

# Using Sports to Teach Geography: Examples From Kansas City

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper illustrates how sports can be used to teach geographic concepts, using illustrative examples from the Kansas City area. Given the global popularity of sport and its impacts and links to environment, economy, and culture, it is surprising that more attention has not been paid to sport as a vehicle for the conceptualization and teaching of geography. We attempt to rectify this situation using examples associated with the Negro Leagues baseball museum, the possible construction of a new sports stadium in Kansas City, and the use of sports information in conveying a sense of place.

*Key Words:* Negro League, Kansas City, sports, sense of place

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary world, professional and amateur sports have achieved unprecedented popularity. The global popularity of sports transcends local, national, and international differences in gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, and citizenship. Billions of persons—in some cases, as much as a third of the world's population—watch or follow major international competitions such as the Olympic Games, soccer's World Cup, the Super Bowl, and the Tour de France.

Sport has many links to geography. Environmental conditions often affect sporting events, and sports impact the natural world in many ways, for example through the construction of stadiums, golf courses, and other sports facilities. Sport is closely linked to the global political economy and international state system. Competitions such as the Olympics and World Cup are competitions between teams of athletes representing different countries, often with opposing or hostile cultures, economies, and worldviews. Sport is also closely related to cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender identity. For example, the integration of African Americans into U.S. professional baseball in the late 1940s is recognized as a watershed event in the history of the civil rights movement. More recently, the international sporting community's ostracism of South Africa's teams in rugby and other sports during the 1980s played a significant role in the eventual dismantling of South African apartheid.

Sports are popular not only among adults but among students of all ages. Throughout the world, even young children follow major sporting events closely and participate in age-appropriate competitions and sporting events. Students around the world identify with and closely follow the sporting careers of famous athletes such as Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and Lance Armstrong. Given the global popularity of sport, its importance to children, and its relationships with the environment, economy, and culture, sport is becoming recognized as an important means by which fundamental geographical concepts can be taught at various educational levels.

The literature on sports and geography focuses primarily in developing and interpreting distributions of sporting activities (e.g., Bale 2000). For the most part, this literature does not address these issues in a very critical way. Nor has this literature addressed the potential for sport, given its popularity, in the teaching of geography and geographic concepts. For example, students could examine the potential impacts of building a new sports arena on a local community, including its environmental impacts, possible economic benefits, and displacement of local residents and businesses. International competitions and the publicity surrounding them provide even young students with an opportunity to learn about the countries that athletes represent and the venues in which sporting competitions take place (e.g., Summer and Winter Olympics, World Cup).

Sport also has strong links to place. Typically, sport implies competition between teams or individual athletes associated with specific

places. The World Cup, the Olympics, and world championships in many other sports are contested among teams representing individual sovereign countries. Other competitions involve teams representing specific cities and towns, schools and universities, and other place-based institutions. Frequently, place-related references are used in promoting a team's identity through nicknames, logos, and mascots. Nicknames refer to the physical geography of the area in which the team plays (e.g., the Colorado Rockies and Phoenix Suns); to historical events associated with the city or region (e.g., the San Francisco 49ers and Philadelphia 76ers); or to the community's economic base (e.g. the Milwaukee Brewers and Pittsburgh Steelers). The nicknames of minor league teams also reinforce geographic perceptions (e.g., Tennessee Smokies, Albuquerque Isotopes, San Antonio Missions, Tulsa Drillers). Numerous surveys have documented the close connections between place and fan support for professional and college sports teams.

In this article, we illustrate the potential of sport as a means for teaching appropriate geographic concepts, with a focus on a specific place. The Kansas City metropolitan area, the site of the 2004 meeting of the National Council for Geographic Education, is used as an illustration of how sport and its relationships with place can be used effectively in the teaching of geography. Examples from the Kansas City area are used to show how teachers can use sport as a means of teaching geography.

The Kansas City metropolitan area has a long and varied sports history. The city is the home of the Kansas City Royals in baseball and the Kansas City Chiefs in football, along with long-successful college athletic programs at the nearby University of Kansas, Kansas State University, and the University of Missouri-Columbia.

