

Those who came before: Remembering baseball's Negro Leagues

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The history of professional baseball is a long and storied one spanning over a century and a half. Countless heroes have stamped their impact on the sport's traditions, record books and the hearts and minds of fans around the United States.

Today's MLB contains more talent in a daily lineup than ever seen at any point before but think back to one of the league's golden eras of the 1950s through the 1970s. What icons come to mind?

Does the name Hammerin' Hank Aaron and his still-untouched career record of 715 home runs spark the sound of a cracking wooden bat in your ears? If not him, then what about the Sey Hey Kid himself, Willie Mays, ranging through the outfield to make unbelievable catches in clutch moments? Surely you know the story of Jackie Robinson, the former Dodger who broke the MLB's color barrier and became the league's first Black player as he anchored multiple World Series-winning rosters.

These legendary names etched their name in the MLB's history — and the Hall of Fame in Cooperstown — thanks to their on-field heroics and influence in shaping the future of the game we love. However, they didn't get their start in Major League Baseball. Were it not for a lesser-known league which faced plenty of challenges in a difficult time, these heroes of the game never would have gotten their start on the professional stage.

All three of those icons began their baseball careers in the Negro Leagues, a construct of segregation which kept Black athletes separated from their white peers over a period of decades. While the MLB has done a solid job in recent years elevating the profile of players who were subject to unjust treatment at the hands of segregation-era racism and prejudiced policies, there are scores of talents whose stories deserve recognition. Yes, each of these men were professional-level talents who played among their best peers at the highest level they were allowed at the time, but they faced many challenges beyond the field as well simply due to the color of their skin.



Figure 1: An image of the 1936 Negro League All-Star Game participants.

For those asking, “It’s 2025, why does that matter?” there’s an easy answer.

During a time today in which the federal government is removing content they deem illegal due to new executive orders banning content related to “diversity, equity and inclusion,” or DEI, baseball was no exception to those takedowns. Pages related to Robinson on the official Department of Defense website — a former Army soldier whose contributions to both baseball and America’s history undoubtedly qualify him — were removed from the platform for a time due to these policies. When officials were asked why such pages were removed, official statements said that “Woke is dead” before another release issued later said the pages were mistakenly pulled from the DoD website. They were eventually restored, though not before the government faced significant backlash online.

Robinson himself was an American hero, an embodiment of integrity, strength and resilience in the face of cruel injustice in this country. His story deserves not only to be told but made readily available for the next generations of young baseball fans and students alike. He and his fellow African Americans endured and sacrificed far too much for us to forget those who made today’s MLB, as well as social progress in the face of prejudice, all possible.

And so here we are.

It’s now 2025. The Negro Leagues have finally received a share of the spotlight after the MLB added statistics from the time to Major League Baseball’s own record books. A museum dedicated to the Black players’ accomplishments and league of their own was established just

over a decade ago in Kansas City, Missouri. Playable moments and baseball cards of icons from the Negro Leagues were even added to last year's edition of popular video game MLB: The Show.

Yet we still must ensure we don't forget the past, and it becomes even more important to honor these men who went through so much.

Those who came before

The Negro Leagues officially originated in 1920 when Rube Foster, a Black pitcher who founded the Chicago American Giants in 1911, finally managed to convince others that a legitimate league for players during the segregation era was needed. Per history on MLB.com, the club itself drew nearly 200,000 spectators in the 1921 season as the Negro National League commenced play. The organization played about a decade worth of games before struggling to maintain operations, but it was eventually replaced by the Negro American League in the 1930s.

At a time when baseball was immensely popular, these leagues birthed their fair share of stars.

The aforementioned Jackie Robinson receives most of the credit, an understandable trend given the role he played. Following his military service, the Cairo, Georgia native began his pro baseball career in the NAL with the Kansas City Monarchs. He batted .388 as a rookie in 1945 before earning a spot on the Brooklyn Dodgers' minor-league team in 1946. On April 15, 1947, he made his MLB debut and became the first Black player to appear in a game over the league's entire history. He went on to win MLB Rookie of the Year.

With multiple NL All-Star nods, an NL MVP and a World Series ring to his name, Robinson's on-field impact on the sport feels undeniable. He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1962 for his accomplishments and the role he played in paving the way for Black baseball players, but he stood for equality off the field as well. Martin Luther King Jr. once said "Jackie Robinson incessantly raises questions to sear America's conscience." The star player once staged a bus protest against racial inequality, testified in front of Congress and endured countless incidents of abuse at the hands of a prejudiced American public. Despite all that, he stood tall and stood *for* what was right — and opened doorways for many more to come in the process.

