

BASEBALL'S NEGRO LEAGUES

Matthew Eisenberg

Although black men were unfairly prohibited from playing in baseball's major leagues until 1947, the Negro Leagues which blacks formed enjoyed tremendous success in the 1930s and 1940s.

Dedicated to my father who helped me so greatly in obtaining resources and gave me my love of baseball, and to all those players who had the talent but not the skin color to play major league baseball.

Introduction

From 1898 to 1947, America's national pastime, baseball, fell prey to the racism in the country and excluded black players from white teams and leagues. Despite their acknowledged equality as players, they were forced to play in inferior ballparks, under inferior conditions, because of their skin color. In the early years of all-black baseball, teams struggled to make money, players struggled to earn a living, and leagues struggled to stay together. By the 1930s, however, two new leagues had formed: the Negro American and Negro National Leagues. It was during this period

Matthew Eisenberg is a Junior at Hall High School in West Hartford, Connecticut. He wrote this paper for Mrs. Elizabeth Devine's course in Advanced Placement United States History during his Sophomore year (1993/1994).

that black baseball flourished, and despite the disappointment of being left out of the major leagues, Negro ballplayers and teams made the two organizations a success.

Baseball had become a popular game during the Civil War, as bored soldiers looked for ways to spend their time in between battles.¹ By 1872, as military governments ruled the South, the first black player, John Fowler, joined a professional league.² Fowler wandered from minor league to minor league, and although he played all nine positions, never distinguished himself as a ballplayer.³ Soon after Fowler, another black man joined the professional baseball ranks. Moses Fleetwood Walker, a student at Oberlin College, left school early to join the minor leagues with the Toledo Club of the American Association. When that league was declared an official major league in 1885, Walker became the first black major leaguer. Despite threats of lynching from the Richmond club, Walker played on. Eventually too much pressure mounted against him, and Toledo released him. Walker's precedent, however, led the way for many more blacks in the following years.⁴ In 1885, there were four blacks in white baseball, and by 1887 there were 20.⁵

At the same time, however, the first all-black baseball team was formed in Babylon, Long Island. This team, chosen from waiters at area hotels, began barnstorming the northeast with the players making \$12.00 to \$18.00 per week. In 1886, the Cuban Giants, as they were called to make people think they were foreigners, recruited some of the finest black ballplayers from all over the country. After beating one white team after another, they won wide acclaim by beating the Eastern League (an upper level minor league) champion, Bridgeport.⁶ In 1887, they joined with other newly formed Negro League teams to form The League of Colored Baseball. Although it folded after a week because it was a financial disaster,⁷ in Sol White's words, "The short time of its existence served to bring out the fact that colored baseball players of ability were numerous."⁸ Later that year, The Cuban Giants once more distinguished themselves by nearly beating the World Champion Detroit club.⁹

Although most blacks were having success in white baseball, in 1887 'Jim Crow' began to take blacks away from the white game. Many players competing against blacks complained, and in Syracuse several players were suspended for refusing to play.¹⁰ With venom and hate, baseball great Adrian "Cap" Anson led the drive to segregate the game. In his book, Sol White charges Anson with nearly single-handedly creating the color barrier. After entire teams refused to play against blacks, the clubs which they were on slowly began to release them.¹¹

For those blacks that remained, life was incredibly difficult. Black second baseman Frank Grant led his team in batting, but was not allowed to pose in the team picture.¹² Black players in white baseball were social outcasts off the field and the subject of intense hate on it. Coaches often gave a black man the wrong instructions, and every effort was made to charge him with an error on a bad play. Most pitchers threw at the batter when he was up, and black infielders were often forced to make an error to avoid getting spiked.¹³ The invention of the foot-first slide is usually credited to whites trying to spike Grant's shins.¹⁴

By 1889, there were just two blacks in white baseball: Fleet Walker and Dick Johnson, who both had distinguished themselves with their off-the-field class. Walker was released after the 1890 season, however, and although that year some of the black teams played in white leagues, most of the leagues failed. By 1898, the barrier was complete, and no black players or teams remained in white baseball.¹⁵