In this article, we will focus on three particular aspects of the Kansas City area's sports landscape to illustrate various aspects of geography teaching. Our primary focus is on Kansas City's museum commemorating Negro League baseball. We give two additional examples: the construction of a new stadium for professional hockey and basketball; and the use of information about sports preferences to convey a sense of place. In each case, we identify possible research questions and topics for investigation by teachers and students in geography classes.

#### THE NEGRO LEAGUES

Kansas City is home to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, which commemorates the history of African-American professional baseball during the first half of the twentieth century. The Museum was founded in 1990 and moved to its permanent quarters at 18<sup>th</sup> and Vine, the heart of Kansas City's African-American community, in 1997. Significantly, the complex where the Museum is located is shared by the American Jazz Museum. Thus, two highly significant developments in

African-American culture in the early twentieth century are commemorated at the same location.

For many years, sport has been recognized as an important mirror of attitudes toward race, ethnicity, and culture. During the early twentieth century, baseball was by far the most popular sport in the United States. Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Walter Johnson, Mel Ott, Dizzy Dean, and other major league baseball stars were household names. These Hall of Famers, like every other person who played major league baseball between the turn of the century and World War II, were white. African-Americans could not play professional major league baseball until Jackie Robinson became the first African-American to play in 1947.

Professional baseball in the United States began shortly after the Civil War. Major league professional baseball as we know it today began to take shape during the 1880s. By the end of the nineteenth century, the owners of professional major league baseball teams had forged an unwritten agreement banning African-American players. A few owners tried to circumvent this unwritten agreement by pretending that African-American players were of Latin American or Native American ancestry, but this practice was also eliminated by 1900.

Barred from playing in white-only competition, African-American entrepreneurs began to establish professional teams (Heaphy 2003; Ribowsky 1995). All-black professional teams such as the St. Louis Black Stockings and New York's Cuban Giants were established in the 1880s. By 1900, talented African-American players could only play on all-African-American teams. The first all-African-American league was established in 1887 and included teams representing Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville. This league, and several others established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, soon folded because of insufficient revenues. By the time of World War I, however, contemporary Negro sportswriters argued that a successful all-black league was on the horizon. A writer from the *St. Louis Dispatch* stated in 1912 "...colored people play [baseball] so much better [than white people] that the time is apparently coming when it shall be known as the great African game" (Bruce 1985).

Once firmly established in the 1920s, Negro League baseball became one of the most successful black-owned businesses in the early twentieth-century United States. The games were a primary source of recreation for African-Americans, many of whom moved from the rural South to the industrial Northeast and Middle West during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. Josh Gibson, "Cool Papa" Bell, and Satchel Paige were among the Negro Leagues' most popular stars. Jackie Robinson was a Negro League star before he pioneered the integration of major league baseball after World War II. Several major stars of the 1950s, including Willie Mays, Ernie Banks, Larry Doby, and Elston Howard, began their professional careers in

the Negro Leagues before signing major league contracts. The linkages between Negro League baseball and other aspects of African-American culture were strong; prominent contemporary musicians and entertainers such as Louis Armstrong and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson were among the owners of Negro League teams. The Negro Leagues also represented a clear statement on behalf of the African-American community of its desire for eventual integration of major league baseball in particular and society more generally.

The first successful Negro baseball league was founded in 1920. Rube Foster, who had once played for the Cuban Giants and who was a former player and owner of the Chicago American Giants, led the charge to establish the Negro National League (NNL). After preliminary meetings in Chicago and Detroit, Foster assembled team owners and media personnel on February 13, 1920, in Kansas City to outline how this new league would be run. While the true significance of this meeting being in Kansas City is unknown, some black baseball historians proffer that it was because Kansas City did not have a professional black team (Doswell 2004). Foster believed that a meeting in Kansas City could generate enough interest with the local wealthy population to find a sponsor and create a team. He wanted St. Louis and

Chicago to have a natural rival in Kansas City. The role of Kansas City as an African-American cultural center, in particular to the development of jazz, also might have attracted Foster to choose Kansas City. Because of his lead role in the NNL, Foster has been dubbed the "Father of Negro Baseball" and is deemed responsible for the continuance of black baseball in the early 1920s. The Negro Leagues remained active until the 1950s, when the integration of major league baseball led to their demise.

