" efforts aren't enough, and the issue keeps flaring up. Gary Sheffield recently threw some inflammatory quotes on the fire in "GQ" magazine, saying in effect that the number of Hispanic major leaguers far exceeds blacks because the immigrants are easier for big league clubs to control. And earlier this month, NAACP interim president Dennis Hayes wrote a letter to Selig, complaining that the league's spending on Caribbean baseball academies dwarfs the resources dedicated to developing more black players.

Despite Major League Baseball's best intentions to reverse the ebony ebb tide, there are major factors beyond its control. The game is out of sync with the hip-hop age. The pro sports scene has changed since Jackie's day, with the NFL and NBA offering far more opportunities and much quicker paths to riches than were available 60 years ago. In many cases, the high costs and time demands of competitive teen baseball winnow out even black kids who *want* to play the game.

It might be that the disappearance of the African-American ballplayer shares a similarity with the weather and the designated hitter: Everybody talks about it, but nobody can do anything to change it.

Yet far from the bright lights of "The Show" and the commissioner's office in New York, some hearty souls aren't just talking. They're doing -- or at least trying. So even unlikely and underfunded activists, such as Boyd and Forrester, are important faces of hope, whatever their chances at meaningful change. They're way beyond counting on Major League Baseball's dollars or words to solve anything. They're attempting to reseed baseball in black America at the grass roots.

These are independent cusses. They usually operate not only apart from the baseball establishment but autonomously -- separate from each other. This weekend, however, they will come together in Montgomery, Ala., to consider the game they insist still belongs to them.

Partly, they will be debating and proposing. Boyd and DeShields will be on a panel at Alabama State University for a fifth annual summit on the state of baseball at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). That forum was created by Forrester, who believes rebuilding faltering baseball programs at HBCUs is a key to restocking professional baseball with blacks.



*John Helyar*The Traveling All Stars are a labor of love for Delino DeShields, who had a 13-year major league career.

Partly, they will be playing and watching some spirited hardball. Boyd's barnstormers will play a doubleheader on Sunday to raise money for host Alabama State University's baseball program and other causes. And more than 400 youngsters on 24 teams will suit up to compete in the 17th annual Inner City Classic, also founded by Forrester.

With Forrester's blessing, the under-12 Richmond team will include two ringers -- Bobby Bonds III and Braxton Bonds. Their late grandfather had a hand in starting the HBCU summit, which is called the Bobby Bonds Memorial Symposium. The family is still actively involved. Tracie Bonds, ex-wife of Bobby Bonds Jr., raised \$20,000 for the symposium with a charity poker tournament last February in Arizona. The "Aces For Bases" event attracted a gaggle of major league players, who took a break from the Cactus League to play a different game. One of them was Barry Bonds, who chipped in \$2,500.

The Bonds family's hearts are in the right place on this, clearly; but as a marketing matter, you might ask whether that name adds luster or baggage to the symposium. The family's most famous member -- the home run king in waiting -- operates in a constant storm of controversy. But that sort of dissonance is utterly reflective of this weekend's event. The grassroots African-American baseball revival movement has been unslick and imperfect so far. Its leaders might be apostles, but they aren't saints.

Forrester, for example, has been through some storms of his own in Richmond. His MJBL used to fund itself by running the city's biggest bingo parlor. But after a series of controversies -- including the embezzlement conviction of the games' manager in the 1980s -- Forrester had to pull the plug on bingo. The MJBL now struggles financially. Oil Can Boyd is known as a world-class character more than an African-American leader. As a pitcher for the Red Sox in the 1980s, he uttered some classic lines. "That's what you get for building a ballpark on the ocean," he said, for example, after a game was called

due to fog in Cleveland. He also pitched some legendary fits. After he was left off the All-Star team in 1986, Boyd went into a rage and temporarily quit the Red Sox, who subsequently required him to get a psychiatric evaluation.