The final attempt to put a black in major league baseball came in 1901, when Hall-of-Famer John McGraw, a manager at the time, claimed that black second baseman Charlie Grant was a Cherokee Indian named Tokohama. McGraw, however, was unsuccessful because Chicago White Sox owner Charles Comiskey discovered the plot.¹⁶

In 1900, there were five black professional teams: The Cuban Giants, the Cuban X Giants, The Red Stockings, The Chicago Unions, and the Columbia Giants. Each barnstormed in a separate region of the country, and each was mildly successful

playing blacks, whites, or each other.¹⁷ 1906 saw a new league form, made up of these teams, that lasted for almost an entire year. The final game was played in front of 10,000 mostly black fans at the Philadelphia Athletics' stadium.¹⁸ Between 1900 and 1920 many Negro teams were formed, most barnstormed, and a few leagues were attempted. Players would travel at night, often encountering problems because of their race with lodging and restaurants. They would play every day, sometimes two or three times.¹⁹ Most made from \$40 to \$100 a month plus expenses, far below the salaries of white ballplayers.²⁰ It was a hard life for the ballplayers, especially those who knew they could have been superstars in white baseball. The greatest player of the era was John Lloyd, nicknamed the black Honus Wagner. Wagner, the Hall of Fame shortstop, proudly acknowledged, "I am honored to have John Lloyd called the Black Wagner. It is a privilege to have been compared with him."²¹

The 1930s and 1940s, an era of racism, segregation, and hate in this country, surprisingly became the golden age of Negro League baseball. Through hardship, depression, and war, all-time great players like Satchell Paige, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, and Cool Papa Bell showcased their tremendous talents in the leagues that were gaining fast acceptance among whites and blacks alike. The Negro Leagues of the era were a tremendous success for various reasons.

The quality of play and the players delighted fans and helped gain blacks acceptance which eased the eventual integration of blacks and whites. The attendance is a testament to the fact that blacks finally had a game of their own and role models to look up to, and many whites also found enjoyment by watching Negro baseball. Financially, the Negro Leagues grew to a two-million dollar a year enterprise, the biggest black-dominated business in the country.²² Finally, Negro League baseball provided many blacks with the chance to do what they loved most: play the game. As Bill Wright, a Negro League player for twenty-one years said, "I think people know now that it was a mistake not to let us play in the major leagues, but we didn't ever hold a grudge. We had too much fun."²³

Andrew "Rube" Foster, an excellent pitcher in the early twentieth century, is widely considered the father of Negro League baseball. In 1919, he proposed the first Negro National League, made up of eight teams.²⁴ The league began a new era for black baseball, as crowds of 8,000 to 10,000 were common in 1920. Attendance soon fell as Foster's death in 1923 left the league with no strong leadership, but the profit made by clubs during the four years was undeniably a source of inspiration for the next series of pioneer owners.

1933 saw two strong men emerge to create the second Negro National League. Cum Posey, founder of the Homestead Grays, and Gus Greenlee, founder of the Pittsburgh Crawfords, worked together to help found the longest lasting league in Negro baseball. Both owners had made considerable money off their talent-rich teams, and saw an even greater potential in organized baseball. The Crawfords, Grays, Chicago American Giants, Indianapolis ABC's, the Detroit Stars, and Columbus Blue Birds, and later the Nashville Elite and the Baltimore Black Sox filled out the roster in 1933. Greenlee's strong and sometimes dictatorial hand helped the Negro National League rule the east coast²⁵

Soon thereafter H.G. Hall founded the Negro American League. At first it was quite unstable, as teams rotated in and out of the league. By the late 1930s, however, both leagues were on strong financial ground.²⁶ There were many problems at first, though, as weak leadership hurt the play on the field. It was not unusual for a player to attack an umpire who made an unfavorable call because there was rarely punishment handed down from the league hierarchy. As players began to realize that the owners were out solely for money, many jumped from team to team, often in mid-season, and played for whoever would pay the larger salary.²⁷