The teams comprising the NNL (Fig. 1) included the Kansas City Monarchs, Chicago American Giants, Chicago Giants, Dayton Marcos, Detroit Stars, Indianapolis ABC's, St. Louis Giants, and the Cuban Stars (who were based in New York). Later, teams were established in other northeastern cities such as Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Newark to form the Eastern Colored League. Teams in southern cities such as Atlanta, Jacksonville, and Birmingham (where Willie Mays first played professional baseball) comprised the NNL's southern counterpart.

Generally speaking, the distribution of Negro League teams represented the changing distribution of a rapidly urbanizing African-American population at the time. Historically, of course, most African-Americans lived in the rural South. During the early twentieth

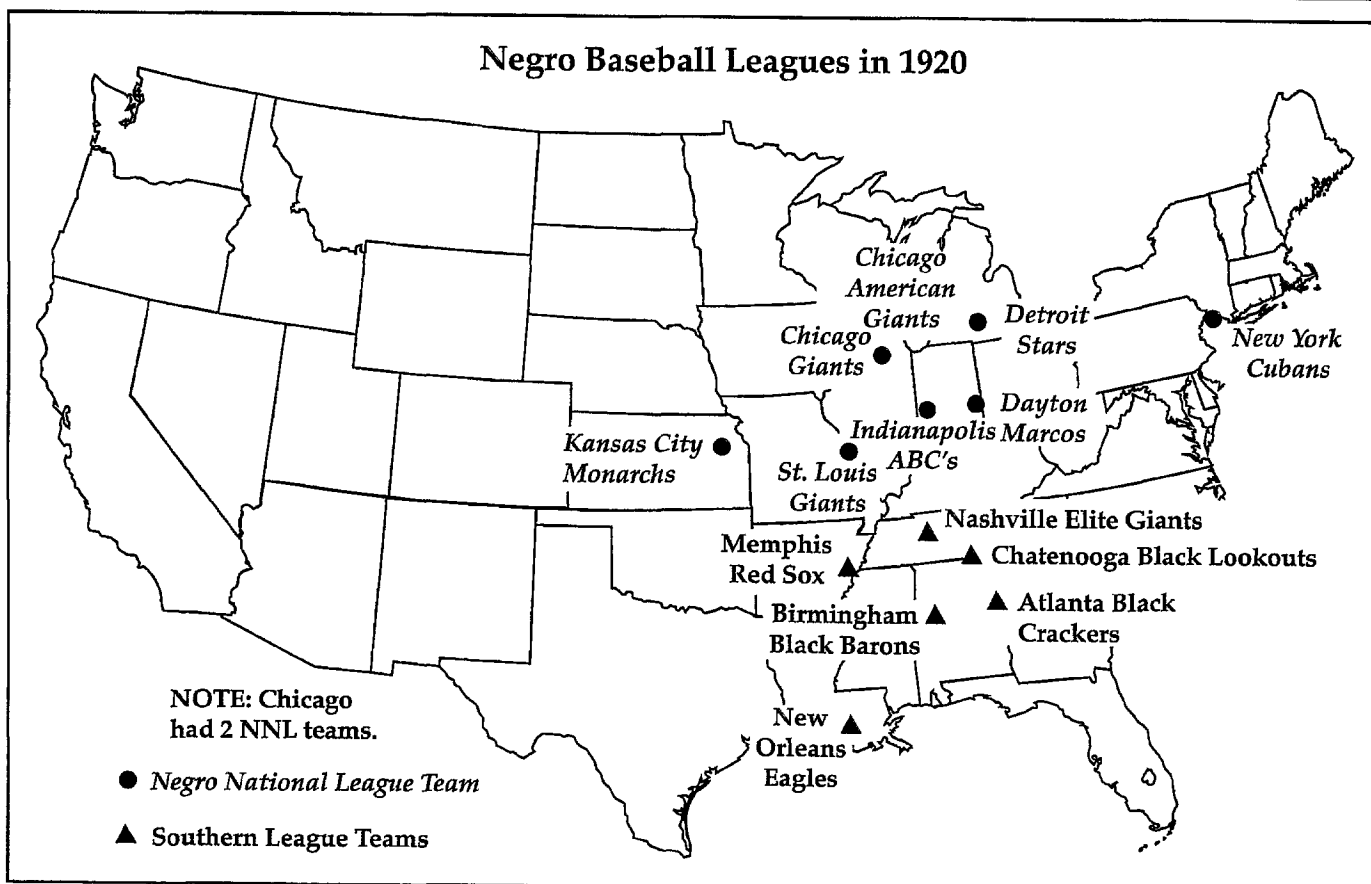


Figure 1. Location of Negro Baseball League Teams.

century, however, the African-American population of the United States began to move in large numbers from rural Southern origins to urban areas. Millions moved to large and medium-sized cities in the industrializing Northeast and Midwest. Several factors triggered this large-scale migration. During and after World War I, the United States reversed its traditional policy of allowing unlimited immigration. Restrictive immigration laws enacted between 1917 and 1924 brought about a sharp reduction in the number of European immigrants into the United States. These immigrants had represented an important source of cheap labor for the steel, automobile, and other industries, whose owners now began to look to the rural South for cheap labor. Rural African-Americans in the South, meanwhile, saw the North as an opportunity not only to earn much higher wages, but also to escape the bigotry associated with Jim Crow laws in the South. Thus many moved to Detroit, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and other northern cities with an industrial base. Many more left the farm to move to the rapidly growing cities of the South. Growth was especially noteworthy in places such as Atlanta, Birmingham, Memphis, and Houston with their large factories and other industrial activities.

