

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

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Today, African American athletes dominate professional football and basketball, and baseball no longer has the mass appeal that it once held a generation ago. But as the new baseball season opens, it's important to remember that black excellence in athletic competition is not a new phenomenon. Decades before Barry Bonds, African Americans played the “national pastime.”

Over a century ago, dozens of outstanding African-American baseball teams traveled across the nation competing against each other: the St. Louis Black Stockings, the Boston Resolutes, the Lord Baltimores of Baltimore, the famous Cuban X Giants of New York City, and Michigan's Page Fence Giants, who in 1897 won an astonishing 82 games in a row.

As white state legislatures passed laws restricting and, in effect, outlawing the right of blacks to vote, sports such as baseball and all other sites of public amusement and leisure were more rigidly restricted. Cities like Atlanta passed local ordinances making it illegal for black and white baseball teams from playing less than two city blocks from each other. Many cities prohibited blacks from entering public parks. Birmingham's white civic establishment was so worried about the dangers of interracial athletic competition that in 1930 it even passed a local ordinance making it “unlawful for a Negro and a white person to play together or in company with each other at dominoes or checkers.”

The paradox of such rigid segregation was that it created the uncontested social and cultural space for the construction of a parallel racial universe for athletic competition. Since

whites hated and feared Negroes, we were content to compete and play against each other, establishing our own standards of excellence along the way.

In the early 1900s, few white teams played the game of baseball as well as Chicago's Leland Giants, a black team which became known later as the Chicago American Giants. In the 1910 season, the Giants won 123 out of 129 total games they played. Other great black teams of the era included the Indianapolis ABCs, New York's Lincoln Giants, the Brooklyn Royal Giants, the Philadelphia Giants, and the Bacharach Giants of Atlantic City, New Jersey. In 1920, the Negro National League was formed. The first all-black World Series was held in 1924, with the Kansas City Monarchs defeating the Philadelphia Hilldales.

Historians and literary critics describe the nineteen twenties as a period when African-American urban culture came of age. In literature, there was the flowering of artistic expression known as the Harlem Renaissance, represented by the works of Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and others. In political life, there was the popular explosion of mass activism symbolized by Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the labor militancy of A. Philip Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

In music, the cultural vibrancy of the "New Negro" was manifested in jazz. All of these cultural expressions influenced the ways African Americans thought about pleasure and physical culture. The construction of successful professional sports teams symbolized black entrepreneurship and creativity. It was always about more than entertainment; it expressed racial pride, the thrill of accomplishments and achievement, excelling and surpassing the standards set by white athletes.

The "Golden Age" of Negro baseball was during the 1930s and 1940s. For my father's generation, the black superstars of their imagination were the incomparable pitcher Satchel Paige and the powerful slugger and catcher Josh Gibson. During a half century, over 4,000 African-

American athletes participated in the professional Negro baseball leagues. They never made any real money, were routinely refused accommodations at whites-only hotels and restaurants, and were barred from demonstrating to the entire world their exceptional abilities in playing the game they loved.

And with the coming of every spring, when walking past inner-city kids playing on a sandlot, I remember the Satchel Paiges, Josh Gibsons, and the thousands of others who never got the chance that Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, Frank Robinson, and others of their generation had. That part of our sports history, when “only the ball was white,” should never be forgotten.

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