Despite this, there was little doubt that the Negro Leagues were becoming the proving ground for black baseball players in the 1930s. Each team played between 30 and 40 games a year, and the winners from each league played each other in the World Series.²⁸ Games were covered in major magazines and newspapers, white and black.²⁹ Similarly, black ballplayers were beginning to

gain fame as they became household names in black families, and many sportswriters began to openly wonder how these men would fare in the white leagues. The Negro Leagues were no longer laughed at by white baseball, and in the next two decades many black players proved that they were equal to if not better than any white counterpart.

By the mid 1930s, the Negro Leagues had developed into two extremely successful organizations. As the leagues stabilized, the general population learned of the great players and teams in black baseball. Attendance began to rise, and money poured in. The players were happy doing what they loved and making money for it, the owners were happy because they were getting rich off their teams, and fans, primarily black, loved to watch their heroes face each other night after night.

The greatest reason the Negro Leagues were successful was the quality of play on the field. They played a tougher game than the white players because the umpires were not nearly so strict with their rules. Infielders would often get spiked by sliding baserunners, and pitchers would throw at a batter to try to intimidate him or to avenge a big hit in a previous at-bat. This different and interesting twist on the old game was a draw for many whites.³⁰ Most players started with small teams that barnstormed regionally and were discovered by major Negro League teams barnstorming on their days off. Roy Campanella's story is typical of a black ballplayer's rise to fame. While playing with the Bacharach Giants, a Philadelphia sandlot team, he was discovered by the Baltimore Elite Giants, where he became a star.³¹

As baseball historian Bill James writes, "There is no doubt that some of the players from (the Negro Leagues) were greater than many of those (listed as white baseball's greatest)."³² The two greatest stars of the time were a pitcher and a catcher, who were likely the best players, black or white, to ever play their positions. The pitcher was Satchell Paige, a tall, lanky man who could throw 100 mile-per-hour fastballs or huge curve balls. Paige could attract such huge crowds that he commanded a \$30,000-\$40,000 per year salary, far superior to any other Negro League player ever. His

appeal to both races was evident by the fact that even in his 40s he was one of the first players brought to the major leagues.³³ Dizzy Dean, a white Hall of Fame pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals in the 1940s said of Paige, "I see all (the great pitchers) but (Christy Mathewson) and (Walter) Johnson and I know who's the best pitcher I ever see and it's old Satchell Paige that big lanky colored boy."³⁴ Paige also received high compliments from Joe DiMaggio, Charlie Gehringer, and many other white stars.³⁵

Walter Johnson, another Hall of Fame white pitcher, once said, "There is a catcher that any big league club would like to buy for \$200,000 dollars. His name is Gibson...he can do everything. He hits the ball a mile. And he catches so easy he might as well be in a rocking chair. Throws like a rifle."³⁶ Catcher Josh Gibson may well have been the greatest black player who ever lived. "The Black Babe Ruth" often hit 80 or more home runs a year. (The major league single-season record is 61, held by Roger Maris.) It is impossible to know exactly how many home runs Gibson hit in his career, but a good estimate is about 670 in 16 seasons.³⁷

These two and other stars like Buck Leonard, Ray Dandridge, Judy Johnson, and Cool Papa Bell helped Negro League stars beat major league all-stars on several occasions. There is no greater evidence that the blacks were as good as white players than the success former Negro League players had in the major leagues. Hank Aaron, who played with the Indianapolis Clowns, went on to become major league baseball's all-time home-run king. Ernie Banks of the Kansas City Monarchs, Roy Campanella of the Baltimore Elite Giants, Jackie Robinson of the Kansas City Monarchs, and Willie Mays of the Birmingham Black Barons all had spectacular major league careers from the 1940s through the 1970s and are all now in the Hall of Fame.³⁸

