

Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution. *By Neil Lanctot.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004. xi + 496 pp. Index, notes, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0-812-23807-9.

By Charles C. Alexander

Anyone inside or outside academic life who regards the study of baseball's history as lightweight and peripheral to the major concerns of scholarship (and there still are such people) ought to be disabused after reading Neil Lanctot's book. Since the publication of Robert Peterson's pathbreaking *Only the Ball Was White* (1970), the study of black professional baseball has attracted a rapidly growing population of researchers, who by now have produced a huge body of published work. Most of that work either has taken the form of directories, compilations, and oral histories or has dealt with particular baseball teams (such as Lanctot's own earlier book on the Hilldale Club) and particular players and their struggles within the relentlessly segregated circumstances of American society. Although Mark Ribowsky (1995) and Leslie Heaphy (2003) have followed Peterson in doing general histories of black professionalism, Lanctot's approach to the subject is substantially different from that of previous writers.

Readers expecting the kind of baseball history that is full of colorful reminiscences and humorous anecdotes may not find this book to their liking. Densely printed, thickly detailed, and massively documented, *Negro League Baseball* is not an easy read. Lanctot, a member of the history faculty at the University of Delaware, does relatively little with the game on the field, such as recounting the particulars of season-by-season competition, player performances, and the like. More than anyone before him, Lanctot focuses on the financial, structural, logistical, and political aspects of what was one of the largest predominantly black-owned industries in the United States. Thus his book is imminently appropriate for review in a journal devoted to the history of American commercial and industrial enterprise.

Although Lanctot gives a brief background sketch of black professional baseball as it evolved out of the intensifying racial segregation of the late nineteenth century, he actually begins his narrative with the 1932–33 season. By then the Great Depression had

so devastated the eastern and midwestern urban black populations on which the two original Negro leagues of the 1920s depended that organized league competition for black clubs had ceased to exist. Then, in the depths of the Depression, William Augustus “Gus” Greenlee, who controlled the numbers racket in black Pittsburgh, together with other African American entrepreneurs (some of whom also operated on the margins of legality), formed a second Negro National League (NNL). Unlike the original NNL, which had operated in cities in the Midwest and the upper South from 1920 to 1931, the second NNL was based in cities scattered from the Chesapeake Bay to the Great Lakes. Greenlee’s Pittsburgh Crawfords and the Homestead Grays, owned by Cumberland “Cum” Posey and also playing out of Pittsburgh, were not only archrivals but also the two best financed clubs in the new NNL. In 1937 another group of investors started up a second professional circuit, called the Negro American League (NAL), which, like the first NNL, operated in cities in the Midwest and the upper South, such as Kansas City, St. Louis, and Memphis. But in covering the years continuing through the Second World War, Lanctot is largely concerned with the fortunes and misfortunes of the NNL.

In the Depression years the NNL’s misfortunes exceeded its fortunes. Not only was discretionary income scarce for the great majority of African Americans, but the NNL also endured persistent squabbling among clubowners, erratic scheduling, and the unwillingness or inability of club officials to provide accurate statistics on team standings and player performance. All of these drawbacks continually angered and frustrated the black sportswriters of the day, who struggled in the weekly newspapers published for black urban black readers to give something approaching coherent coverage to Negro-league baseball. Then, too, black professional clubs, unlike the practice adopted in all-white Organized Baseball dating back to 1879, did not include a reserve clause in player contracts. That, and the fact that players often worked without any kind of contract, meant that black professionals were free to move from club to club between—and often even during—seasons. From the late 1930s on, many players deserted the North American leagues for the higher pay and more congenial living conditions offered in Mexico and the Caribbean countries.

So chronic personnel turnover and financial woes characterized both the NNL and the NAL for nearly all their history. The one period of real prosperity for the Negro

leagues spanned the years from 1941 through 1946. The massive industrial expansion triggered by the Second World War and the steady reduction of the white labor force brought employment opportunities and economic gains hitherto unknown to African Americans. More people attended Negro-league games than ever before, and black players were able to command salaries that for the first time were comparable to those paid in the top-level minor leagues in Organized Baseball. The good times carried over into the first postwar year, although dramatic changes were underway that would ultimately bring ruin and extinction to the Negro leagues.

Besides providing an excellent chapter on players' lives on and off the field, the composition and behavior of black baseball fandom, and the hard existence of Negro-league umpires, Lanctot also gives a good account of the difficulties the leagues encountered despite the prosperity of the war years, especially in getting enough gasoline and tires to run the buses on which teams usually traveled. He also covers in considerably more depth than anyone else the role played by the Communist Party in pushing for the end to the color barrier in Organized Baseball. Lanctot also has a detailed explanation of the murky history of the United States League, a third black circuit formed largely through the efforts of Brooklyn Dodgers executive Branch Rickey, although Rickey's motives and machinations are still not wholly understood—and probably never will be.

Rickey's signing of Jackie Robinson and subsequently other black players for the Dodgers organization, Robinson's brilliantly successful entry into the major leagues, and the subsequent arrival in the majors of Larry Doby and a slowly increasing number of other Negro leaguers prompted masses of black fans to desert the Negro leagues. The NNL disbanded following the 1948 season; some of its member clubs merged with the NAL. Through the 1950s the NAL carried on with fewer and fewer first-class players (it even added some female performers) and a diminishing number of viable franchises, until it finally folded in 1963.

Conceivably, black teams could have survived by being absorbed into Organized Baseball and functioning as a development league for the major leagues. But the disunity, indecisiveness, and false optimism of black clubowners, together with the apathy of white clubowners and officials and the rapid decline of the minor leagues after

1949, doomed such prospects. Today few African Americans lament the passing of the Negro leagues, which were, after all, but a small part of the vast and complex system of racial segregation that once existed across the nation—under law in the southern states, by common practice in the North. But as Lanctot notes, black professional baseball was one “of the moderating institutional supports that once alleviated the plight of blacks,” and its disappearance left “a void in the black community” (p. 394).

I judge Lanctot’s *Negro League Baseball* to be the best study of the subject done up to now. He quotes extensively from black newspapers published in nearly every city where the Negro leagues operated. Besides using a number of manuscript collections in Philadelphia, Newark, Kansas City, and elsewhere, he has conducted personal interviews with some of the rapidly dwindling number of men who played on the other side of what used to be called the “color line.” Although he brings ballplayers—Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Monte Irvin, and others—into the narrative, he mainly deals with the people who owned the clubs and tried to operate the leagues and with staff writers on the black newspapers. Although Greenlee, Posey, and Newark’s Effa and Ed Manley are familiar figures, for the first time we get to know much about the backgrounds and personalities of executives like Tom Wilson, J. M. Martin, and John H. Johnson; the booking agents Eddie Gottlieb and Abe Saperstein; and sportswriters such as Rollo Wilson, Francis “Fay” Young, and Wendell Smith. All in all, Lanctot has given us a fine book.

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