

Black Baseball: Looking back

By Clarissa Myrick
Smithsonian News Service

Oscar Charleston was his name. He starred at about every position on the diamond and has been called the greatest baseball player of all time.

Then there was Buck Leonard. His first-base playing skills were considered the match of New York Yankees star Lou Gehrig's.

But even among avid baseball buffs these names may draw a blank. They played in the Negro baseball leagues in the years before that historic day in 1947 when Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers and broke the half-century-old color barrier in the majors.

Charleston and Leonard did not play in obscurity by any means. Though the Negro Leagues were around before the color bar went up, the teams reached their stride in the 1920s and '30s when thousands of Black fans, and even some white baseball enthusiasts, packed stadiums, ballparks and sandlots all over the country to see the stars of such teams as the Kansas City Monarchs, the Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Newark Eagles.

These fans got the chance to see baseball at its finest. "Blacks were playing probably the most exciting -- yes, and very possibly the best -- baseball seen in America before 1947," critic John Holway writes in his book, *Voices From The Great Black Baseball Leagues*.

Carl Scheele, curator of a recent exhibition on Black baseball at the Smithsonian's Museum of American History, agrees. "The talent of the Black baseball league stars was amazing."

Talent wasn't the only thing these players had going for them. They had charisma and a bit of panache. The flamboyant pitching style and personality of Leroy "Satchel" Paige, for instance, made him a national celebrity even before he broke into the major leagues in 1948 as a 42-year-old "rookie" for the Cleveland Indians.

Another dazzling pitcher, "Smokey" Joe Williams, was throwing treacherous fast balls before Paige became a star on the mound. And there was shortstop John Henry Lloyd whose mild manner off and hard-driving ballplaying on the field earned him the title "the Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde of baseball."

Although most of these players were never declared national sports champions, they did become heroes in the nation's Black communities. "When I was a kid, I felt a great sense of pride whenever I watched Black leaguers play," recalls James Piper, a designer for the Museum of American History and himself a former semi-pro Black baseball player.

Ironically, soon after Robinson cracked the color bar in major league baseball, the Black leagues began to fade away.

"Once integration began, the major leagues recruited the better young players of the Black leagues," cultural historian Donn Rogosin, who organized the Black baseball exhibition, explains. "Then the fans stopped going to see the Black league teams play; they opted for integrated rather than segregated baseball."

It's not easy to track down the great moments of the Negro leagues and their stars. Most of the teams never documented their players' records. The large metropolitan newspapers seldom covered their games and hardly ever featured stories about the players. So, when the league died, the little bit of fame the Black league stars had known died, too.

Today's sports historians must glean most of their information about the leagues from the files of Black newspapers of the period and from the memories and memorabilia of such players as former first baseman Walter "Buck" Leonard.

Leonard, now 73 and a real estate broker living in Rockie Mount, N.C., was once half of a dynamite duo. The other half was Josh Gib-

son, the ball player credited with hitting the longest home run ever struck in Yankee stadium. Like Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth of the major leagues, Leonard and Gibson batted third and fourth in the line-up. Between 1937 and 1945, the duo led the Homestead Grays to nine straight Negro League pennant wins.

Life in the underfinanced Black leagues was exciting, but rough even for the stars, Leonard says. During the season -- mid-April to the end of September -- most of the teams tried to play every day to keep financially afloat. "One year we played 210 ball games and traveled 30,000 miles by bus and train," Leonard recalls.

If a team found a little extra time in its schedule, it set up games with small town white and Black semi-pro teams to get a little heavy extra money. "Sometimes we played three games in one day," Leonard says. "We'd play a doubleheader against a Black team at Yankee stadium on a Sunday afternoon; then, on Sunday night, we'd go out on Long Island and play a semi-pro, white team."

Economic necessity also proved to be the mother of invention in Black baseball. In the early 1930s, the Kansas City Monarchs were pioneers in the use of the portable lighting system that made night baseball -- a good source of revenue -- possible.

Near the end of the season, the best players in the leagues went to Chicago to play in the East-West Classic, an annual all-star game. "My greatest thrill on the field was playing in that game," Leonard says.

After the classic and the end of the grueling season, most of the players continued their hectic pace in off-season, cross-country barnstorming tours and winter games in Florida, California and Latin America.

The players looked forward to these off-season games, especially those in Latin America, for several reasons. "We made three times



Before the major leagues dropped their color barrier in 1947, Negro League teams starred at packed ballparks in the United States and at special exhibition games in Latin America. In this photo taken in 1945, the All Stars posed at game time in Caracas, Venezuela. Team member Roy Campanella, top row, second from left, later starred with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Jackie Robinson, bottom row, far left, became the player who

broke the color barrier when he joined the Dodgers in 1947. Others are: (Top row) Blanco Chataing; Campanella; Marvin Barker; Bill Anderson; Quincy Trouppe; George Jefferson; Parnell Woods; Roy Welmaker; Buck Leonard. (Bottom row) Robinson; Eugene Benson; Felton Snow (mgr.); Verdal Mathis; Sam Jethroe (trainer). (Photo: Smithsonian News Service)

more money in the Latin American countries than we did playing in the Negro leagues," says Monte Irvin, a veteran of the Black leagues who went on to stardom in the majors.

The players could also improve their skills and learn to play under extreme pressure. "If you didn't play well in the Latin American countries," Irvin remembers, "they sent you back to the United States."

But perhaps the main reason for the popularity of the off-season games was the opportunity afforded the Black players to compare their skills with those of white major league players. In Mexico, Cuba, Venezuela and other Latin nations,

Black leaguers played with and against white major leaguers on fully integrated teams.

In the United States, Black all-star teams organized by such players as Satchel Paige barnstormed with white all-star teams put together by such men as Dizzy Dean. These games demonstrated that the skills of Black players equalled and often surpassed those of white major league players. Boxscores uncovered by author Holway show that out of the 445 games Black leaguers played against white major leaguers between 1866 and 1948, the Black teams won 260, lost 172 and tied 4.

Within the last 10 years, the

baseball world has begun to praise the achievements of the greats of the Black leagues. In 1971, Satchel Paige was the first of these players to be elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard were elected in 1972. And this year, Rube Foster, the organizer of the first successful Black league, was added to the Hall of Fame.

"I never thought I would be honored like this," Buck Leonard said a few days before attending a White House luncheon for champions elected to the Hall of Fame. "It makes all those years of low pay and long travel in the Negro Leagues worthwhile."

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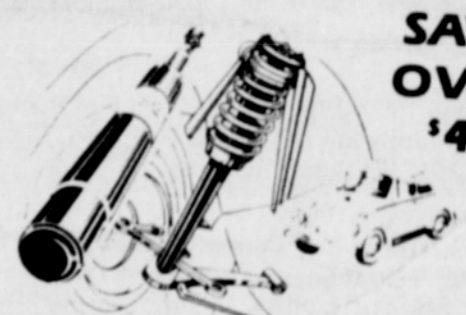
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