Desegragation In Major League Baseball Essay, Research Paper

Desegregation in Major League Baseball

? We are the Ship, All Else the Sea?

-Negro National League motto

Barely two years after the end of the Civil War ? a war that was fought, in part, over the enslaving of black Americans- the first baseball teams compromised entirely of black players stepped up to the plate in Brooklyn, New York. The Philadelphia Excelsiors defeated the home team, the Brooklyn Uniques, in a contest that was billed as ?the championship of colored clubs? (Dungee 7). Black Americans had their freedom, but that did not mean they would be accepted as equals in any phase of American society. The ?colored clubs? provided blacks the opportunity to play America?s favorite sport, even while being routinely discriminated by the white community. Seemingly just one more form of racial discrimination, these ball clubs fostered a sense of unity and camaraderie among black Americans.

As hard as it may be to comprehend today, in this era of multi-million dollar contracts for ball players, baseball was ? in the beginning- a ?gentlemen?s game? (Dungee 15). Amateur athletic clubs played it purely as leisure time recreation. Among those amateur teams in the early days were teams with black players. When baseball turned to a professional sport, John ?Bud? Fowler was the first black professional player, and Moses ?Fleetwood? Walker was the first black major leaguer (Dungee 17). Hundreds of black players played with their white teammates in professional and amateur clubs in the United States and Canada. It wasn?t such an amiable situation; far from it. Some white players refused to play against black players. A midseason exhibition between the Chicago White Stockings and the Newark Little Giants in 1884 marked the end of blacks playing on predominately white teams. Cap Hanson, a white Chicago player, refused to take the field because a black pitcher was scheduled to start for Newark. Directors of the International League, concerned for their financial future as well as the growing racial controversy, voted not to approve future contracts with blacks.

There were a few black players who continued to play in the white leagues, but in 1887, the white owners of teams in the International Baseball League decided they ?couldn?t stomach? the idea of blacks playing on their teams. They came up with a ?gentleman?s agreement? for this formerly ?gentleman?s game,? forbidding blacks from being on their teams (Dungee 58). Although it was, in fact, just an ?unwritten understanding? ? not a formal agreement- there was no doubt as to its enforcement. It remained in effect for the next 80 years. Because of this restriction, black players organized into their own professional teams, the first being the Cuban Giants, organized in 1885.

At the turn of the century, Baltimore Orioles manager John McGraw tried to work around this color barrier by signing a light-complexioned black man, Charlie Grant; passing him off as a Cherokee. Racial discrimination was not extended towards Native Americans. It was eventually discovered that he was, indeed black, and although there was still no formal regulation against black players, Grant (known as Charlie Tokohama) was banned from playing (Dungee 67). This action only served as a catalyst for the black players, bringing forth a new generation of black baseball teams for the new century. But the Giants and other black teams didn?t officially organize themselves on a national scale by 1920. Then, led by entrepreneur Andrew ?Rube? Foster, black baseball teams became organized into the Negro National League, followed seventeen years later by Negro American League. Because of that ?gentleman?s agreement? barring blacks from major league competition, these Negro Leagues would provide the only opportunity for black men to play the game they loved.

Just As Good As the Majors

Just as in the Major League, the Negro Leagues put on yearly events for their fans. Their best players took part in games such as the Negro World Series and the East-West All-Star Game. Their All-Star game became an annual classic and was the biggest single event in black baseball each season in terms of interest and attendance. During their regularly scheduled games, black ball players followed a grueling schedule, playing all week, sometimes as many as three games in one day (Craft 59). The games attracted millions of fans ? predominantly black, but white fans too- and gave birth to an entire industry. The Negro Leagues were prosperous for black athletes, but it also provided another unique opportunity for black Americans, giving them a chance to do something that, even today, none of them does ? own a team. Black men such as Gus Greenlee, Effa Manley and Bubber Lewis owned and operated the teams of the Negro League. It was under their guidance and leadership that the teams flourished through Great Depression and two world wars.

Negro League teams really came to the forefront during the World War II. More fans, both black and white, continued to attend Negro League games than Major League contests. The East-West Negro League All-Star Game in 1944 drew 46,247, compared to 29,589 for the Major League counterpart. Research director for the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, Larry Lester, said ?Fans wanted to see good baseball, no matter what color the teams were? (Craft 63). The Negro Leagues, according to Gil Griffin, were about ?straight-up, serious baseball,? but because of the color of the players? skin, they were barred from playing against the greatest of the white players (Craft 64). Many of baseball?s finest players were in the Negro Leagues, proving blacks could play ball as capably as whites.

