Negro Leagues – Black BaseBall Life Essay, Research Paper

The Color BarrierDue to the color of their skin and their past history, blacks were unfairly denied the privilege to play Major League Baseball; it has remained a period of shame for baseball. Not only did the white players not accept Blacks as equals, on or off the field, the public did not either. Because of the determination and strong perseverance, the blacks were able to overcome what many thought was not achievable. The events that took place during the early 1900s changed the history of baseball forever.

Americans started playing baseball on relaxed teams, using local rules, in the early 1800s. By the 1860s baseball jumped in popularity, some people said it was America’s “national pastime.” In 1869 the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first paid team and are considered the first professional team. In 1871 the first professional baseball league, the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players, was started. Then in 1876 the first major league, the National League, was formed.

African Americans played baseball during the 1800s. By 1860s some popular black amateur teams were Colored Union Club in Brooklyn, New York, and the Pythian Club, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. All the black professional teams started in the 1880s. Some of the teams were the St. Louis Black Stockings and the Cuban Giants (of New York). This really showed how the public felt; amateur and professional baseball were mainly segregated.

One of the few black players on an integrated professional league team was Moses Fleetwood “Fleet” Walker, a catcher for the minor league Toledo Blue Stockings. In 1883, the Chicago White Stockings did not take the field against the Blue Stockings because of Walker being on the team. The Blue Stockings manager said that the game be played, and Anson gave in. When the Blue Stockings joined the American Association in 1884, Walker became the first African-American major leaguer. In July 1887, the International League banned future contracts with black players, even though it allowed black players already under contract to stay on its teams. These are two of the events that helped form the color line, which segregated baseball until the 1940s.

During the 1890s, most professional black players were only allowed to play in exhibition games on colored teams on the barnstorming circuit. Players on major league teams also barnstormed in cities and towns after the regular season was over. In some places black teams and white teams played each other. In amateur baseball, some athletes played on integrated teams like the Navy baseball team.

Some baseball owners and managers of major league teams tried to hire African Americans by describing the players as Hispanic or Native American, this was there way of trying to sound the least discriminate as possible. In 1901, John McGraw, manager of the Baltimore Orioles, tried to get black second baseman Charlie Grant into the game by calling him a Cherokee named Tokohama. The bulk of owners and managers did not even try things like that. Baseball also did not like interracial barnstorming and white players were in the long run banned from wearing their major league uniforms in these games.

In parts of Latin America, baseball was not segregated. A lot of blacks played baseball there in the winter as well as in Negro Leagues in the United States in the summer. The most popular of the Negro Leagues started in 1920, the Negro National League. The Negro American League started in 1937 and then took in the Negro National League teams.

By the 1940s, organized baseball had been racially segregated for a lot years. The black writers and some of the white writers had long wanted integration of baseball. Wendell Smith of The Pittsburgh Courier was very active in the fight. World War II experiences forced more people to question segregation. Though several people in major league baseball tried to end segregation, no one succeeded until Brooklyn Dodger’s general manager Branch Rickey took action. In 1945, the Jim Crow policies of baseball changed when Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson of the Negro League’s Kansas City Monarchs agreed to a contract that would bring Robinson into the major leagues in 1947. Jackie Robinson joined the Kansas City Monarchs and played with baseball greats like Satchel Paige and Martin Dihigo. Negro League competition featured speed, surprise, and more action than in organized baseball. Written contracts to keep players with teams through a season were unusual and schedules were weird.

As with racial prejudice, economic and other factors contributed to segregation in baseball. Many owners of major league teams rented their stadiums to Negro League teams when their own teams were on the road. Team owners thought if baseball were integrated, the Negro Leagues would probably not survive losing their best players to the majors, major league owners would lose important rental income, and many Negro League players would lose their job. Some owners also thought that a white crowd would not want to attend games with black players. Others thought the addition of black players as a way to attract larger white as well as black fans and sell more tickets. Looking back on this time, Rickey described the problems he faced and the events that influenced his decision in a speech to the One Hundred Percent Wrong Club in 1956.

