

“Only the Ball Was White: Blacks and Baseball”Part One of a Two-Part Series

It's always around this time of the year, as winter stubbornly disappears and spring finally blossoms, that I am reminded how much baseball meant to young African American males growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. It had only been several years since Jackie Robinson had joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. That same year Robinson won the “Rookie of the Year” award, and eight of the next eleven Rookies of the Year were also African Americans.

Jackie Robinson's desegregation of the sport meant the beginning of the end for the old all-Negro baseball leagues. Many of my favorite players, whose daily exploits on the diamond I followed by checking the box scores in the sports pages of our local newspaper, had been veterans of the Negro leagues, such as Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Roy Campanella, Ernie Banks, Larry Doby, and Don Newcombe. The professional baseball team closest to where I grew up, in Dayton, Ohio, was the Cincinnati Reds. Although located in Ohio, Cincinnati was in many ways a Southern, Jim Crow city back in the 1950s, and the team was slow to abandon its whites-only policy. The Reds finally signed its first black player, Nino Escalera, only in 1954.

When I was eight years old, my parents bought a home in what would soon become an all-black suburban neighborhood just outside of Dayton. The great luxury we had as children was having the freedom of space, to be able to start up an informal game in the open fields next to our elementary school. All of us boys pretended to be our favorite “stars” when batting or in the field, mimicking as best we could their individual mannerisms and styles of play. Our budding notions of masculinity, of what it meant to be “male,” and even more importantly, the significance of being a “black male,” were all heavily informed by the game of baseball.

It was only years later, as a scholar and historian of the African-American experience, that I came to understand why baseball and other forms of athletic competition had so much symbolic significance for how race and masculinity are expressed and represented in American society. In a racist society, competition between blacks and whites has historically been rigged to favor whites at virtually every level of social and economic interaction.

Whites as a group have consistently masked their racial privileges through the pseudo-ideology of “meritocracy,” and claims of “natural superiority,” which are essentially products of unequal wealth and power. The rules are rigged, so blacks compete at a relative disadvantage—whether it’s buying homes, or being only 60 percent of the average income of whites, or having the burden of substandard schools and inadequate healthcare. Sports was one of the few sites of human interaction and endeavor where questions of who was “superior” or “inferior” were plainly transparent. On the field of play, you were either faster, or slower; you either could hit the curve ball, or you couldn’t; you either won or you lost, period.

As baseball evolved as the “national sport” in the mid-nineteenth century, the issue of race was never far from the surface. The first African-American baseball teams emerged immediately following the Civil War, in the small black urban communities in the North. Some of these early black clubs included the Brooklyn Uniques, the Philadelphia Excelsiors, and the Philadelphia Pythians. From the outset, black participation in “white men’s games” was strongly discouraged. In 1867, for example, when the Philadelphia Pythians applied to participate in the National Association of Baseball Players, the first organized league in the country, their application was curtly rejected.

On December 11, 1868, the league’s governing board voted unanimously to bar “any club which may be composed of one or more colored persons.” Despite this restriction, a small number of African Americans continued to play on professional, minor league and collegiate baseball teams. Black pitcher Bud Fowler won two games and lost one for the Live Oaks baseball team of Lynn, Massachusetts in 1878. In 1884, Moses Fleetwood Walker, a catcher, played professional baseball with the Toledo Blue Stockings of the Northeastern League.

Second baseman Frank Grant played on an all-white team in Meriden, Connecticut in the Eastern League in the 1880s. During six seasons, Grant's batting average was never less than .313. In the 1887 season, Grant stole 40 bases and led the league by hitting eleven home runs.

As thousands of African Americans began to migrate from the rural South to the urban North at the end of the nineteenth century, the popularity of baseball among blacks soared. In 1885, the first all-black professional team was formed in Babylon, New York, called the Cuban Giants. In 1887, the short-lived National Colored League was created, with teams based in Louisville, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Boston, and Cincinnati. In 1888, the Cuban Giants thoroughly trounced a prominent white team based in New York, winning four out of five games in the series. White teams in Detroit, Chicago, and St. Louis refused to accept challenges to play against the Cuban Giants, because they feared the shame and utter humiliation of losing to black men. Today's record of black achievement in sports, therefore, has a very long and rich history—a heritage that African Americans should know.

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