Topic Page: The Negro Leagues

Definition: Negro leagues from Britannica Concise Encyclopedia

Associations of teams of black baseball players active largely between 1920 and the late 1940s. The principal leagues were the Negro National League, originally organized by Rube Foster in 1920, and the Negro American League, organized in 1937. The most noted teams included the Homestead (Pa.) Grays, who won nine pennants in the years 1937–45 and included the great hitters Cool Papa Bell, Buck Leonard, and Josh Gibson. In the mid 1930s the Pittsburgh Crawfords included Satchel Paige and the clutch-hitter William Julius “Judy” Johnson. The Kansas City Monarchs, after winning four national championships, lost Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers; the breaking of the colour barrier in major and minor league baseball led to the Negro leagues’ decline.

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Since its invention in the mid-19th century, baseball has often served as a reflection of American society and culture. This certainly has been true when it comes to the history of race relations in the United States. Despite racial discrimination, some blacks played alongside whites in the early major and minor leagues in the late 19th century. By the 1890s, however, with the rise of official and legally sanctioned racial separation, black players had been locked out of “organized” (white) baseball. A short-lived “League of Colored Baseball” surfaced in the South as early as 1886, while a mostly northern National Colored League sputtered into a brief existence in 1887. In 1910 and 1911, a proposed National Negro Baseball League of America also failed to get off the ground. Nevertheless, many black teams competed regularly in the 1890s and the early years of the 20th century, with the best teams meeting in an informal “colored championship of the world,” a black version of the white World Series. Black teams competed in loosely organized state and regional leagues during these years, especially in the South, where most blacks lived at the time and where the milder climate permitted year-round baseball. Many of the best black players from northern teams spent their winters in Jacksonville and Palm Beach, Florida, where they played on resort hotel teams while also working as waiters.

The first successful effort to organize a league of big-city black teams came in 1920, when the National Negro League (NNL) was formed in Kansas City, the inspiration of Rube Foster, a former star player and later owner of the Chicago American Giants. Composed mostly of midwestern teams, the NNL soon found a counterpart in the Eastern Colored League, formed in 1923, with teams from Cleveland, Pittsburgh, New York, Brooklyn, and Richmond. The two leagues began playing a Negro World Series in 1924. Black baseball thrived for some years in the 1920s, but the Eastern League folded in 1928. As the Great Depression deepened, the NNL collapsed as well in 1931. By 1933, however, with an infusion of “gangster capital” derived from the “numbers” rackets in the black ghettos of urban America, the NNL was revived. Gus Greenlee, the chief numbers racketeer in Pittsburgh, took the lead in rebuilding the league, which included teams from Pittsburgh, New York, Philadelphia,

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Baltimore, and Newark. A competing East-West League emerged about the same time, advanced primarily by another Pittsburgh sports promoter, Cumberland “Cum” Posey, but the league fell apart after only one season. In 1937, the Negro American League (NAL) was established, representing teams from Kansas City, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Memphis, and Birmingham, among others. Over the years, some teams dropped out and others joined; the Negro Leagues generally lacked the financial stability of the white major leagues. The massive migration of southern blacks to northern cities that began in earnest in the 1920s provided the large spectator base that supported the Negro Leagues from the late 1930s to the demise of organized black baseball in the mid-1950s. Held in Chicago’s Comiskey Park, the annual East-West All-Star Game between the NNL and the NAL became a major event for black America, drawing up to 50,000 spectators, considerably more than the multigame Negro League World Series between NNL and NAL pennant winners. Black communities had great pride in their Negro League teams.

In the days before integration and television, African Americans throughout the country also supported a variety of black minor league and semipro teams. The Southern Negro League, first established in the 1920s, continued to thrive into the late 1940s, including teams from Atlanta, New Orleans, Nashville, Chattanooga, Little Rock, Lexington, and Mobile. The Texas Negro League and the Georgia-Alabama League drew on widespread baseball enthusiasm among black fans in small southern towns and cities. Several Black semipro leagues sprouted in California and the Pacific Northwest, along with an integrated California Winter League. The African American press, especially the nationally circulated Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier, and their black sportswriters played an important role in reporting on black baseball and generating a sports culture in urban black communities.

Black baseball teams, even NNL and NAL teams, barnstormed around the country to survive financially. Among the most popular of the independent touring teams in the 1930s and 1940s was the Miami Ethiopian Clowns, a clowning team that combined baseball with slapstick comedy. Owned by sports promoter and booking agent Syd Pollock, the team became known as the Harlem Globetrotters of baseball, but it dropped much of the clowning when it joined the NAL in 1944 as the Indianapolis Clowns. Abe Saperstein of the Globetrotters was also involved in black baseball as a part owner (he fielded a Globetrotter baseball team in the 1940s and 1950s), promoter, and booking agent. In fact, Saperstein, Pollock, and two other Jewish booking agents controlled much of the Negro League’s scheduling, as well as access to white major league ballparks, leading to bitter conflict with black team owners in the 1930s and 1940s over the economic control of black ball. During these years, black sportswriters (such as Wendell Smith of the Pittsburgh Courier) and white sportswriters (such as Jimmy Powers of the New York Daily News) attacked the racial ban in major league baseball. That barrier was breached in 1945, when Brooklyn general manager Branch Rickey signed Jackie Robinson, a Kansas City Monarch star, to a minor-league contract.

Robinson played with Brooklyn's Montreal farm team in 1946, but the sports world changed forever when Jackie put on a Dodgers uniform in 1947. Cleveland Indians owner Bill Veeck signed Larry Doby of the Newark Eagles later the same year and the legendary Satchel Paige in 1948. The days of the Negro Leagues became numbered. Black fan interest quickly switched to the newly integrated major league teams with outstanding black stars. Blacks in cities around the country turned out in huge numbers for a chance to watch Robinson play. In 1951, Dodgers road games brought in about a third of the entire National League attendance. One consequence of these shifting fan loyalties was the rapid decline of Negro League attendance. Losing at the gate and losing their star players to the major leagues, black...
teams ultimately folded one by one. Those remaining merged into a single Negro American League in 1950, but it too finally collapsed in 1955, with only the Indianapolis Clowns continuing its barnstorming tours. The cost of sports integration was the demise of Negro League baseball.

Further Readings and References


Mohl, Raymond A.

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