A few notable events took place during the thirty-five years of Negro baseball. The first was the World Series, of which eleven were played (1924-27; 1942-48). The second was the All-Star Game, or the East-West game. The importance of the East-West game was two-fold: (1) the best black talent was showcased; and (2) clubs with insecure financing enjoyed a financial boon (Peterson 1970). This game became the largest black sports attraction in the country. The East-West game, first played in 1933, was an economic gain to the Negro Leagues and the players who participated (Ribowsky 1995). Players were elected by the fans. A large percentage of players came from Chicago and Pittsburgh, mainly because these cities had the biggest Negro newspapers. The *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier* paid a large amount of attention to baseball games, providing game summaries and player statistics. The local teams benefited because many citizens were able to follow their favorite players. Other cities did not have widely circulated black newspapers, if they had one at all, and game summaries, scores, and statistics were spotty at best.

The original Negro National League existed until 1931 when it folded, mainly due to financial problems that arose during the Great Depression. A second Negro National League existed from 1933 to 1949. With the integration of black players into professional white franchises, the popularity of Negro League baseball began to decline. By 1960, integration of the top black players was in full force and all-black professional baseball teams and leagues had become a thing of the past.

#### NEGRO LEAGUE BASEBALL IN KANSAS CITY

The Kansas City Monarchs were one of the most successful teams in the Negro National League.

The Monarchs played for thirty-seven seasons, from 1920 through 1930 and again from 1937 through 1962. The Monarchs were known as the New York Yankees of Negro League baseball; they won the first Negro League World Series in 1924 and more than a dozen league championships. Robinson, Paige, Banks, and Howard all played for the Monarchs before joining major league teams. Interestingly, Kansas City also played a pivotal role in the history of American jazz. Several icons of jazz history, including Count Basie, Jimmy Rushing, Coleman Hawkins, and Charlie "Bird" Parker, began their careers in Kansas City. Thus, Kansas City was a center for both African-American sport and culture throughout the early twentieth century.