He left the majors in 1991, but occasional independent-league comebacks (most recently with the Brockton Rox in Massachusetts in 2005) and occasional brushes with authorities (a federal indictment in Mississippi that year for threatening a former girlfriend) have kept Boyd's sketchy image intact. (The charges were dismissed in January 2007.)



John Helyar Doesn't much matter whether Oil Can Boyd's team wins or loses these days, as long as the mission gets accomplished.

"I've done some things that were not positive, but that's part of being human," Boyd says. "A lot of people are talking about [blacks in baseball], but we're making the first step and doing something -- putting something out there."

So what, exactly, *is* he putting out there? Well, it's a stretch to call the Oil Can nine "all-stars." The only ex-major leaguers are Boyd, DeShields (who had a 13-year career as a second baseman) and David Valdez, who had a cup of coffee with the Mets and Dodgers. It's also a stretch to call them all-black. Valdez and four other barnstorming players this night in Pittsfield are Hispanic.

It's even a stretch to call them barnstormers. The team played no games between the mid-June exhibition at Wahconah Park and the Montgomery outing this week.

Norman Yee, the team's part-time logistics chief and a full-time Boston bartender, admits this isn't a well-Oiled machine. By the time Boyd and DeShields decided to field a team in 2007, most leagues' schedules were set and dates were hard to get. Even when the barnstormers lined up four games against teams in the independent Can-Am League in May, two of them were wiped out by rain. The low number of games, combined with the low pay, increased the difficulty in getting player commitments. Marquis Grissom originally was supposed to be on the team, for example, but dropped out.

The other problem, according to Yee, is that a lot of potential opponents have low-budget operations too. The barnstormers nearly had a historic game with the Russian national team. But the Reds wouldn't cover the Cans' main cost -- player travel.

Forrester, for that matter, had to think long and hard about advancing \$2,500 for the Traveling All-Stars appearance in Montgomery.

Still, the black players who *have* signed on with Boyd share his missionary zeal.

Outfielder Nathan Lane, a onetime Cleveland Indians farmhand who is now a financial advisor in Chicago, treks from there to wherever the barnstormers play. He declares that African-Americans have learned they can't rely on others to ensure their place in the sport. This team represents a start, however humble, in developing a league of their own.



John Helyar
Catcher Jaquan Davis hasn't given up on the game in Forrester's Metropolitan Junior Baseball League.

"I'm honored to be part of this," Lane says.

Boyd, these days, might have lost a yard or two off his 1980s fastball, but he hasn't lost a thing off his stream of consciousness. Oil Can explains what he's up to by free-associating from the Negro Leagues to Freedom Riders, from slave history to conspiracy theory.

But as he leans against the right-field wall and watches Team USA take batting practice, he finally gets to the point.

"I look over there, across the field, and I see an all-white baseball team," he says. There appear to be only three players of color.

Then he muses on the segregated Mississippi of his youth.

"I saw that my whole life," he says. "It feels like going backwards. It's gonna look funny tonight to see an all-white baseball team playing an all-black team."

When the game begins, mostly it looks one-sided. Team USA jumps out to a big lead and wins 10-1. As the manager -- his primary role, along with some pitching -- of the losing team, Boyd exhibits some strictly old-school baseball tendencies.

"Never go down looking," he barks at one player, returning from a strikeout. "Swing those damn bats."

That's the mildest in a game-long barrage of epithets from Boyd, who even takes off after the weather.

"[Blank] that lightning," he says as a storm threatens Wahconah Park.

But ultimately, Boyd knows this is more about the mission than the won-loss record. It doesn't matter that Lane can't handle a fly ball in left, which gives Team USA two of its runs. It doesn't matter that a 38-year-old DeShields isn't exactly hitting ropes off these kid pitchers. ("I ain't tryin' for no comeback," he snarls, returning to the dugout in disgust after a fly out.) What matters, they say, is that this is a building block for a higher, bigger platform.