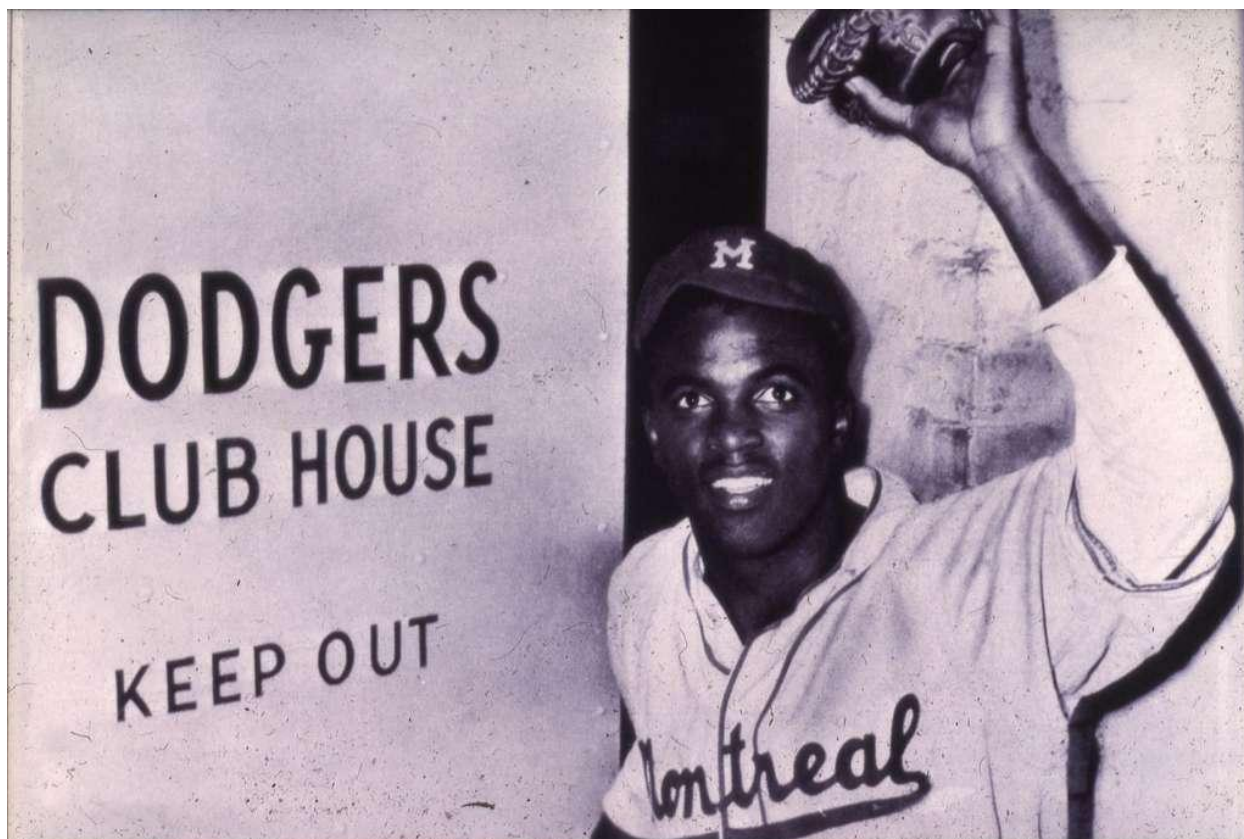
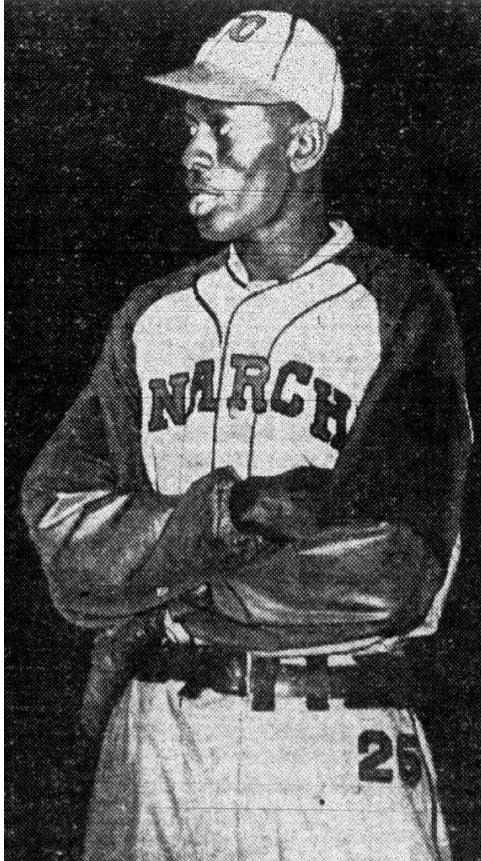


Figure 2: Jackie Robinson pictured outside the Dodgers' clubhouse in 1947.

After Robinson broke the color barrier, superstar-level talent from the Negro Leagues began to trickle into Major League Baseball.

For instance, one of the greatest pitchers of his time tore up multiple levels of competition and was once barred from playing against the MLB's best. Satchel Paige's career statistics look absolutely absurd even by today's standards. The right-handed hurler appeared in 400 games over his decades-long career and amassed 1,739.2 innings of work. Despite the massive workload he saw in a time when relief pitchers were an exception to the norm, Paige threw to the tune of a 2.74 ERA and 1.11 WHIP.



