

# Before You Could S

*A history of black baseball from 1933 through the 1960's p*

## NEGRO LEAGUE BASEBALL

*The Rise and Ruin  
of a Black Institution.*

By Neil Lanctot.

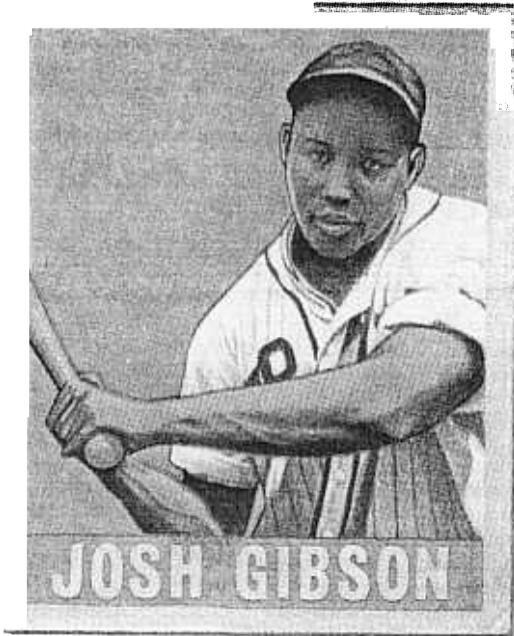
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By Warren Goldstein

**D**ESPITE the evident messiness of the past, few of us — including historians — can resist the temptation to read history as a morality tale. Whether we write or read about war or workers, presidents or politics, we find it difficult to let go of the hope that good (even the better side of a complex figure) will triumph over bad. Small wonder, then, that

1933 through the early 1960's provides an enormously important historical corrective to this feel-good version of baseball integration. In order to get beyond the traditional accounts of the Negro leagues — “marred,” he says, accurately, by “reductive analyses, an appalling number of inaccuracies” and a focus “on the exploits of individual players and teams without attention to historical context or the actual administration of the leagues themselves” — Lanctot, who teaches history at the University of Delaware, claims to have read “virtually every sports page of every black newspaper located in a league city,” supplementing this with interviews, court records and archival digging. The result is a most comprehensive study of the business side of the Negro leagues. Even though they often lie buried beneath a mass of blow-by-blow, season-by-season details, Lanctot's judgments can be pointed, persuasive and at times profound.

Even in the relatively prosperous 1920's, the Negro leagues had been marked by unreliable scheduling, nasty business rivalries between owners and leagues, and players jumping from team to team for better salaries. Late in the decade, these leagues all folded. Enter the dominant figure of the 1930's black baseball business — William Augustus Greenlee, the Pittsburgh-based numbers racketeer who owned the legendary Pittsburgh Crawfords and revived the defunct Negro National League in 1933. A “larger-than-life figure possessing a considerable bankroll and an abundance of street smarts, toughness and bluntness,” Greenlee initiated a shaky league of seven franchises, many of them financed



the story of major-league baseball's integration in the 1940's and 1950's has become a modern morality play, featuring the wily white businessman Branch Rickey and the fiery black player Jackie Robinson, along with Robinson's heroic performances on and off the bench, black fans' mass embrace of Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers, and most white fans' gradual, if often grudging, acceptance of Robinson and the impressive group of pioneering black players in the major leagues. This story allows Americans to feel strong and good emotions, and to take pride in one of our few successes in race matters.

Prodigiously researched and thoroughly unsentimental, Neil Lanctot's history of organized black baseball from

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barely wobbled to a finish that year — a pattern repeated, with a shifting cast of teams, mostly in the East, for the rest of the decade. (In late 1936 a Negro American League started up, with teams from the Midwest and South.) Greenlee's most important innovation, “the sole positive development in an otherwise dreadful 1933 season,” Lanctot writes, was the East-West All-Star Game (modeled on the just-begun major-league All-Star Game), which evolved into the most prominent annual showcase for black baseball.

Black professional baseball leagues faced so many obstacles that their very existence compels a kind of wonder. The Depression hit blacks far harder than whites, so even fewer blacks had discretionary income to spend on ballgames. Professional sports franchises required substantial funds for payroll and transportation, means generally far beyond the reach of legitimate black businesses.

# Day Jackie Robinson

*provides a context for the story of the game's integration.*

Most club officials either made their money illicitly or relied on white investors or owners. Since so few black owners could afford their own stadiums (Greenlee was the exception, though even his lacked a grandstand roof), they had to pay white stadium owners rental fees, often steep. Black ball clubs operated on thinner margins than their white counterparts, so a run of bad weather could have disastrous consequences.

The Negro leagues faced equally daunting internal problems, what Lanctot calls "remarkably shoddy administration." Owners wrangled constantly, never installing a truly independent commissioner to resolve disputes. They made no rules governing player movement and did not even routinely provide their players with contracts. Teams did not regularly keep score or report statistics to league offices. The leagues consistently frustrated sportswriters, who complained bitterly about how little basic information — like statistics and standings — came their way. Nor did the leagues have the resources to oversee or insist on the authority of umpires, who could be, and often were, intimidated by players.

Fortunately for the players and for fans across the country, black clubs did not rely on league baseball for most of their games or their income. They barnstormed far from their home parks, playing teams of white ballplayers in the



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off-season, and black semipro teams all the time.

