By MIKE SCHMIDT

For The Associated Press

Captain America used to be Derek Jeter. Now it’s David Wright and he had been the star for Team USA until a rib strain ended his stay in the World Baseball Classic.

Wright said he could have played but the New York Mets said no and demanded he go for tests. That is normal procedure, as Team USA is forced to honor all wishes of a player’s parent club.

Minus Wright, his teammates lost twice and went home. With the U.S. elimination went TV ratings in this country. It also opened a door to study the relevance of the WBC, at least in its current form.

Relevance, maybe. Or need — that may be a better question.

The WBC tournament, as we are led to believe, is designed to promote baseball throughout the world. Asian teams, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands get national TV coverage.

There are many human interest stories coming out of those clubs, whose players for the most part don’t compete in the majors, and this provides exposure to them and their passion for baseball.

In several cases, retired major league players and a couple Hall-of-Famers take roles as coaches for those countries. Barry Larkin, Bert Blyleven and Mike Piazza all were involved in that way. This element of the WBC makes it relevant but is it enough for baseball to need it?

What the world needs from Major League Baseball is not more high-profile competition — rather, its help at the grass-roots level, help forming youth leagues and getting kids interested through proper instruction.

Now, the big question: Why can't the USA Dream Team walk through this tournament with ease?

Answer one, it's not a Dream Team. And two, there are three Latino countries — the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico and Venezuela — with talent just as rich. But even they haven't won it.

That honor went to Japan in both previous tournaments. Why? Japan goes "all in" for the WBC, it's out to prove something. The best they have play, even though this time it lost in the semifinals. It's the Japanese mindset of anything worth doing is worth doing right, being invested totally.

The U.S. doesn't take the same approach for this competition. It has higher priorities, players on mega-contracts to protect and personal issues. Many players have legitimate needs to stay with their clubs during spring training.

Josh Hamilton can't leave Angels' camp, Ryan Howard is coming off an injury and Stephen Strasburg has well-documented arm issues. There are legit reasons why the U.S. players are not "all in," nor do I feel they ever will be.

With other countries, the stars who are physically OK do play. For some reason they are committed to country, not parent team. Look at Jose Reyes, who has good reason to turn down the Dominican invitation. He was a new player in camp with the Toronto Blue Jays, good reason to stay home. But no. With so many Dominican big names playing, he felt obligated.

Team USA was definitely formidable, with high-caliber players at all positions, but not an All-Star roster by any means. The catcher, third baseman, shortstop, right and left fielders would

be on an All-Star roster, as would the 1-2 starters and a reliever or two, but that's about it.

It was basically the same for other competing teams. The Dominican and Puerto Rico had top players but not MLB All-Stars at all positions. The talent level was very similar; that's why Team USA loses.

In baseball, if the talent is similar anything can happen. Imagine a rotation of Strasburg, Justin Verlander, Cole Hamels, Matt Cain and David Price? Three innings apiece should win every game, especially with Craig Kimbrel and Jonathan Papelbon at the end. Throw Hamilton and Mike Trout in the middle of the order, now you're talking about dominant players and a dominant team, a Dream Team.

Ain't going to happen, too many issues.

Everyone would agree the timing element, during spring training, is always a concern. The NBA puts its Dream Team in play in the offseason. Why not consider baseball's offseason? Because baseball has no offseason.

After the World Series, there is the 60-game winter ball season that leads into the Caribbean Series. This runs right up to spring training and most Latin players are involved. There's been consideration for shortening the season to 150 games every four years and playing the WBC in early April and also suggestions for a 2-week period in the middle of the season. Truthfully, the WBC is in the only place it can be.

We also saw another side of the WBC that needs work when Mexico and Canada got into a very nasty brawl caused by the run differential rule. If teams tied, advancing in the tournament could be determined by the team that scores the most. Now this rule, like the mercy rule for routs, takes us back to our Little League days.

I assume not all in that game were on the same page, as Ernie Whitt's team bunted for a hit with a 6-run lead in the ninth inning, a run differential strategy. After three tries the Mexico pitcher hit the next Canadian batter in the back, a war broke out at home plate and fortunately

no one was seriously hurt.

You'd think after two tries by the pitcher, the Mexico manager might have intervened and explained the rules to his team. Again, just an issue that cries for the WBC to retool the rule element of the competition.

In 2009, we were three outs away from elimination in Miami. Only a 3-run rally in the bottom of the ninth kept us from the same fate as 2006 and 2013. After 2006, the U.S. was to pull out all stops to win in 2009. After a loss in the semifinals to Japan, same thing. So the U.S. brought in the heavy artillery this time with Joe Torre & Co.

Dud again; 0-for-3 in three WBC opportunities. And maybe it's time to face the music.

Until Team USA and the MLB clubs vested in winning the WBC by motivating — in some way — the best American players to compete, Team USA will be no different than its competition.

Having said this, I must finish with this thought: My experience as Team USA third base coach in 2009 was one of the most memorable experiences of my life.

I will forever cherish the friendships I made during the three weeks we were together. And like the players always say, there is no feeling that compares to having USA on your chest. I'm sure the same holds true for all players who represent their countries.

Playing for your country is the ultimate. Maybe that's the bottom line. Maybe winning isn't everything or the only thing.

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