He made his first professional appearance with the Negro Leagues' Birmingham Black Barons before departing for the Cuban league and returning stateside after a brief stint overseas. Nearly 20 years after his pro career began, he made it to the MLB and won the World Series in 1948 with Cleveland. He retired from Major League Baseball in 1954 but did make one more appearance for the Kansas City Athletics at the age of 59. While it was more publicity stunt than anything else, Paige faced 10 batters without allowing a single earned run. He earned his induction into the Hall of Fame in 1971.

Figure 3: Satchel Paige poses for a photo in 1942.

It's impossible to discuss players who got their start in the Negro Leagues without mentioning Josh Gibson, one of the best catchers to ever grace the grass and dirt of a baseball diamond. Born in Buena Vista, Georgia, Gibson undoubtedly endured racial prejudice throughout his youth in the late 1910s and 1920s. He got his first opportunity in professional baseball with the Memphis Red Sox in 1930 at the age of 18.

He joined the Pittsburgh Crawfords in 1933 and immediately emerged as one of the sport's best hitters with a .395 average, 1.178 OPS and 18 home runs in 74 games. Over the course of his 14-year career, Gibson hit .371 while tallying 746 RBI and 171 homers in 647 appearances. He unfortunately never saw the chance to compete in the MLB as he passed away from a stroke in 1947 at the age of 35. His story remains one cut entirely too short, but he undoubtedly earned his place in the Hall of Fame with his 1972 induction as a trailblazer for Black players everywhere.

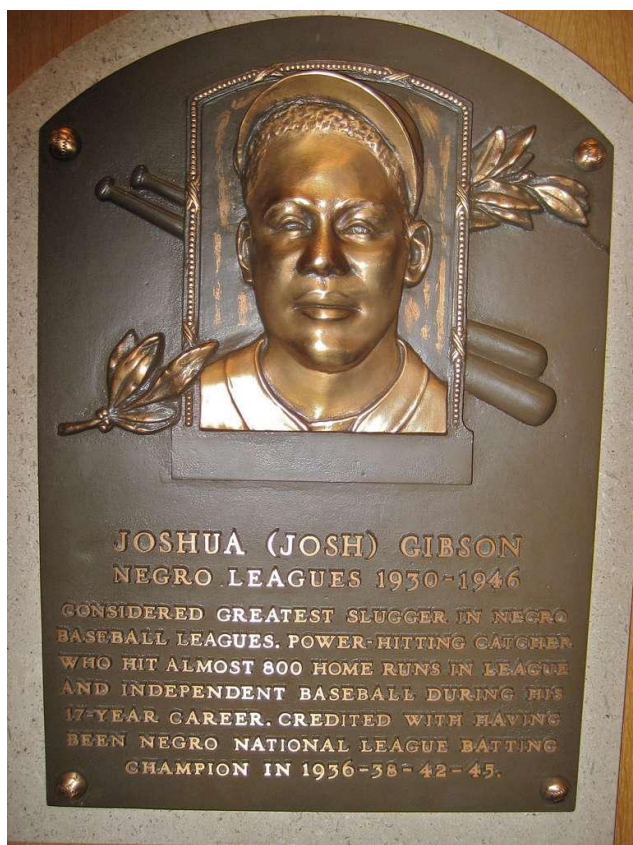


Figure 4: A photo of Josh Gibson's Hall of Fame plaque.

These names may seem like ancient history to some, but their efforts and impact of showing up every day and competing — excelling at the highest level of their time which still holds immense statistical and cultural significance today — cannot be denied.

They paved the way for names mentioned at the beginning of this story who appeared in the majors throughout the 1950s and later, Hank Aaron and Willie Mays. The former began his time in baseball with the Indianapolis Clowns while the latter took a roster spot with the Birmingham Black Barons in 1948. Mr. Cub saw his professional debut in the Negro Leagues as well. Ernie Banks won multiple NL MVPs as a member of the Chicago Cubs, but few realize his first gig came in 1950 with the Kansas City

Monarchs... and he was discovered by a Cool Papa Bell, a Negro League legend himself.

The Negro Leagues disbanded over the course of the late 1940s into the 1950s and later. It took several more years for the Black population in the United States to receive the same civil rights with the legal end of segregation in the 1960s, and while it didn't end racial prejudice entirely, things did begin to improve over the years which followed.

As we fast forward to today's times, it's crucial that we don't take for granted how far we've come. Gone are the days of segregated baseball leagues as the MLB now reigns supreme with the most diverse group of players it's ever seen. Still, there's a reason Jackie Robinson day is recognized in April during each season with athletes across baseball donning the hero's retired No. 42 across the backs of their jerseys. This remembrance remains key in honoring the legends of the past, as well as ensuring that their stories are told far into the future.

Even decades removed from those times, those men have still more than earned the right for their records to join Major League Baseball's stat-keeping libraries. They have a rightful place in history, and despite the efforts of some forces at play, the icons who endured countless hardships of their times live on.