

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEGRO BASEBALL LEAGUES

Baseball started as a “gentleman’s game” played by rival athletic clubs and grew to be the popular sport that it is today with many teams and many players.

When attending a major league baseball game, we think nothing of the color of the players, the varied ethnic names, or the countries from which the players come. We simply recognize the skills of the players and support our favorite teams. Unfortunately, that has not always been the case.

In the history of major league baseball, we know that from the years 1900 to 1946, African Americans were not allowed to play baseball in the major leagues. Before World War II, by custom and law, baseball was as racially segregated as the country. History tells us that in the 1880’s there were a few Black Americans playing on white clubs, but as early as 1888 the governing body of the National Association of Baseball Players banned African Americans from play because many of the white players refused to play with them.

Because African Americans were not allowed to play in the white leagues, they started their own. In 1920, Rube Foster started the Negro National League, followed by the Eastern Colored League in 1923, and the New Negro National League in 1933. In 1937 the Negro American League was also formed.

Few books have been written about these leagues or their players even though they have now been recognized as some of the great players in baseball. One team, the Pittsburgh Crawfords of the Negro National League had Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and Satchel Paige all playing together. Josh Gibson is the only player to ever hit a ball completely out of Yankee Stadium. Cool Papa Bell was said to be so fast he could hit a ball from the home plate that would bounce off of him as he slid into second base!! Satchel Paige was known to send his whole team to the dugout when he pitched to the best batter on the opposing team. The conditions that these great talents played under left much to be desired. They had no written contracts, merely informal or verbal

agreements. If they did get paid, it was around \$200 a month, compared to the \$10,000 paid to the players in the white leagues. They often played two games on a Saturday, drive all night to another location, and played two games on Sunday, sometimes with no sleep. Often they could not find lodging or had to stay in segregated hotels. Jeers and taunts of racists were often heard in the cities where they played.

In order to get an audience of whites, many of the teams coupled baseball playing with singing, dancing, and comedy skits. The Ethiopian Clowns painted their faces and wore their hats sideways. The Zulu Cannibal Giants not only painted their faces, they also played barefoot while wearing grass skirts.

It wasn't until April 15, 1947, that Jackie Robinson broke the "color barrier" by being the first African American to play in the major leagues. Robinson was a graduate of the University of California in Los Angeles, in addition to being a great baseball player. Branch Rickey of the Dodgers saw the potential in Jackie, but he also knew that Jackie had the "guts not to fight back" to the racial threats he would receive. Many of his teammates stated they would never play ball with Robinson, giving him physical and verbal abuse. Not his teammates or the booing fans could deter Jackie's will to participate in the major leagues. He stayed, he played and he became the Rookie of the Year in 1948 and the Most Valuable Player in 1949! In 1997 his number, #42, was retired from all major league teams in honor of his contributions to baseball. Many great ball players followed Jackie Robinson: Hank Aaron, Willy Mays, Ken Griffey, Jr., and Barry Bonds to name a few. Today 17 African American baseball players are in the National Baseball Hall of Fame.