

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors remember baseball's Negro Leagues

by *Linda_Rosenkrantz*

Before Jackie Robinson famously broke the color barrier by signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, black baseball had a long and interesting history, culminating in the glory days of the Negro Leagues in the 1930s and 1940s, a history that's intriguing to collectors of Black Americana.

Throughout the 19th century, baseball was a popular sport with black Americans, and by the 1860s notable amateur teams such as the Colored Union Club in Brooklyn and the Pythian Club in Philadelphia had sprung up. Some African-Americans - including Bud Fowler, Moses "Fleetwood" Walker, George Stovey and Frank Grant - did play alongside whites on both major and minor league teams, though the National Association of Baseball Players (amateur) announced in 1867 that they "unanimously report against the admission of any club which may be composed of one or more colored person."

After numerous failed attempts to form a professional black team, the Cuban Giants of New York was organized by Frank Thompson in 1885. (Thompson, the headwaiter at New York's Argyle Hotel, got a group of the hotel's waiters and bellmen together to play the game.) Those that followed played each other without any official league to coordinate the sport.

During that period, most professional African-American players were restricted to playing in exhibition games on "colored" teams on the barnstorming circuit, sometimes playing against white teams, a number of players passing as native Americans or Cubans. Then, around 1890, a gentlemen's agreement was made that would bar black players from participation for the next 55 years.

In the late 1890s, an enterprising group of baseball enthusiasts was planning a Lone Star Colored Baseball League of Texas and approached the legendary ex-player Bud Fowler to manage it. Fowler accepted and the Lone Star League was formed.

The early years of the 20th century saw the emergence of a number of black teams in the Midwest, East Coast and even in the South, becoming a huge attraction for urban black populations. On Feb. 13, 1920, a former pitcher named Andrew "Rube" Foster organized the Negro National League (at a Kansas City, Mo., YMCA), which would consist of eight teams. The Eastern Colored League followed three years later. Together they were known as the Negro Leagues, holding four Negro League World Series from 1924 to 1927, and flourishing until 1930, when they fell victim to the Great Depression, dissolving in 1931.

In 1933, however, the Negro League World Series was revived by Gus Green, launching a golden age of segregated black baseball, featuring some of its greatest stars and lasting until 1949, two years after Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier.

It is this period of the Negro Leagues that collectors focus their attention on, when one team, the 1935 Pittsburgh Crawfords, featured the talents of no less than five future Hall of Famers: Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, Judy Johnson and Oscar Charleston. In demand are all sorts of memorabilia, from clothing and equipment to photos, flyers, autographs and baseball cards.

RECOMMENDED

Celebrating the history and achievements of the players in the Negro Leagues is a small, handsome book called "Heroes of the Negro Leagues" by Mark Chiarello and Jack Morelli (Abrams), one that could be especially inspirational for young people. In 1990, Chiarello published a group of trading card-format watercolor portraits of some of the greatest stars of the Negro League. Now, for the first time, they are presented in book form, with the addition of 39 new images of such players as Hank Aaron and Jackie Robinson. A biographical text by Jack Morelli accompanies each image, and an added feature is a DVD documentary titled "Only the Ball Was White."

Â© Copley News Service

Contemporary Collectibles: Collectors remember baseball's Negro Leagues by Linda_Rosenkrantz