The player who would break the color line, Jack (John) Roosevelt Robinson, was born in Cairo, Georgia, on January 31, 1919. His mother moved the family to Pasadena, California, in 1920, and Robinson went to John Muir Technical High School and Pasadena Community College before transferring to the University of California, Los Angeles. An excellent athlete, he played in four sports at UCLA, baseball, football, basketball, and track, and played well in others, like swimming and tennis. So, he had practice playing integrated sports.

After scouting many players from the Negro Leagues, Branch Rickey met with Jackie Robinson at the Brooklyn Dodgers office in August 1945. Clyde Sukeforth, the Dodgers scout, told Robinson that Rickey was scouting for players because he was starting his own black team called the Brown Dodgers. At the meeting, Rickey said that he wanted Robinson to play for the major league Dodgers. Rickey then acted out scenes Robinson might face to see how Robinson would respond. Robinson kept his cool and agreed to a contract with Brooklyn’s Triple-A minor league farm club, the Montreal Royals.

On October 23, 1945, Jackie Robinson officially signed the contract. Rickey soon put other black players under contract, but the focus stayed on Robinson. Rickey made known Robinson’s signing nationally through Look magazine, and in the black press through his connections to Wendell Smith at the Pittsburgh Courier. Here is a letter Robinson wrote to the president regarding segregation.

?The President

The White House

Washington, D.C.

My dear Mr. President:

I was sitting in the audience at the Summit Meeting of Negro Leaders yesterday when you said we must have patience. On hearing you say this, I felt like standing up and saying, ?Oh no! Not again.?

I respectfully remind you sir, that we have been the most patient of all people. When you said we must have self-respect, I wondered how we could have self-respect and remain patient considering the treatment accorded us through the years.

17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of the men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago.

As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in the Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those prosegregation leaders like Governor Faubus who would take from us even those freedoms we now enjoy. Your own experience with Governor Faubus is proof enough that forbearance and not eventual integration is the goal the prosegregation leaders seek.

In my view, an unequivocal statement backed up by action such as you demonstrated you could take last fall in dealing with Governor Faubus if it became necessary, would let it be known that America is determined to provide ? in the near future ? for Negroes ? the freedoms we are entitled to under the constitution.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson?

Robinson wrote this letter to president Dwight D. Eisenhower, on May 13, 1958.

When black players entered pro ball, they brought in a determination and talent that blew the public and writers away. They asked no special favors or treatment, just a chance to play. They won their rightful place and loved the rewards. Many fans still did not accept blacks as equals on the baseball field. Baseball fans and players reacted to Robinson with everything from out of control enthusiasm shown in newspaper headlines, to care and open hostility expressed in beanball pitches and death threats. His athletic abilities were able to with hold even with the intense pressures caused by breaking the color line. Robinson won respect and became a symbol of black opportunity. The Sporting News, which had never wanted blacks in the major leagues, gave Robinson its first Rookie of the Year Award in 1947. After a few seasons of playing well while tolerating racial insults, Robinson stepped up his playing style and spoke out often. He started up controversy by protesting umpires’ calls and hotels that refused to let him stay with his teammates. He also protested against teams that refused to hire black players. Robinson’s great 10-year career included a .311 lifetime batting average, playing in six World Series, and stealing home 19 times. He also won the National League Most Valuable Player award in 1949, when he led the league with a .342 batting average and 37 stolen bases. His amazing running speed, powerful hitting, and strong fielding made Robinson a great player on a team with many abilities. It is obvious that Jackie Robinson helped lead the way for blacks to make their presence a huge impact on Major League Baseball, and its fans.

Branch Rickey had many reasons for wanting to integrate baseball. First, Rickey said that he hired Robinson because of his wish to put the best possible team on the field. Before multi-million dollar broadcasting contracts were started, teams relied almost fully on ticket sales to pay their expenses, spring training, travel, player salaries, stadium repairs, and make a profit. Attendance was always higher for winning teams, and Rickey was not alone in believing that African-American players could improve his team. The Dodgers played well with black stars like Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Don Newcombe. In a 1955 interview in the Rickey Papers, Rickey said that his belief in equal rights was also a strong motive in signing African Americans to the Dodgers.

After Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson opened the door for black players in organized baseball, a few others soon followed. In that first year, Dan Bankhead pitched for the Dodgers, Larry Doby played for the American League Cleveland Indians, and Henry Thompson and Willard Brown played for a short time for the St. Louis Browns. Though some major league teams began to integrate right away, it was twelve years until the last major league team integrated in 1959. It just goes to show, how some teams were not ready to accept the fact that blacks had finally made their way in. It was as if it was a defeat for the coaches, and owners. They tried to take as long as they could to integrate, but were eventually forced to do so.

Sometimes humans like to think that cops cannot be prejudice against blacks. They are expected to give equal rights to everyone. But, one incident with a black player really sparked some questions with the public. In June of 1945, Satchel Paige and the Kansas City Monarchs came to the nation’s capital. But as Satchel Paige would learn, what he had seen, was nothing compared to what he was about to see.

In late August of the same year Satchel came back to Washington D.C. The Birmingham Black Barons wanted him to pitch a few innings against the Homestead Grays. As promised he pitched his three innings. He struck out six of the nine men he faced. After the game he hopped into his maroon Cadillac. He made it exactly one block. Wearing badge number 1106 was Robert Lewis, the officer in charge of directing baseball traffic at the intersection of 8th Street and Florida Avenue. Paige turned left onto Florida, passing a little too close to Officer Lewis. The policeman told Paige to stop the car. When Paige attempted to explain his driving the officer called him a ?smart black b\*\*\*\*” and punched Paige in the eye. The shocked Satchel was punched a second time before Lewis looked back to the traffic. Unluckily for Lewis some of the large crowd that had just paid to see Satchel had also witnessed the officer’s punches. Lewis was then told who he had just assaulted. “I didn’t know it was Paige!” said the policeman. This only annoyed the crowd. Three police cars were needed to restore order.

Out of all the teams in baseball, one team seemed to attract more attention than any other, with the public and civil rights. The New York Giants, were one of the culprits in many actions taken against Negroes and playing integrated baseball. “Get that nigger off the field!” That statement by Cap Anson set the Color Barrier that would last for 60 years. Anson was one of the most popular baseball players of the 1800s, and he was also a pretty big racist. His well-known statement was said in 1887 when he found that the International League team he was facing in an exhibition had George Stovey and Fleet Walker, two black men playing. Stovey and Walker were kicked from play, and that same day the owners of the International League decided not to hire any more black players. This “Gentleman’s Agreement” spread all over white organized baseball. While African- Americans could not play in either the major or minor leagues, they still played baseball. The relationship between the New York Giants and the Negro Leagues has a very unique history. It involves the Giants’ greatest manager, riot?s, no-hitters and Hall of Famers.

One of the worst incidents between the Giants and Negro Leaguers happened in 1912. The headlines read, “Giants Play Negro Team, Ends in Riot.” The Giants sent several of their players to New Jersey to face a team called the Smart Sets. When the Giants got arrived they found out that the Smart Sets were not a white team. Seeing as there was a crowd of 8,000, they felt it would be right to play the game. One thing to see is that this was just a small squad of players and not the full team. Because of that, they were being managed by Wilbert Robinson, and not John McGraw, who had more control of the problem. The first problem came when the Giants’ only pitcher refused to take the mound. According to the ?New York Times?, “The only pitcher taken along was Louis Drucke, who comes from Texas. Drucke completely refused to play against the black team. All sorts of arguments were brought up, and Drucke finally agreed to pitch if he was announced as ‘Pitcher O’Brien’ instead of Drucke.” After that, things went well until the 7th inning. Harry McCormick of the Giants disagreed with a call by the umpire, and it came to chaos. A fellow Giants player by the name of Fletcher decided to jump in, but McCormick refused to leave the field after he was tossed from the game. The Chief of Police had to come and remove him. With the game tied in the bottom of the ninth, the umpire handed Drucke a new ball. Drucke took some dirt and darkened the ball, so the other team could not see the ball very well. Players of the Smart Set did not like that, and Drucke was forced to pitch with a new ball. The game went on to the top of the tenth. McClellan of the Smart Sets took the mound to pitch, and instead of using the white ball, he used an older, darkened ball. Giants? players Fletcher and Snodgrass protested to the umpire, saying that if the Smart Sets were able to bat against a pitcher with a clean ball, the Giants should have the same right. The umpire disagreed and the Giants left the field. The crowd ran out into a mob and attacked the Giants bus with sticks and stones. The Chief of Police broke it up and was able to get the Giants out of town, and they were happy to be gone. This incident occurred roughly a week after Ty Cobb went up into the stand to beat up a fan who had no hands. Cobb beat up the man and was suspended by the American League. The Detroit Tigers went on a strike in support of Cobb and the American League let the suspension go. The fan’s called Ty Cobb a “half-nigger”.

