NEGRO BASEBALL LEAGUE played role for Latin players, too

FROM THE PRESS BOX

Negro Baseball League played role for Latin players, too

Shannon J. Owens | From the Press Box
June 3, 2008

If the Negro Baseball League never existed, forget about fewer black faces in American baseball.

We would also see fewer Latinos and Asians playing today.

Diversity in baseball? Forget about it.

Books call the Negro Baseball League a part of American history. But it's more than that, it's also international history.

Think about this, nearly a third of all Major League Baseball players today are from Latin countries. Before the sport was integrated more than 60 years ago, the only way darker-skinned Latinos could compete in America was through the Negro League.


Latin players did not first jump to my mind when thinking about last Thursday's honorary Major League Baseball draft of former Negro Baseball League players at Disney's Wide World of Sports.

But I will never look at the league the same way again after speaking with former players Walt McCoy and Neale "Bobo" Henderson.

McCoy, 84, and Henderson, 77, traveled to Latin America in their offseasons to play baseball and pick up a little extra money in the process.

There, they were treated like men. The pay was about three times what they made in America. The fans loved them. And they were more than talented Negro players. There, they were baseball legends.

"We enjoyed being exposed to those people down there. They were so good to all the players," McCoy said.

It is a pitiful thought to know McCoy, Henderson, Buck Leonard, Jackie Robinson and many of the great black players had to leave America to find acceptance and democracy.

But they did find the true spirit of baseball in places such as Mexico, Venezuela, Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

McCoy, who played for the Chicago American Giants, competed for various Latin teams
Negro Baseball League played role for Latin players, too -- Colleges an...es, Disney's Wide World of Sports, Buck Leonard -- OrlandoSentinel.com

every winter during the offseasons from 1945-1952.

Most countries, aside from America's neighboring Mexico, did not have fields with lights when McCoy first started his travels. More quality fields, stadiums and increased crowd
support grew with each passing year.

"That's what got so many Latin players in the big leagues now because of us guys who went
down there early on and really got the interest of baseball [fans] in those places," McCoy
said.

It would be an exaggeration to credit the entire evolution of baseball in Latin countries to
the Negro Baseball League. Each country's team allotted just two, sometimes, three
Americans -- some of whom were white.

But the relationship between blacks and Latinos played a huge role in the shaping of
American baseball today.

"Most folks have no idea that Latinos played in the Negro League," said Adrian Burgos, a
professor of race and sport relations at the University of Illinois. "The story of Latino
baseball and black baseball as well is an integrated story."

In Burgos' book Playing America's Game, he wrote that 54 Latinos played in the major
leagues from 1902-1947. Those, of course, were the lighter-skinned Latin Americans who
could pass for white. In contrast, 230 Latinos played in the Negro Baseball League
during the same time period.

It is also important to note its founder, Andrew "Rube" Foster, first played in Cuba. The
Negro Baseball League, like historically black colleges, was never exclusive to African-
Americans.

Stories were written earlier this year about the anemic number of African-Americans
playing professional baseball today. Some said the legacy of Jackie Robinson has been
unfulfilled.

I disagree. The Negro Baseball League was not just about promoting African-Americans,
but giving all minorities a chance to play.

Shannon J. Owens can be reached at sjowens@orlandosentinel.com.

more in /sports