It?s been suggested that the milestone of Major League history might have been achieved by black players, if they?d only been given the chance to play. Marc Sessler contends that the existence of the Negro Leagues are a reminder of the ?stolen opportunities and the injustices of baseball?s past? (Craft 65). While he has a valid point, it?s also true that the Negro Leagues baseball was the third-largest black industry in the country at the time. It provided hundreds of black athletes with the chance to play and excel in the game. The teams were also an important part of the ?social fabric of the African American community.?

?Social Cement?

Baseball, suggests James Olson, has always been a ?social cement.? This was especially true for the black teams. Traditionally, black sports have seemed to focus on the opportunities that sports provided for some blacks to escape the ghetto. But for the Negro Leaguers, it was more of a unity among a common people than a chance to escape their living conditions.

Between 1900 and 1930, the black population in Pittsburgh, for example, more than doubled, growing from 20,000 to 55,000 as blacks left the rural areas in the south for the urban North. Sports in the black community were far more important than ?providing an economic escape for a handful of the best players? (Olson 129). Sporting events, whether as an athlete or spectator, helped the black community adjust to a new life, to feel a part of their community, and became a respected black institution. Baseball was a connection for communities everywhere. That they had their own leagues with their own heroes was a source of pride; not a feeling of discrimination.

John ?Buck? O?Neill joined the Negro Leagues? Miami Giants in 1934. He scoffs at the idea that black players felt discrimination for being left out of the Major League ? ?to have been a part of black baseball was great,? he says. ?It may not have paid as well or been as comfortable or as glamorous as playing in the Major Leagues, but it sure was enjoyable and satisfying? (Olson 148). It wasn?t without pitfalls, of course. O?Neill does admit to feeling upset over the fans who would cheer on the team during a game, shake the players? hands afterwards, and then not let black players into ?white? restaurants or hotels.

A similar feeling prevailed concerning involvement in the World War II. Black Americans fought side-by-side with the white Americans during the war, yet they were banned from participating in sports together. It was especially relevant in that most athletes who were inducted into the service were placed on service sports teams as entertainment for the troops. In his book, A Hard Road To Glory, the late Arthur Ashe wrote that the war gave many black and white men their first experience with one another on the playing field.

Just as D-Day was a turning point in the war, that same year led to the beginning of the integration of Major League Baseball. It was the year that baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis died; he had been a fierce opponent of integrated baseball. His successor, ?Happy? Chandler said at the time, ?if a black boy can make it on Okinawa and Guadalcanal, hell, he can make it in baseball. I don?t believe in barring Negroes from baseball just because they are Negroes? (Olson 158).

Too Good To Be True

In the end, it was not as good and fair as it first seemed. Integration of the Major League killed the Negro Leagues, and left many good players without a place to play. Only a token number of the best black players were actually allowed in the Major League, other good players were simply never given a chance. Major League teams, eager to get the best in the Negro Leagues, scouted and signed dozens of black players. As teams began to integrate, they naturally wanted to sign the brightest stars from the Negro Leagues. The Milwaukee Braves bought Hank Aaron from the Indianapolis Clowns in 1952. The Chicago Cubs bought Ernie Banks from the Kansas City Monarchs. The Major League depleted the talent of the Negro Leagues. They took future Hall of Fame players such as Willie Mays, Monte Irvin and Roy Campanella. These signings did not happen all at once. Most teams were reluctant to integrate.

Because of this, the Negro Leagues survived for a short period of time. In their struggle to maintain that sense of community and camaraderie among black Americans, the Negro League held on until, ultimately, the revenue was no longer there. Fans moved on along with their favorite black athlete, to watch them perform in the Major League.

As Michael Sheffield points out ?The Negro Leagues officially began to die when Jackie Robinson took the field for the first time with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947? (Sheffield 30). In the year that Robinson broke the color barrier, nearly all the Negro League?s teams lost money. What had once been the most lucrative business in the black community eventually just folded and died. As for Robinson, he was the subject of nasty racial epithets and death threats, occasional physical violence from opposing players, and had to endure from his own teammates. While he was disputably a trail-blazer, the one who opened doors for black athletes to compete in white leagues, one has to wonder if he ever wondered if it was worth it. His sacrifice was in becoming the first black player at the expense of his morale, which surely must have suffered from the racism he was initially subjected to. Jesse Robinson Simms, Robinson?s grandson, is sure that ?Baseball could have never reached its full potential until Jackie Robinson and others who looked like him were allowed to play? (Sheffield 35). While this is arguably true, the loss of the Negro Leagues was a blow to black identity.

In 1946, the Negro National League incorporated its surviving teams into the Negro American League. That League lasted for twelve more years until it, too, folded in 1960. This ended the nearly 100-year tradition of black teams.

Of course, by this time, black athletes could be found on every Major League roster. Integration of the Majors certainly opened a door for black players, but it also stole from the black community their hometown black baseball league heroes.