Willie Grace, a Negro League player for eight years, said of the talent, "The last four or five years of the Negro Leagues we had the best players in the world and we didn't even know it."³⁹ Bill Yancey agrees, "If we could have selected the best of the colored league and gone into the major leagues, I'd say we would have won the championship."⁴⁰ There was a consensus among the unbiased

sportswriters as well. Shirley Povich of the *Washington Post* wrote, "There are pitchers who would win 20 games this season for any big league club...and there are outfielders who would hit .350, infielders who could win quick recognition as stars, and there is at least one catcher (Josh Gibson) who is probably superior to Bill Dickey (the best white catcher of the era)."⁴¹

With the influx of talent and the new respect for the league came a boom in attendance. While the first Negro National League's World Series in 1926 drew only 9,000 fans, the famous East-West games in the 1930s and 1940s never drew less than 20,000. These games, the brainchild of Gus Greenlee, were tremendous showcases of Negro talent. At the peak of Negro League baseball success, 1943, the East-West game was played at Comiskey Park, home of the Chicago White Sox, and drew 51,723 fans. Mostly blacks attended these games, but it was not uncommon for whites to attend. Regular season games also drew well, although not nearly as well as the East-West games, and a marquee player like Paige or Gibson could always draw a large interracial crowd of spectators.⁴²

The league was a financial success for the owners, and the players were compensated nicely as well. By World War II, an average Negro player would make about \$400-\$500 a month plus expenses, and stars could make nearly \$1,000 per month. While these numbers did not compare to the salaries of white major leaguers, they were far superior to the money made in white minor leagues or by most blacks in America.⁴³

For the owners there was no doubt that the Negro Leagues were tremendously profitable. In the 1940s, Negro organized baseball grew into a \$2 million a year business, the single largest black-dominated enterprise in America.⁴⁴ The richest owners were able to entice the finest players to join their teams, and thus made even more money. While in the 1930s, Negro League teams played anywhere from cheap local diamonds to major league ballparks, by the mid 1940s, every team either leased a major league park or owned their own stadium.

Perhaps the single greatest element that helped make the Negro Leagues successful was the fact that the players were doing what they loved. Henry “Jumbo” Kimbro, a Negro League ballplayer for 13 years stated, “Those were good days. We just loved to play. We didn’t mind nothing as long as we got to play.”⁴⁵ Buck O’Neil echoed a similar sentiment, “Those places (where we played) were alive. It was the jazz era. All the black entertainers, we knew them, because we were entertainers too. They’d see us play in the afternoon, and we’d go see them play at night.”⁴⁶ Although most players may have resented being left out of the major leagues, the Negro Leagues gave them a respectable league in which to showcase their talents, get paid fairly good money, and play the game that they loved so much.⁴⁷

The Negro Leagues may not have received the respect that major league baseball earned, but they certainly enjoyed a success of their own. Constantly battling racism and doubts about their ability, the players went on the field to play their game and in so doing earned the admiration of blacks and many whites alike. Life was not easy for black ballplayers, but they overcame the disappointment of being left out of the white game and proved that they could do just as well. By the end of the 1940s, the Negro Leagues had become so successful in showcasing black baseball talent that the white leagues were forced to question the wisdom of their decision to exclude them. They could no longer claim to have the greatest talent in the country when everyone knew that only half of baseball’s superstars actually played in their league.

By 1940, pressure was mounting in major league baseball to allow blacks to play. Managers and many ballplayers called for the end of the racial barrier.⁴⁸ Bill Veeck led the charge in 1943 with an idea to buy the last place Philadelphia Phillies and fill the team completely with Negro League stars. “I had not the slightest doubt that in 1944...the Phils would have leaped from seventh place to the pennant,” Veeck claimed.⁴⁹ Although Veeck failed when baseball’s owners learned of his idea and didn’t approve the sale of the team, it was a large step in integrating baseball.