That's the Urban Baseball League (UBL), which Boyd and DeShields hope to debut in 2008. The concept: four teams playing in one ballpark in one southern city, owned by black entrepreneurs and attracting black fans. If they've learned one thing, they say, you can't count on The Man to develop African-American players or attract African-American fans. This proposed independent league intends to do both.

Still, it's hard to know whether to view this as a business proposition or a buddy movie. You can practically see it in lights: "Can" and "Bop" (as DeShields is known) reprising the Richard Pryor classic, "The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings." Boyd and DeShields have been talking about the state of the black ballplayer since 1990 when they were teammates on the Montreal Expos, one of the early teams to go heavily Hispanic.

"Baseball went to the Caribbean, where talent was cheaper and there was a lot of it," DeShields says. "It's a mirror of the rest of American business."

That set off a vicious cycle, as he sees it. Black players lost out to Hispanic players, black fans lost interest in the game, and Major League Baseball did little to reverse the trend. He believes that only a black-owned enterprise can do so.

"We're trying to create a business model the community can rally around," DeShields says. "We have enough resources in our community to do what we need to do. And it's bigger than just getting more blacks in the major leagues. It's getting black kids to fall in love with baseball. That starts when your granddad brings you to a ballgame. That's where the bonds are built. But blacks haven't been going to games."

The co-founders of this would-be circuit aim to reverse that, not by fielding all-black teams -- they envision racially-mixed ones -- but by making the presentation of the games appeal to black fans.

"We're going to have a livelier atmosphere, a big party at the ballpark," says Boyd, who sees lots of music, for example. James Brown, R&B, that sort of thing.

"Black people love music," he says. "That's not a stereotype. We love music."

Is this all just an Oil Can pipe dream? To date, developing and executing a business plan doesn't appear to be this pair's strong suit. Boyd acknowledges that one of their previous ventures -- bringing a pro team to his hometown of Meridian, Miss., -- was a costly failure. But he and DeShields insist they're in serious talks with potential investors for the UBL, though they won't name them. They also insist they have a plan: Keep start-up costs down by sticking to one city and one facility, and later expanding to other Southern cities.



*John Helyar*Forrester had to shut down the bingo hall, which featured baseball murals on its exterior.

It's hard not to believe in Boyd, on some level, when you see him take the mound in the ninth for his one-inning stint. Pitching against kids nearly 30 years his junior, socks pulled high like an old Negro Leaguer, he strikes out the first two batters. Makes 'em look silly with his junk.

The old jazz-band leader shows for a few moments, at least, late in the final set, that he can still summon a great riff. The fans who remain in those ancient Pittsfield stands are chanting, "Oil Can! Oil Can!" The Traveling All-Stars come bounding off the field, oddly energized despite the thumping by Team USA. Says Lane, the left fielder, to no one in particular, "Power to the people, baby."

William Forrester Jr. knows well that there are different kinds of segregation. The clearer, crueler one, he learned at age 8, in 1966. He was the only black kid at tryouts for a youth baseball league in Richmond. His parents thought he'd surely be on a team. Then they received a letter from the league secretary, which the family has saved to this day. Young Bill couldn't be accepted, the secretary explained, because teams they played from other towns would have problems with his participation.

"If we have no one to play," she wrote, "none of the boys will have the benefit of the [league]."

William Forrester Sr., a Richmond physician, promptly founded the Metropolitan Junior Baseball League (MJBL), where William Forrester Jr. -- and any other black kid in the city who so desired -- could play the game. Forrester Sr., along with some other early stalwarts, grew MJBL into a league of 45 teams and 800 players. Young Bill Forrester easily recalls those numbers; but even more clearly, he remembers something else: He had a marvelous time playing shortstop.

Now, running the MJBL 41 years later, he sees a more subtle, yet still startling, kind of segregation: White kids in greater Richmond play baseball and black kids, by and large, don't. Nowadays, it isn't a snippy letter that keeps them out -- it's simple economics.