During the early period of Negro baseball, Kansas City, like other Midwestern industrial cities, had a growing African-American population. Many male African-Americans in Kansas City were employed as steelworkers, meatpackers, and railroad workers. These men created the first baseball teams in the city as a weekend diversion from the daily grind of their industrial jobs. The first uniformed Kansas City team established was Wall's Laundry Grays, which was established in 1897 and sponsored by Quong Fong, a Chinese laundryman (Bruce 1985). However, the Monarchs became Kansas City's premier African-American team.

The Monarchs were owned by J. L. Wilkinson, who was the only white owner in the Negro National League. Wilkinson owned an All-Nations team comprised of players of many different nationalities. In 1915, Wilkinson moved this team from Des Moines, Iowa to Kansas City. The All-Nations team became the farm club for the Kansas City Monarchs, the all-black team Wilkinson established to enter into the NNL (Bruce 1985). The move to Kansas City was strategic and proved good for Wilkinson for several reasons: (1) meat packing plants provided a large population of men to field a team; (2) good railroad connections allowed for easier access to other major baseball cities; (3) a lively tradition of black baseball already existed; and (4) a large black population could draw crowds in excess of 50,000 fans for a home game. Rube Foster initially tried working on the NNL without the support and coordination of Wilkinson. However, because Wilkinson held the lease for the American Association Park, where the new Kansas City team would play, he became the first and only white owner of a NNL team.

Wilkinson was a prominent presence in black Kansas City. Many of his players thought that having a white owner was advantageous because Wilkinson could secure better deals with white businessmen on issues such as leasing stadiums and booking exhibition games. Wilkinson always treated his players respectfully and fairly and was able to help defuse racial tensions during games against white teams. Wilkinson gained the respect of the black community, being seen as diplomatic, unassuming, and easygoing. A prominent leader in the

Kansas City black community, Robert Sweeney, once said of Wilkinson, "He gave employment to several Negro families. He had a good image in the Negro community – all over the country" (Bruce 1985, 20). Wilkinson also established a number of strong alliances within the black community, including Quincy J. Gilmore, who became a public face of the Monarchs, Judge William C. Hueston, who was active in the NAACP, and Frank "Jewbaby" Floyd, who became the trainer for the team (Boxerman and Boxerman 2003).

In the 1920s, blacks in Kansas City were considered second class citizens and the economic boundaries for the black population emulated the physical boundaries in the city. Becoming a Monarchs' player was alluring to many men because of the good salaries compared to the wage they would earn in a meat-packing plant, the chance to travel and see distant cities, and the celebrity status that accompanied being a ball player. According to Bruce (195, 40), "It was the ambition of every black boy to be a Monarch, just as it was for every white boy to become a Yankee." Wilkinson was able to assemble such a strong contingent of black ball players that the Kansas City Monarchs were a highly recognizable team. "In the American Midwest or south of the border, the Monarchs established a reputation as being one of the outstanding ball teams in the country. For black Kansas Citians crushed by harsh discrimination, the Monarchs became a community focus..." (Bruce 1985, 66).

Attendance during the first few Monarchs' seasons was respectable: 400 to 500 fans for weekday games, up to 5,000 fans for Sunday games. In the late 1920s, attendance weakened and white fans comprised 50 percent of the fans who came to watch. Not only did Kansas City not have a team in the white-only National or American Leagues, but many black Kansas Citians did not have sufficient income that would allow them the luxury of attending games, frequently, especially as the Great Depression approached. Tactics were devised to attract larger crowds to games including urging civic groups to buy blocks of seats, Ladies' Night (ladies' admission was reduced), Knothole Day (children 15 years old and younger received free admission), and advertised home games in newspapers and on streetcars.

The Booster Club also came into more prominence in black Kansas City. They were a loosely formed group of fans in the early 1920s, organizing a parade for the opening game of each season. By the mid-1920s they had become a popular civic organization. Along with the opening day parade, the Boosters organized banquets for the team, printed window decals, and sponsored trips to Chicago for the most contested rivalry in the league. With the help of the Booster Club and the talent that Wilkinson was able to assemble, the Kansas City Monarchs became a foundation of the black community.