In the mid-1940s, several baseball teams held tryouts for black players. The Boston Red Sox, for example, invited several players, most notably Jackie Robinson, to a private workout. Each player showcased tremendous talent, but never heard from the team again. This was a typical scenario for most of the tryouts, as for one reason or another the players never made the team.⁵⁰ Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, set out to change this pattern.⁵¹

Under the pretense that he was planning to buy a Negro League team, Rickey sent out scouts to watch Negro League games. These scouts would report back to Rickey on the best players and Rickey would personally see many of them. Realizing that it would take more than just a great ballplayer to become baseball's pioneer, Rickey had specific criteria. One name kept popping up from all his scouts; Jackie Robinson, the fleet-footed second baseman of the Kansas City Monarchs. Although Robinson was not the best player in black baseball, he was an excellent ballplayer known for his competitive fire on the field and his gentlemanly conduct off of it. Robinson was a non-drinking, non-smoking, former tri-sport star at UCLA, and an army veteran.⁵² He was signed by Rickey to the Triple-A Montreal Royals of the International League.⁵³ Ordered never to fight back against any racism he encountered, Robinson held up under the media's magnifying glass and the constant taunts of spectators and quietly became the Royals' star player. The next year, on April 15, 1947, he broke the color barrier when he started at second base on opening day for the Dodgers. Rickey had carefully orchestrated his debut, and shortly before the season started, he traded a bunch of players that had spoken out against Robinson playing on the team. Robinson went on to win the National League Rookie of the Year award.⁵⁴

The Negro Leagues' success undoubtedly led the way for the integration of the major leagues. The legend of the tall, dark, powerful slugger had spread, and names like Gibson, Robinson, and Paige had become known among whites. Blacks had distinguished themselves on the field with their wonderful play, and many had distinguished themselves off the field with their gentle-

manly manner. Baseball had no choice but to give in to the tremendous pressure from sportswriters, fans, and members of the baseball fraternity.

It is likely that if it had not been for the success of the Negro National and American Leagues, black baseball players would have had to wait years longer before breaking the color barrier. Similarly, had Robinson failed to impress the Montreal crowds or the Brooklyn Dodgers' front office, or simply reacted to the prejudice he faced with any rage or hint of retribution, it would have set Rickey's effort back several years. The Negro Leagues had been successful in opening the door to so many opportunities that black players had never before been confronted with, and given the chance they proved their equality and often superiority to white ballplayers. The Negro Leagues and the courage of Robinson gave Mays, Aaron, and even the great black players of today the opportunity to play in the major leagues.

And so, with the beginning of a new era for major league baseball, the era of the Negro Leagues reached the beginning of the end. In 1947, every Negro League team lost money, and attendance plummeted.⁵⁵ As one Negro League star after another went to the major leagues, the league withered. Barnstorming once more became common, but now each team needed a gimmick. Clowns, cannibals, midgets, and many other sideshows were used to draw fans to the games. Only players with personality played on black teams, because they were called upon to make jokes or humorous plays to keep the fans excited. Negro League baseball ceased to be a breeding ground for the finest black talent in America, and instead fans went to the major league parks where they could see their black heroes play with whites for the first time in nearly 60 years.⁵⁶ The Negro American and Negro National League survived on a small scale until they finally collapsed in 1960.

The Negro Leagues, even with their faults, proved to the world the equality of blacks on the baseball field. At the time, every small step in the overall struggle against racism had an impact, and the fact that white baseball was forced to admit that they needed

blacks lifted the spirits of many who were fighting the civil rights battle. Baseball had slammed the door on black players in the 1890s, and they became such a success without whites that 50 years later many baseball executives were virtually begging to get them back.

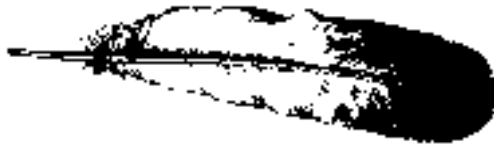
Baseball had long been a source of heroes and inspiration for America's youth, and there was hope that as blacks became accepted in baseball, many would accept them in life. How could a boy whose favorite team was the New York Giants not fall in love with Willie Mays?, and if his idol was Willie Mays, there was a much greater chance that he would respect blacks in every facet of life. Such was the hope of blacks who saw the overall picture of breaking the color barrier.

