

Commentary: A final end to an ungentlemanly agreement

By: Special to The Daily Record, Tony Adams › February 24, 2021

Two months ago, Major League Baseball announced it would recognize players from seven Negro Leagues that operated between 1920 and 1948 as “major leaguers” for historical and statistical purposes. That symbolic act — nearly all the affected players are long-deceased — finally addresses the last vestige of a shameful “Gentlemen’s Agreement” that excluded generations of Black athletes from white baseball, while defaming their abilities and disparaging the only forums in which they were permitted to play. The wonder is that it took so long.

A true “gentlemen’s agreement,” according to Black’s Law Dictionary, is “an unwritten agreement that is secured by the good faith and honor of the parties.” Such agreements, though not enforceable legally, were central to gaining ratification of the first U.S. Constitution by the states, to opening San Francisco’s public schools to Asian children in the early 1900s, and to ending the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962.

Until Jackie Robinson took the field for the Montreal Royals in 1946, a “gentlemen’s agreement” among team owners was cited by baseball’s leaders — if they were being honest — as the reason why no Black athletes had played for any organized professional team since the previous century. (In less candid moments, they said that no African-Americans were good enough to make their teams.)

Professional baseball wasn’t always that way, but it didn’t take long to get there. The first enduring professional baseball league began in 1876, when teams in eight Northeast and Midwest cities formed the National League of Professional Base Ball Clubs. At first, neither the National League nor the other professional leagues that followed banned Black ballplayers. In fact, several African-Americans played on some of those teams. But in 1887, the International League resolved not to approve any further contracts with Black players, and three years later (right before it collapsed) the league banned African-Americans outright. No other

professional baseball league formally enacted a similar ban, but after 1889 no African-American appeared on the roster of any major league or affiliated minor league team until 1946.

Thus 1889 appears to be the year when Major League baseball's "gentlemen's agreement" was conceived. And while that "agreement" may technically have been among team owners, it was enforced by white players as well. Even before 1887, some white players had refused to play scheduled games if an African-American player was allowed on the field. (In fact, there were similar protests by white players even after Jackie Robinson and other Black players began to appear on the rosters of white professional baseball teams, although there were no recorded forfeits.)

As it did when other industries and institutions excluded its people, Black America formed its own professional baseball teams and leagues. African-American promoters (and some white promoters as well) began forming professional teams of Black baseball players in the 1880s. In the earliest years those teams flourished by "barnstorming" across different regions of the country, particularly in the northeast and the upper Midwest, taking on the best local teams.

By the end of World War I enough African-Americans had migrated to northern cities from the South to make an organized league of Negro teams financially viable. In 1920, Rube Foster (a former Negro teams star who owned a "colored" team in Chicago) recruited professional Black teams from other Midwest cities to create the Negro National League. That league, and in some years other regional leagues, maintained regular schedules and a high quality of play, despite frequent franchise changes, until the Great Depression killed most of them in 1931. In 1932, the best Black players gravitated to two minor Negro Leagues, but in 1933 the Negro National League was revived, under the leadership of Pittsburgh team owner, businessman and numbers runner Gus Greenlee. In 1937, a competing Negro American League formed from many of the same Midwestern teams that had played in previous leagues. The revived Negro National League survived until 1948, while the Negro American League continued (in a greatly reduced state) until 1962.

Although Negro League teams often played in white major league ballparks, they were unknown to most white Americans. White sportswriters seldom covered the games so it was left to the Black press to report (and preserve) records of the games and player performances. Nevertheless, the Negro League teams often drew large crowds, and generated sufficient revenue to employ thousands of ballplayers and countless support staff while earning profits (in most years) for the team owners. From 1933 until the early 1950s, the leagues featured annual all-star games in Chicago and Washington, D.C. that attracted as many as 50,000 paying fans. While African-American teams and players were banned from the professional white leagues, they frequently competed in exhibition games pitting all-stars of the Negro Leagues against all-stars from the white Major Leagues. And more often than not the African-American teams won. (Several times between 1920 and 1944 MLB Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis temporarily halted or limited such contests because, as Landis told Rube Foster, "when you beat our teams it gives us a black eye.")

