

A Look at the Creation of Modern Baseball:  
The Formation and Contributions of the Negro League<sup>1</sup>

Baseball has long been recognized as Americans' favorite pastime. It is a common form of recreation. Many people of all different ethnicities, religions, and social status have recently endorsed it. Despite its great outreach to the people, it was once restricted to be professionally played only by Caucasian males. Despite this major setback, African-Americans embraced baseball through the Negro League. Black people organized their own teams, formed leagues and competed in their own championships. From these leagues emerged many players who were later honored in the Baseball Hall of Fame and many who were not. Today baseball is a world wide played sport open to all who wish to play. It no longer is restricted by the color of skin. The greatest players of today come from different beliefs to show the diversity of baseball. Since the integration of baseball, it has rightfully earned the title of America's favorite pastime.

As baseball recognition grew, so did the number of speculators who saw the profit in the game. The new National Association of Professional Baseball Players contained players from ten clubs. These clubs made up the first professional baseball league. They introduced the practice of league competition and concluded their regular season with a pennant race and championship. However, the National Association suffered from poor management and by 1876 it collapsed [Encarta]. The Negro Leagues emerged due to the segregation of all Major Leagues that were soon to follow the National Association and by the will of many African-Americans to play the sport.

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<sup>1</sup> Authored by Ms. Martha Aquilar, Vista, CA, 2002, and first winner of the Boynton baseball Research Award given by the San Diego Ted Williams Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research (SABR). Copyright by SABR.

The major leagues were only for white males and thus the African-Americans were forced to play in the Minor Leagues. They were denied the access to play as high as the whites in the major leagues. The first black baseball league was the Negro National League [NNL] formed in the 1920's [Encarta]. This league was composed of eighth midwestern teams. The League included the Chicago Giants, the American Giants, the St. Louis Giants, the Detroit Stars, the Indianapolis ABC's, the Cuban Stars from New York, the Dayton Marcos, and the Kansas City Monarchs [McKissack 40]. Rube Foster, a star pitcher, had much to do with the formation of the NNL [McKissack 40].

“Foster was the driving force behind the formation of the Negro National League ...”<sup>1</sup> [Ribowsky 100].

He helped establish a balance of power between the teams. Groups of southern baseball owners also formed leagues that were thought to be inferior by the northern leagues. As a consequence the Negro Southern League lost lots of players to the northerners without compensation [McKissack 48]. In 1923 six clubs formed the rival Eastern Colored League [ECL] [Encarta]. This league was headed by a five-man commission board that evidently showed that Nat C. Strong was in charge [McKissack 48]. This league contained the Brooklyn Royal Giants, Lincoln Giants of New York, the Bacharach Giants of Atlantic City, the Baltimore Black Sox, and the Hilldale Club of Darby, Pennsylvania [McKissack 48]. Both Foster and Strong refused to merge the two leagues in fear that they would lose their position in power so a world series was developed.

“The game helped showcase some of black baseballs best talent”<sup>2</sup> [McKissack 53].

The NNL champions were the Kansas City Monarchs who met the Hilldale Club, champions of the East. The Kansas City Monarchs beat the east and won their first world championship [McKissack 52]. This was also known as the east-west game. This game of all-star players attracted many spectators. A record crowd of 51,723 saw the game in 1943 [Gardner 58]. This gave the teams exposure and a little aid to the Negro Leagues financial problem. There were also many other leagues that were created by small men with big ideas and a lot of will power.

The leagues gave the practice to some of the best baseball players to ever emerge. Alongside the league there were powerful players.

“Some of the most exciting baseball was played during the 1920’s by black players who put in performances that were second to none”<sup>3</sup> [McKissack 54].