The Monarchs played Hilldale of Darby, Pennsylvania, the Eastern Colored League champs in the first Negro League World Series in 1924. These games

were played in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Kansas City, and Chicago. This series of games proved lucrative for each city. Over 46,000 fans bought tickets and gate receipts totaled over \$52,000. World Series cities regaled in an influx of customers and cash in the city's hotels, bars, and other service-oriented stores. Monarchs' players also financially benefited from winning the Series. After Wilkinson took his half of the winner's proceeds (about \$9,800), each player received \$308, a large increase in their regular paychecks. Kansas City played in several other World Series contests before the team folded.

The Monarchs were a major social institution in Kansas City for 35 years, until their demise was hastened by the move of the American League's Philadelphia Athletics to Kansas City in 1955 (Lanctot 1966). Deemed by the Negro League as THE team in the Midwest, the Monarchs were regarded as the league's best-administered team (Bruce 1985). During World War II as much as \$2 million annually flowed into the Negro Leagues. The Monarchs helped establish baseball as a respectable livelihood for black men and offered a chance to "make it" for the black youth of the city. For some players it became a stepping stone for other opportunities, such as being able to gain additional schooling. One sportswriter for the *Kansas City Call* remarked, "From a sociological point of view, the Monarchs have done more than any other single agent to break the damnable outrage of prejudice that exists in this city" (quoted in Peterson, 1970).

#### USING THE NEGRO LEAGUES AND KANSAS CITY SPORTS TO TEACH GEOGRAPHY

The Negro Leagues Baseball Museum and the associated history provide a unique opportunity to teach about demographic and racial issues. Much of the information that teachers and their students can use in undertaking projects of the type described below can be found on the Negro Leagues website (<http://www.nlbm.com/>) as well as at the Museum itself.

The history of the Negro Leagues provides an interesting mirror of the changing historical geography and demography of African-Americans in the United States. For example, students can map the locations of the teams and compare these locations to those of major league baseball at the time. To what extent were teams concentrated in areas with large African-American communities? Students also can investigate the home towns of Negro League Hall of Fame members and compare this distribution to those of African-American populations at the time, when a large majority came from the rural South, and today when a large majority of African-Americans live in metropolitan areas. The Negro Leagues also provide an interesting opportunity to discuss racial segregation and identity. The demise of the Negro Leagues following the integration of major league baseball in the late 1940s, which drained much of the talent away from the Negro Leagues, also illustrates the impact of money on sport.

A second important means of teaching geography and geographic concepts is through examining aspects of constructing sports arenas, stadiums, and other facilities. Cities and private corporations spend large amounts of money on constructing and upgrading sports arenas, whose presence and quality are often critical to a city's ability to attract professional baseball, football, basketball, and hockey franchises. Currently, the Kansas City metropolitan area is in the process of considering whether to allocate public funds to construct a new sports arena. The arena, if approved and constructed, is to be "NBA-ready and NHL-ready;" that is, of sufficient size and quality to attract teams in the National Basketball Association and the National Hockey League. (At one time, Kansas City was home to the NBA's Kings, now in Sacramento, and to the NHL's Scouts, which are now the New Jersey Devils.)

The process of locating and constructing a new sports facility raises a host of interesting questions with important geographic implications. For example, how would a community such as Kansas City select a specific location for a new sports arena? What are the relative advantages of locating the arena near downtown, or in the suburbs? What are the criteria that local officials would use in assessing the relative merits of proposed sites? What would be the environmental impacts of the new arena? How would its construction affect nearby neighborhoods and traffic patterns? What would be the impacts of the arena on other aspects of the city's economy, for example the hotel, restaurant and construction industries? Students could investigate such questions and could use overlays and other analytic techniques to show the relative merits of alternative proposals.

A third approach to sport and geographic education involves "sense of place." Kansas City is one of the few major metropolitan areas in the United States that straddles two different states. Do the perceptions of place on the Missouri side of State Line Avenue differ from those on the Kansas side of the boundary? Recently, in commemoration of its fiftieth anniversary, *Sports Illustrated* prepared and published the results of surveys done in each of the fifty states concerning residents' preferences for various sports teams. The results of the project can be found on-line at <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/magazine/features/si50/>. The website is designed with the first page presenting a clickable map of the United States. The second page the viewer sees is a state map of the state they clicked on from the full U.S. map. This state map identifies major cities and transportation corridors, and includes some interesting sports facts about the state.