When the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract in 1945, they may have violated MLB's "gentlemen's

agreement," but they didn't end it. The New York Times reported that a joint commission of major league owners, upon learning of the Jackie Robinson signing in 1945, had concluded that however well intended, "the use of Negro players" by major league teams would pose a significant threat to the sport. The Cleveland Indians and the St. Louis Browns quickly joined the Dodgers in integrating their player rosters, but other teams resisted. At the start of the 1953 season — Robinson had started for the Dodgers in 1947 — only six of MLB's 14 teams had played a Black player. The New York Yankees didn't have an African-American on their roster until 1955, the Philadelphia Phillies until 1957, the Detroit Tigers until 1958 and the Boston Red Sox until 1959. No major league team hired an African-American manager until 1975, or an African-American general manager until 1994.

However important the Dodgers' signing of Jackie Robinson may have been, MLB's leadership, including Dodgers President Branch Rickey, was deeply disrespectful at the time of the Negro Leagues that had found and trained Jackie Robinson, and provided opportunity to generations of Black ballplayers that MLB's "gentlemen's agreement" had excluded. (Negro League baseball would quickly decline and then disappear once the MLB and its minor league affiliates began to integrate.)

In prior years, major league teams bought out the contract of a ballplayer who was already signed to a white minor league team. When the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson, he was under contract with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League. But the Dodgers made no offer of payment to the Monarchs. In fact, Dodgers President Branch Rickey never even notified the Monarchs that he was negotiating a contract with Robinson.

In the face of this slight, the Monarchs' ownership took the high ground, announcing that, while they felt aggrieved, they'd be the last to stand in the way of MLB integration. Rickey defended himself to a New York Times reporter by slandering the Negro Leagues, saying: "The Negro organizations in baseball are not leagues, nor, in my opinion, do they even have organization. As presently administered, they are in the nature of a racket." Notably, not all owners shared Rickey's view. Washington Senators owner Clark Griffith reportedly said that, even without a formal arrangement between MLB and the Negro Leagues, "we still can't act like outlaws in taking their stars." The second MLB owner to integrate his team — Bill Veeck of the Cleveland Indians — paid Newark Eagles owner Effa Manley (the only woman enshrined in the Baseball Hall of Fame) \$20,000 to buy out the contract of Larry Doby, who became the first African-American to play in MLB's American League.

But on the occasion of Jackie Robinson's signing, Rickey and other MLB leaders were guilty of perpetuating an even greater insult against the generations of players who had been allowed to perform only in "their own" segregated leagues: The unfounded claim that none of them had been good enough to play in white major league baseball. When a reporter asked why Robinson was signed to Brooklyn's minor league team rather than to the Dodgers, Rickey replied: "Robinson was not ready for the majors. In fact my scouts inform me that there is not a single Negro player ready for the big leagues." That insult had echoed through the past, from other MLB owners who lacked the integrity to acknowledge their "gentlemen's agreement" as the cause of racial segregation in white baseball.

That slander carried forward into the future, through 1959 when the Red Sox finally added Elijah Jerry Green to their major league roster; through 1971, when the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown began considering Negro League players for induction, but only

in a separate “Negro Leagues” wing; through Dec. 15, 2020, the day before the MLB press release that said: “Major League Baseball is correcting a long time oversight in the game’s history by officially elevating the Negro Leagues to ‘Major League’ status.” By that announcement the “gentlemen’s agreement” that had consciously marginalized so many for so long came to an end.

There will still be those who will object to treating players of the Negro Leagues as Major League-caliber ballplayers. Some will argue that those players were never tested by competition with the great white players of their time. But the same may be said of the white players who never faced the likes of Raymond Brown, Frank Wickware, Smokey Joe Williams, Bullet Rogan and Satchell Paige in his prime; or or never pitched to Josh Gibson, Willie Wells, Cool Papa Bell, Turkey Stearns, Pop Lloyd or scores of other great Black players of an earlier era.

Others will argue that the Negro League seasons were too short or too erratic, or that the statistics of player performances are not of sufficient quality. But the MLB press release anticipated these objections: “The perceived deficiencies of the Negro Leagues’ structure and scheduling were born of MLB’s exclusionary practices, and denying them Major League status has been a double penalty.”

Speaking for the 3,400 athletes who played, as he did, in the Negro Leagues between 1920 and 1948, 93-year-old Ron Teasley, recently said: “We always felt that we were part of a higher caliber game and this just more or less certifies it. I just didn’t think it would take so long to come.”

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