Teens have very few options to keep playing competitive baseball if they don't join traveling teams. Those teams require big financial and time commitments, as well as proximity to the well-groomed suburban baseball complexes where they usually practice and play. For many low-income, single-parent, inner-city kids, that's three strikes and they're out.

The growing perception of baseball as a "white" game has only added to the difficulty of retaining teens in the MJBL, which accommodates players through age 18. MJBL alum

Rasheed Lewis, who stuck with the league to its age limit, recalls peer pressure in high school *not* to play.

"My friends said, 'Baseball, what's that?'" Lewis recalls.



John Helyar College coaches Terrance Whittle, left, and Jimmy Williams are working with Forrester to help revive baseball.

The MJBL's best athletes often abandon baseball for other sports. Five MJBL players have gone on to play in the NFL; no one has signed a professional baseball contract. Consider the reverse dynamics of high school basketball and baseball. In Richmond, predominantly black urban hoops teams regularly dominate suburban white teams.

Predominantly black urban baseball, on the other hand, teams get dominated.

One reason Forrester started the Inner City Classic in 1991 was to motivate and keep the league's older players. MJBL all-star teams needed to play against peers from Detroit and New York because they couldn't compete in tournaments involving suburban teams.

"It was one and done," he said. "We'd get beaten to death."

Forrester, obviously, takes this stuff very seriously. His day job -- the paying one -- is at a Defense Department logistics agency in Richmond, but his life's work is the MJBL. He rides between the league's fields in a red 2000 Monte Carlo, where league files share the back seat with a booster chair. The 49-year-old Forrester has two young children.

He gets discouraged, feeling he's always a few runs behind. The bingo bonanza, as noted, went away. The league netted \$300,000 from the recent sale of its bingo hall, which provides a temporary cushion but no answer to the question about future funding.

The city of Richmond used to fund the league's programs for 5- to 12-year-olds. (The games are played on city-owned fields.) Then in 2005, the city switched to Little League's "Urban Initiative" program. That has limited MJBL to being a teens-only league and left it without a feeder system of younger players.

A spokeswoman for Richmond's Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities Department said the Little League affiliation enabled teams to organize around the city's community centers and to get a shot at playing in that organization's statewide tournaments.



John HelyarJamal Luck, one of Forrester's MJBL players, is getting the feel of the game.

Today's resource-constrained MJBL doesn't offer the array of non-baseball services it once did: a Boy Scout troop, a summer day camp, a tutoring program. That frustrates Forrester, who wants the league to be about helping the whole kid, not just the baseball player. That's what's behind his pledge to his high school age players: "If you keep playing, if you keep up an acceptable GPA, if you stay out of trouble, I will find you somewhere to go to college and play baseball."

There came a moment five years ago when Forrester began to fear he could no longer deliver on that promise. He'd been funneling his qualifying MJBL grads to historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), where they stood the best chance of getting admitted and playing ball. Forrester cultivated tight relationships with HBCU coaches such as Terrance Whittle at Elizabeth State (N.C.) University (Rasheed Lewis played third base there for four years) and Jimmy Williams at Howard University in Washington, D.C.

Three MJBL alums were playing at Howard in 2002 when the school announced it was dropping baseball. Forrester was horrified. He knew HBCU baseball programs were struggling, and some were dying. But Howard seemed relatively robust, granting far more baseball scholarships (nine a year) than many of the others.

(Howard's official reason for the termination was the lack of facilities. The unofficial buzz around campus, according to former coach Williams: "I heard it said, 'It's a white man's sport.'")

Forrester wanted to do *something* to help preserve HBCU baseball, but he had no idea how -- until Jimmy Williams gave him one. The ex-Howard coach played pro ball for 16 years, reaching Triple-A in the San Francisco Giants organization in the early 1970s. Williams thought one of his old teammates from back then might help. He put Forrester in touch with Bobby Bonds.