Residents of each state were asked a series of preference questions regarding sports and their state. The questions range from favorite baseball, basketball, football, and hockey teams, to the state's biggest rival, to favorite sport to watch on TV. All data were collected by a Harris Interactive Poll, which means that all respondents

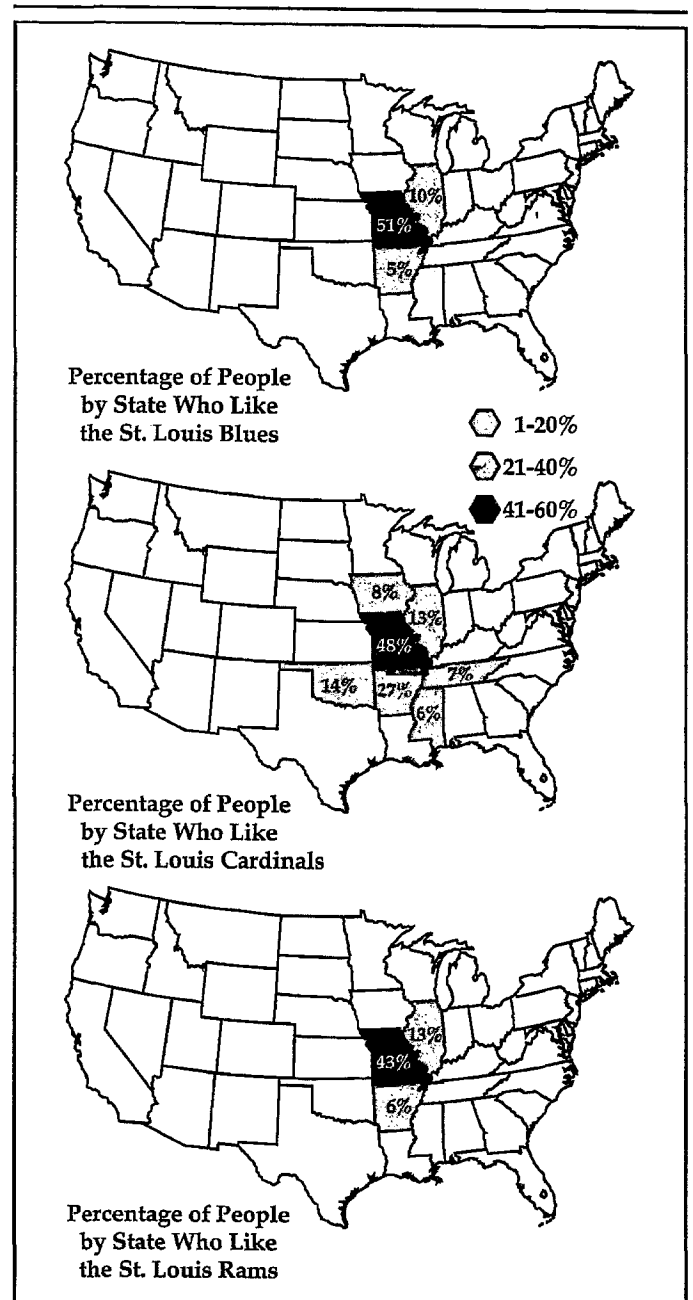


Figure 2. Percentage of people who like St. Louis professional sports teams.

completed the survey on-line. The statistics pages of the site indicate how many respondents participated in the survey for each state and what the margin of error is. For example, 415 Kansas residents who identify themselves as sports fans completed the survey and the margin of error was  $\pm 5$  percent.