Black players, who had for so long toiled in anonymity when their talent far exceeded that of so many whites, benefited from the Negro Leagues more than any owner or fan. The players had gotten a chance to play, and by the end of the 1940s, those who had proved themselves at that level were nearly all given an opportunity in the majors. However, it is Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Rube Foster, and all the others that never got to live out their dream who really lost. Most of these players have also been lost from baseball's history, and until recently weren't even mentioned among discussions of baseball greats. While the players who made it to the major leagues owe much of their success to the Negro Leagues, there is no doubt that to these players the Negro Leagues just weren't enough.

The biggest loser during the era of the Negro Leagues was white baseball. Not only didn't they benefit from a huge crop of black talent for 50 years, but they lost black fans and some white fans as well when the Negro Leagues prospered. Every time the legend of some black player grew, baseball became a little more defensive over their policies. When given a chance to play in Yankee Stadium, "the house that (Babe) Ruth built," Josh Gibson hit the longest home run in the history of the ballpark (the record still stands).⁵⁷ Events like these both embarrassed the major leagues and heightened the pressure for integration.

There is no doubt, however, that in 1947 baseball really won. After Jackie Robinson's tremendous season, the floodgates opened, and 57 former Negro League players were brought to the majors in the next decade. Baseball never would have been the same had it not been for Mays, Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, and all the wonderful black players who became stars. It raised the level of play in the major leagues, and raised the level of consciousness in America.⁵⁸

The impact of the Negro Leagues has in many ways been lost among today's baseball players and fans. In a recent *Sports Illustrated* survey, several players didn't even know who Jackie Robinson was, but there is no way to tell what the game would have been like without him or without the Negro Leagues. Baseball's Negro Leagues, despite the tragic circumstances through which they were created, had a tremendous impact on the game of baseball and all of society, even if they are not well known today. Denied their dream, black players took the field and made that dream possible for generations to come, while winning the hearts and minds of millions of baseball fans in the process.



¹ Pete Palmer and John Thorn, Total Baseball (New York: Warner Books, 1989) p. 7

² Robert Peterson, Only the Ball Was White (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 18

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-24

⁵ Solomon White, Official Baseball Guide (Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House Library of Baseball Classics, 1907) p. 82

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-23

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-26

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

¹⁰ Peterson, p. 28

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 32

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 41

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 62-63

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 63-65

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73

²² *Ibid.*, p. 93

²³ Shelley Smith, "Remembering Their Game," Sports Illustrated 6 July 1992, p. 86

²⁴ Peterson, pp. 80-84

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-93

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 277

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 67

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-118

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119

³² Bill James, The Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract (New York: Villard Books, 1986) p. 310

³³ Peterson, p. 120

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 129

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158

- ³⁷ Bruce Chadwick, When the Game Was Black and White (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992) p. 179
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 180
- ³⁹ Smith, Sports Illustrated 6 July 1992, p. 91
- ⁴⁰ Peterson, p. 4
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 176
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 100
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 98
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93
- ⁴⁵ Smith, Sports Illustrated 6 July 1992, p. 85
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 80-92
- ⁴⁸ Peterson, p. 177
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 180
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-186
- ⁵¹ Phil Dixon and Patrick J. Hannigan, The Negro Baseball Leagues (Mattituck: Amereon House, 1992) p. 302
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 188-189
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 190
- ⁵⁴ Peterson, p. 198
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 201
- ⁵⁶ Dixon and Hannigan, p. 302
- ⁵⁷ Peterson, p. 166
- ⁵⁸ Dixon and Hannigan, p. 306

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Thanks to: Thomas Craig, National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, and David Dalin, University of Hartford.