As the overall economy improved dramatically during World War II, so did the financial health of the Negro leagues. The Kansas City Monarchs netted nearly \$260,000 from 1942 to 1946, as black fans, for the first time in a decade, had enough income to spend it regularly on ballgames. Core difficulties remained, however, problems that had dogged the black game for decades. "Ironically," Lanctot notes, "as black baseball reached its financial peak, it remained firmly bound to the whims of whites," particularly white owners' willingness to rent their ballparks.

The larger truth was that black baseball, like segregated public schools, hospitals and recreational facilities (but less like churches, newspapers or colleges), had always inhabited a nether world that owed its existence entirely to white racism and white-enforced segregation. Black players were willing to play black baseball because that was all they could do; fans and sportswriters, on the other hand, could use different standards. Black businessmen, journalists and consumers had long debated whether they should patronize black businesses simply because they were black, especially if they offered second-rate products or services.

Black fans sometimes patronized major-league baseball in the place of black ball because it was better run, more pre-

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## Before Jackie Robinson

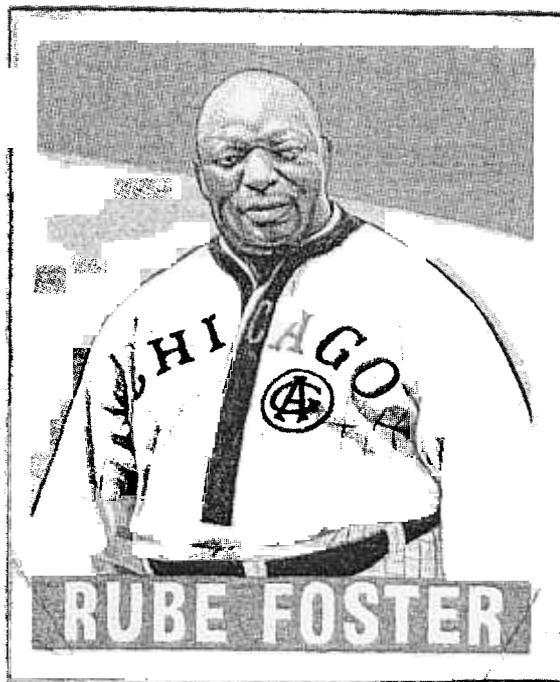
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dictable and easier to follow. The flamboyant pitcher Satchel Paige was the biggest draw in black baseball, but he frequently pitched only two or three innings at a time, to save himself for multiple appearances — and multiple paychecks. The black sportswriter Dan Burley followed a long line of criticism when he wrote in 1943, “There is no need of kidding ourselves; colored baseball is but a poor shadow of the major league — the real thing.”

As pressure for integration grew throughout American society during and after World War II, the principal black foes of baseball integration remained, understandably enough, the Negro league owners, who rightly saw the danger to businesses they had nurtured in the face of nearly overwhelming obstacles but now seemed powerless to protect. Lancot provides a detailed picture of the baseball world during and after Branch Rickey’s signing of Jackie Robinson; his account is the most extensive to date that focuses on the overall context of the first few years of baseball’s integration rather than on Robinson himself.

It is not a pretty picture. Lancot shows just how much major-league owners wanted to keep the income from rent-

ing their ballparks to black clubs, and he details clubs’ resistance — often in the face of political pressure — to signing black players. Rickey refused to compensate the Kansas City Monarchs for Robinson or the Baltimore Elite Giants for Roy Campanella or the Newark Eagles for Don Newcombe. True, none had contracts; when, in 1946, Rickey signed the Philadelphia Stars’ Roy Partlow (who did have a contract), he offered the club a paltry, if symbolic, payment of \$1,000. Rickey paid the Memphis Red Sox \$15,000 for the pitcher Dan Bankhead; Bill Veeck, the owner of the Cleveland Indians, paid the Newark Eagles \$15,000 for Larry Doby’s contract in 1947. Robinson himself published a stinging criticism of black baseball — “What’s Wrong With Negro Baseball” — just before the 1948 season, joining Rickey in “demonstrating,” Lancot observes, “little sympathy for the previous decades of struggle to establish the industry” and the extraordinary difficulties it had faced.



While the Negro league owners began to put their administrative houses in better order — offering player contracts and trying to affiliate with organized baseball — they were too late. Lancot suggests that while they might have lasted a bit longer as a farm system — recruiting, training and then selling their best players to the majors — the overall trend toward integration in American life (in professional basket-

ball and football as well) had drawn black attention, almost en masse, toward the exploits of black players in newly integrated leagues.

**W**ITHOUT nostalgia, Lancot offers a careful and balanced judgment on the Negro leagues, one that is likely to stand for some time. He points out that by the mid-1950’s, organized baseball employed more black ballplayers, at all levels of the game, than the 200 on Negro league teams “at their peak in the mid-1940’s.”

On the other hand, “black baseball and other separate enterprises helped build an irreplaceable sense of collective solidarity, identity and self-esteem” for which “no adequate replacement has emerged.” Especially not in organized baseball, which proved much less interested in attracting black fans (fearing white flight) than in signing players. By the late 1980’s black attendance had fallen to “as low as 3 percent” in Chicago and Philadelphia, cities “that had once enthusiastically supported black baseball.” At the level of players, baseball is changing too: while American blacks occupied 27 percent of major-league roster slots in 1975, last July they accounted for just 10 percent. Even the story of baseball integration, it turns out, is no simple morality play. □