As Babe Ruth dominated the sports pages, African-Americans had their own dominators. Such dominators were outfielders Oscar Charleston and James Thomas “Cool Papa” Bell, third baseman William Julius “Judy” Johnson, shortstop John Beckwith, second baseman Newt Allen, first baseman George “Mule” Suttles, catcher George “Chappie” Johnson, and pitchers Wilber “Bullet” Rogan and left-handed Andy “Lefty” Cooper [McKissack 53]. The Negro Leagues produced many capable players who later became Hall of Famers. Leroy “Satchel” Paige played both for the Negro League and the majors [Encarta]. He is known for his powerful pitches. James Thomas “Cool Papa” Bell never made it to the Major Leagues but he also left a trademark. Bell could run the bases in slightly more than 13 seconds [Gardner 29]. Josh Gibson also never got the chance to play in the Major Leagues. He was an outstanding hitter who hit 800 homeruns during his

career with a batting average of .300 [Encarta]. John Henry “Pop” Lloyd is considered to be the best shortstop ever to play in the Negro Leagues [Gardner 43]. He unfortunately did not make it to the Major Leagues. Oscar Charleston had a twenty-seven year career including ten years serving as player-manager [McKissack 156]. Ray Dandridge played in the Mexican and the Negro Leagues from 1933 to 1944. His lifetime batting average was .325 [McKissack 157]. Martin Dihigo is known for his versatility in the field. He played mostly any position available [McKissack 157]. Walter “Buck” Leonard spent his seventeen-year career with the Homestead-Grays. He rarely batted below .390 [McKissack 160]. All of these players became national heroes to future generations of professional baseball players.

By 1945 the African-Americans had grown politically. They helped defend democracy in World War II and now stood higher in the social equilibrium of America. Segregation still dominated and integration was still a blurred vision to many. There was no interest for integration by owners of major leagues and by many Americans. The white owners created a business that needed the separation between white and black in order to gain two different profits. Why would they settle for just one when they can get two. But as the blacks arise so did their acknowledgments of playing the sport.

“Once the color barrier was broken in 1947, the play of such black stars as Jackie Robinson, Ron Campanella, Don Newcombe, Larry Doby, Monte Irvin, and others, made it clear that outstanding black players were not hard to find...” 4 [Gardner 2].

In 1945 the Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, a UCLA track star, to a minor league team affiliated with the Dodgers. While playing

with the Kansas City Monarchs in forty-one games he averaged a batting average of .345; had ten doubles; four triples; and five homeruns [Gardner 91]. He was an all around player who was soon to be discovered. Next year Robinson great performance allowed him to be boosted to the major leagues and he became the first black to play major league baseball in the 20<sup>th</sup> century [Encarta]. After Robinson a chain reaction occurred and other black baseball stars became visible to major baseball scouts. John Wright became the second Dodger sign on. He later became the second black to play in organized baseball in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Rickey did not stop there. In April 1946 he signed Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe to the Dodger organization [Gardner 95]. Rickey was well on his way to integrating the Brooklyn Dodgers. More and more black players were recruited and taken from their low Negro League beginnings. The integration of baseball now marked the end to the Negro Leagues.

Baseball has surely come a long way through time. From its humble beginnings in Persia, Egypt, and Greece and its evolution through cricket, baseball came to be known what it is today. It is well recognized throughout various nations. It may differ a bit in name, rules, and regulations, but the backbone of it is still there. It still is a sport that can be enjoyed with and by all. It still brings families together and enjoyment to life.

Through the evolution of mans common sense baseball has also grown to incorporate more people. It no longer is the “white man’s” game but the game of all people. Through the creation of the Negro Leagues, black talent became recognized. The game was kept alive by those who were restricted from so much to be later enjoyed by those who tasted the fruits of its victory. The hardships that Jackie Robinson and other minorities in the game had to endure were not a lost cause. Baseball did inflate thanks to them. Baseball

has grown to encompass all nationalities and is now one of the most if not the most diverse game. Just take a look at a baseball game. The attendees, the players, the broadcasters, the fans, all are different shapes, colors and sizes. Baseball now has rightfully earned the prestige of being coined Americans favorite pastime because it now does encompass all Americans.

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## Notes

1. Ribowsky, Mark. A complete History of the Negro Leagues: 1884-1955. [New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1995.], p. 100.
2. McKissak, Patricia C. and Fredrick McKissak. Black Diamond: The Story of The Negro Leagues. [New York: Scholastic Inc, 1994.], p. 53.
3. McKissak, Patricia C. and Fredrick McKissak. Black Diamond: The Story of The Negro Leagues. [New York: Scholastic Inc, 1994.], p. 54.
4. Gardner, Robert and Dennis Shortelle. The Forgotten Players: The Story of Black Baseball in America. [USA: Walker Publishing Company, inc., 1993.], p. 2