Scouting Territories: Making and Managing Baseball's Transnational Labor Market

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"Organized" baseball tightens labor regime… and spends more on hiring teenagers?

A crackdown on player mobility in the late 1940s asserts contractual control, giving management leverage over wages but increasing costs of labor market circulation

This encourages spending on scouting players not yet under contract and paying large signing bonuses to secure their services

Two responses emerge:

1. Expansion of recruitment to margins of labor market, targeting black Americans and players across the Caribbean

2. Investment in information techniques that promise to improve selection

These fueled each other: navigating distance and difference encouraged management to convert networks of people into numbers…

…building a business in which value might be extracted from overlaying predictive models on physical efforts of workforce

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New Targets and Territories

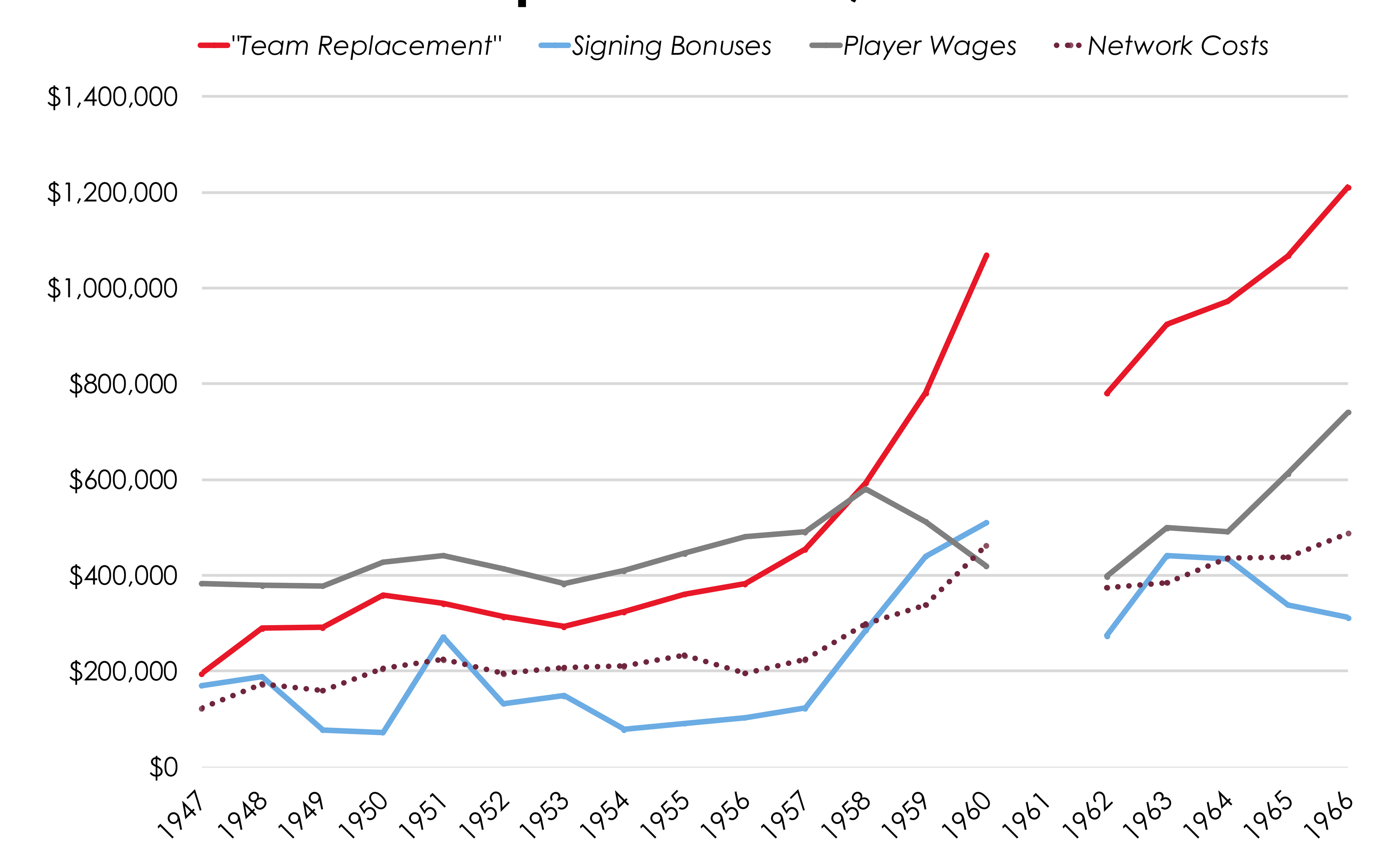
Rising costs pressured the Pittsburgh Pirates to experiment with scouting players where most other teams did not in the early 1950s

The team tried to make contacts at black colleges in the United States and hired scouts in Mexico, on the specific rationale that players signed would command smaller bonuses and lower wages

The "Money Market"

Since player contracts carried a perpetual claim on services, teams would speculate and trade them as assets: for instance, signing many young players with the idea that a few successes would yield a return on investment

Labor and Recruitment Costs, Philadelphia Phillies, 1947–1966



This chart draws on annual treasurer's reports to trace spending related to identifying, recruiting, and retaining the playing workforce. "Team replacement" is the category label used in these reports for expenses related to the scouting and development of players, of which "network costs" are a subset the author has identified. All totals are displayed in nominal U.S. dollars (for context, the CPI rose about 32% over the documented interval).

Scientific Baseball

The Philadelphia Phillies directed investment toward scientific research that promised better collection and analysis of baseball data in the early 1960s

They hoped sensors, computers, and other emerging technologies would help them make more accurate predictions about player productivity

Games and Data

Information produced about baseball addresses its economic imperatives—the evaluation of performance is pursued not to win an abstract "game" but to find advantage in the contest to extract value from a labor market

*Key archival sources include: Philadelphia National League Club Records, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware; Branch Rickey Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.