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## Baseball Teams Worried Some Players May Not Be Fielded Due To Visa Quotas

By [MEG COKER](#)

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WASHINGTON —

Imagine it's the end of the summer, pennant races are heating up, but the home team is plagued by injuries and Congress is still bickering about immigration reform.

What do baseball and immigration have in common? Plenty, if a ball club is looking to call up a foreign-born pitcher with a mean sinker, but visa quotas block bringing the potential star to the States.

That's what happened to the Seattle Mariners two years ago. They signed Taiwanese pitcher Chien-Ming Chiang but couldn't bring him to the United States until the 2005 season because of government rules that lump minor league baseball and hockey players in the same visa category as oyster shuckers and summer resort help.

"The quotas had been met. There was nothing we could do about it," said Benny Looper, the Mariners' vice president of scouting and player development. "The assets of Major League Baseball clubs are their players. If we can't get a guy into the game here, that's a waste of money ... and of major consequence to us as a team and to him as an individual."

On Opening Day this year, more than one-quarter of ball players on Major League teams were foreign-born, while immigrants comprised about 40 percent of minor league rosters.

With such statistics, it's no wonder that with a national debate raging about how many and what kind of foreigners to allow into the country baseball officials are weighing in to make sure that decisions made in Washington this year won't hurt the national pastime.

Baseball and the National Hockey League — which also runs a domestic farm league — have teamed up to lobby Congress for a change in the arcane visa rules that separate foreign-born major league and minor league athletes into two separate categories. The minor league category has caps, the major league one does not.

"Our sports are affected by these rules ... because our sports need minor leagues to nurture players into the Majors," said Lucy Calautti, the senior lobbyist for MLB in Washington. "This is one of the biggest issues for us."

U.S. federal immigration rules decide which immigrants are allowed to enter America to work legally. For athletes, there are two types of work permits.

The P-1 visa is reserved for what the law calls "internationally recognized" artists, entertainers and athletes, the best of their profession, whether they are Russian violinists or Dominican outfielders. Major League and NHL players automatically qualify for this visa, and the government does not cap the numbers given out each year.

Then there is the H2-B visa, which was designed for seasonal agricultural workers and service industry employees but also includes minor-leaguers from foreign countries, as they work in America for set sport seasons.

These are the visas that allow American clubs to bring up players from the leagues they sponsor in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic, as well as Canadian high schoolers drafted each June.

The system worked well until two years ago, when in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the government lowered the cap on the number of H2-B visas to 66,000 per year, down from more than 120,000 visas in past years.

The crunch took baseball teams by surprise, because the U.S. government had always worked closely with ball clubs to

push immigration papers for players needing to get into the country.

"We've had people working in baseball on immigration for years now. They've done a good job ... [but] that year some people got caught unaware," said Dayton Moore, the Braves' assistant general manager for scouting.

The quota is particularly troublesome for baseball because it holds its draft in early summer. Other employers with whom ball teams are competing for visas secure their worker slots by December of the previous year, meaning baseball players signed in June usually can't make it to the States in the same year they are signed.

Moore says that his team has not had problems with the cap because of the Braves' well-established player development plans. However, some 350 foreign-born minor leaguers have been denied visas in the last two years, numbers that have affected all other ball clubs, baseball officials say.

Teams never had their visa requests denied before 2001, as the old Immigration and Naturalization Service routinely raised quota levels for baseball prospects.

MLB received a slight reprieve in its struggle in 2005, when Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., authored and then helped push through a law that allowed the H2-B quota to be split up into two halves over the course of a year. Her amendment was designed to help the crabbing and oyster industry in Maryland, but baseball teams also benefited by getting some of their draft choices that year into the United States the same season.

Yet national security prerogatives have kept the government from changing the quotas for baseball or hockey or moving these minor leaguers into another visa classification, baseball and Homeland Security officials say.

This year, Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, drafted language that has been incorporated into the overall Senate immigration bill that would allow minor league baseball and hockey players to apply for the specialized P-1 visa.

But baseball officials aren't yet confident that their woes will be over by this year's post-season. They know that any number of local and national political issues could strike down immigration reform efforts on Capitol Hill.

"Americans right now are focused on the illegal immigration debate, but I hope that they will turn their attention on the legal immigrants that need some help, too," said Stan Brand, the vice president of Minor League Baseball.

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