One of the biggest factors in integrating baseball was World War II. More than 50 Negro players served their country in war. The war also left a lot of open spots in the major league teams. The teams were recruiting Negro players to fill the empty positions. This really helped lead the way for integrated baseball. The effects of the war really helped as well. It brought fourth a United Nation feeling in the public, and people were a little more apt to tolerate blacks in baseball. Negro baseball players were also a big part of leading civil rights movements. Although they did not get the credit that more dominating leaders did, like Martin Luther King Jr., they helped more than people thought. Their efforts to help integrate baseball, also helped integrate the whole southern part of the United States. Owners of baseball teams started to see past the color of the skin. They were not worried about what color the players were, but rather looking for skill. Owners and coaches started to see how good the Negro League players really were. Teams started to recruit more and more Negro players. This in turn started an integrated fan base at ballgames. Ballparks were now filled with blacks as well as whites. It was no longer just whites going to white baseball games, and blacks going to black baseball games; Things were starting to change. The impacts of black baseball players in the majors were felt right away. After Robinson received the Rookie of the Year Award, black players won eight of the next eleven awards. Also, nine of the eleven men voted the national League’s Most Valuable Player between 1949 and 1959 were players who were Negro League stars. Negro League stars like Sam Jethroe, Roy Campanella, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Larry Doby, Monte Irvin, Ernie Banks, Junior Gilliam, Joe Black, Don Newcombe and others brought a thrill to the Baseball never before seen. Since the integration of the American and National Leagues, the skill level of the game has increased to an unbelievable level. Black pitchers Bob Gibson and Luis Tiant, Jr. had the lowest earned run averages in both leagues. In 1974, Hank Aaron broke Babe Ruth?s record of lifetime home runs. Aaron went on to hit 755 homeruns.

It is pretty ironic that the start of Jackie Robinson into the Major Leagues and the breaking of the color barrier was also the beginning of the death of the Negro Leagues. By 1961, the Negro Leagues were dead. The great players of the Negro Leagues signed with the major leagues. They had finally received what they had been reaching for many years. The fans had joined them as well. Games were not only integrated on the field, but in the stands too. The fans deserve a great amount of credit them selves. If it was not for them, the Negro Leagues could have never gotten the appreciation they had gotten, and would not have people there to back them up. The fans helped decipher some of the finest black athletes on the field. Some of the greatest baseball players in the Hall of Fame are black baseball players. The Negro League?s even have a Hall of Fame in Kansas City dedicated to the great players of the Negro Leagues and remembering their past.

The Negro Leagues had some of the greatest baseball players of all-time and had a great love for the game that was all its own. Today many African- Americans thank Jackie Robinson for doing what he did to show African-Americans are just as good as anyone else. He really helped lead the way for Negroes, and helped lead the way for future baseball stars. Buck O?Neil once said a very interesting quote. He stated, ?Don?t feel sorry for the black baseball player: Feel sorry for the ones who didn?t get to see them play?. I believe this is very true. It shows how strong the Black baseball players really are, and how they did not let the color barrier get in the way of Negro players doing something they loved to do. Play baseball, just as any other American loves to do.