These data are extremely useful in the classroom when teaching about geography. Students can look at the professional sports team data presented for their state and discuss the data. The teacher can lead a discussion about why identified teams were chosen, and how locational factors were likely to have played a role in

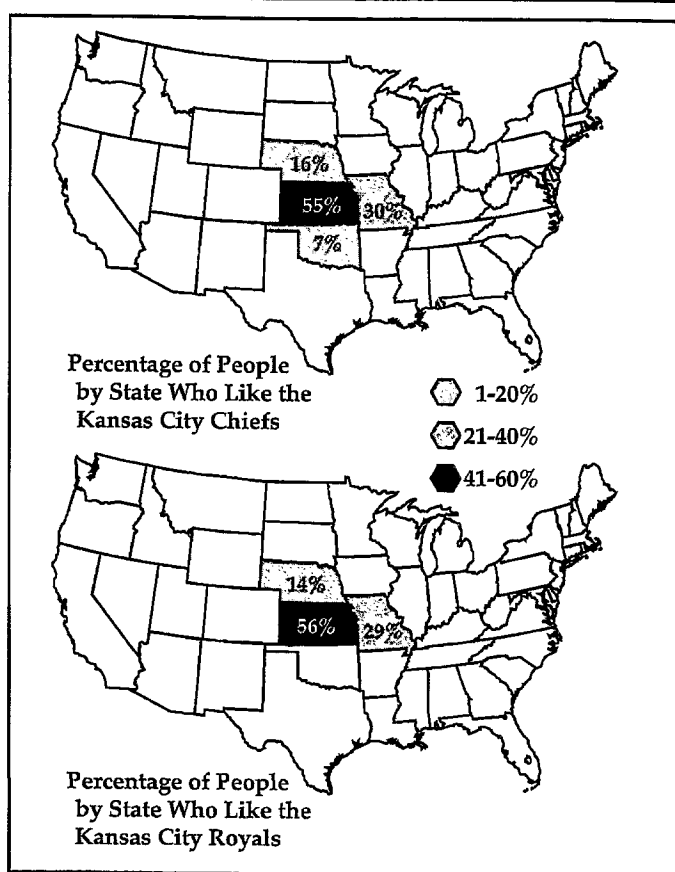


Figure 3. Percentage of people who like Kansas City professional sports teams.

local preferences. Students can also map these data using graduated symbols for each sport and preference percentage. Students could record the state and the percentage of respondents that chose a particular team. This mapping provides students gain a sense of whether or not their team has a more regional or more national following.

Examining these concepts with respect to the five professional teams in Missouri, it is clear that the main following of the Kansas City teams is regional (Figs. 2 and 3). Only in Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Nebraska did significant numbers of people express loyalty to baseball's Kansas City Royals and football's Kansas City Chiefs. The St. Louis Cardinals baseball team had a slightly larger fan base, including significant support in Iowa, Illinois, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi in addition to Missouri. The Cardinals have farm teams playing in Memphis, Knoxville, and Peoria, perhaps reinforcing these loyalties. These results are different from what students would find if they compared the Cardinals' results with a team like the New York Yankees, Dallas Cowboys, or Atlanta Braves, which have more national followings as a result of ongoing successes on the field and extensive media coverage.

After maps have been generated, the teacher could lead a guided discussion about why some teams have more local or regional following than others. What does this mean in terms of sense of place? People typically identify with their more local or regional team first, then a more national team if a local/regional team is present. A discussion on sense of place could hearken back to other leagues or teams that might have been in the region in the past, such as the Kansas City Monarchs. As we have seen, the black community of Kansas City felt strong ties to this black professional baseball team. Discussion could also focus on factors such as ethnic succession and media attention that might result in changes in the geography of various teams' bases of fan support.

#### CONCLUSION

Given the popularity of sport, the high degree of media attention paid to sport, and the intensely geographic nature of sporting competition, it is not surprising that educators in geography and other disciplines are becoming aware of the value of sports as a means of teaching geographic concepts at various grade levels. The history of sports in Kansas City, and in particular the Negro Leagues and their role in the history of professional baseball, provide a rich source of information from which teachers can draw to teach concepts in geography. Teachers in other states and communities can likewise draw upon examples from their own regions to spark student interest and to teach important concepts to their students.

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