The former slugger/speedster told the Richmond youth-league director to meet him at a North Carolina celebrity golf tournament. There, Forrester told him about the dying HBCU programs and how this was further drying up the pool of black players. He explained that he needed some way to get some attention for the issue, and made his pitch: "We need a big-name person to come in and try to spearhead this thing." Bobby Bonds never attended college, going directly from high school to professional ball. But he was a big believer in mentoring black players and supporting education, according to daughter-in-law Tracie Bonds. He told Forrester, "I'll get some of my friends. We'll have a roundtable conversation and see what we can get going." That was the genesis of the annual forum -- this year's event marks the convention's fifth anniversary. Bobby Bonds didn't live to attend one. He fell ill with cancer and died in August 2003, as the first symposium was being conducted. Forrester subsequently named the summit in his honor.

If you're looking for a tangible measure of progress, you won't find much of one. The symposium has put up goose eggs. At the first conference, Forrester thought he'd intrigued MLB officials in attendance with his main idea: making HBCUs the focal point in developing more black professional prospects and running youth baseball programs in their communities. He wrote a detailed proposal to the commissioner's office for a five-year, \$10 million program, to be administered by MJBL. Jimmy Lee Solomon, the executive in charge of minority initiatives, turned it down. MLB declined to comment on its rejection of the proposal.

Major League Baseball did chip in a little money (under \$10,000) for the first two symposiums, and league officials keep attending them. But they keep funding their own programs -- RBI, Baseball Tomorrow (a fix-up program for inner-city fields) and Urban Youth Academies (the first one of those is in Compton; others are supposed to follow) -- rather than Forrester's undertaking.

Forrester hoped to spice things up at the summit this year by inviting the NAACP's Hayes to debate MLB's Solomon. No dice. Hayes was unavailable, and Forrester says Solomon didn't respond to the invitation.

Going forward, Forrester's prospects for getting major league money appear to be about as good as the Tampa Bay Devil Rays' chances of winning the World Series this year. Still, that doesn't mean he has *no* prospects. As with Boyd's barnstormers, there is a core of believers and a buzz of energy around what he's doing.

On a recent July evening, it is in the air at a Richmond ball field as surely as the occasional ball laced high into the darkening sky. The MJBL's 16- to 18-year-old All-Star team is playing the Black Barons from Prince George's County, Md. The Barons were started last year by Ricky Adams, one of the players' dads. Adams says he started the team because black kids that age couldn't make teams in the established local leagues. "Personally, I feel a lot of people don't think these kids can play baseball," says Adams.



*John Helyar*The MJBL all-stars pose for a team photo after their win over the Black Barons.

He reached out to Forrester, who advised him about putting the Black Barons together. He got pointers and help with playing facilities from Jimmy Williams, who now coaches at Prince George's Community College. He got inspired by attending last year's Bobby Bonds symposium. And now, here he is, his team playing a tune-up for this weekend's Inner City Classic in Montgomery.

Williams and Elizabeth State University coach Terrance Whittle are here tonight, too, doing some scouting. They see some pretty darned good ball, with the MJBL team prevailing 3-1. The Richmond players consider it a great victory, avenging a Memorial Day loss to the Barons. They douse their pitcher, Anthony Simpson, with a cooler of Gatorade.

So there is a hint of progress here -- small as the pitching rubber in the middle of the diamond, maybe, but present. There is a team of black players that didn't exist two years ago. There are two college coaches who bespeak the potential synergies between HBCUs and black-oriented youth leagues like MJBL. The Black Barons' Adams is on board with a proposal Forrester will advance to the Inner City Classic entrants to form a league of their own.

And there are the Oil Can Boyd Traveling All-Stars.

But do Forrester's proposals or Boyd's machinations have a prayer of achieving significant progress? Given their ragtag nature, you might say they've got two chances: slim and none. But they believe in their causes and they believe in a variation on that old baseball axiom: The game is never over until the last black player is out.

They also believe this: You never go down looking. You keep swinging those damn bats