

World

'Coming back is not easy': Reggie Jackson recalls racism he faced in 1967 Alabama

Jackson spoke during MLB game honouring the Negro Leagues



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Reggie Jackson is seen here at Minute Maid Park in Houston in this September 2023 photo. (Bob Levey/Getty Images)

Baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson was the 1973 American League MVP, a two-time World Series MVP and 14-time all-star.

He was dubbed "Mr. October" for his hitting during the playoffs.

But before all that he played as a minor leaguer on a team in Birmingham, Ala., in 1967.

On Thursday night, during a broadcast of a game between the San Francisco Giants and St. Louis Cardinals at Rickwood Field in Birmingham to honour the

Negro Leagues, Jackson offered up a raw remembrance of the racism he faced as a Black player there 57 years ago.

"Coming back is not easy," Jackson said.

"The racism ... when I played here. The difficulty of going through different places where we travelled. Fortunately, I had a manager and had players on the team who helped me get through it. But I wouldn't wish it on anybody.

"People said to me today, I spoke, and they said 'You think you're a better person? Do you think you won when you played here and conquered?' I said, 'You know, I would never... want to do it again.

"I walked into restaurants and they would point at me and say, 'The [censored] can't eat here.' I would go to a hotel and they'd say, 'The [censored] can't stay here.

"We went to [Kansas City Athletics owner] Charlie Finley's country club for a welcome home dinner and they pointed me out with the n-word: 'He can't come in here.' Finley marched the whole team out. Finally, they let me in there. He said, 'We're going to go to the diner and eat hamburgers. We'll go where we're wanted.'

"Fortunately, I had a manager in Johnnie McNamara that if I couldn't eat in a place, nobody would eat. We'd get food to travel. I couldn't stay in a hotel. They'd drive to the next hotel and find a place where I could stay."

Jackson, who is 78, made the poignant comments during the first regular-season Major League Baseball game to be played at Rickwood Field, the oldest professional baseball park in the United States.

The game honoured the Negro Leagues, which were made up of Black players who were excluded from the majors. In 1947, Jackie Robinson broke MLB's colour barrier when he debuted for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Rickwood was also the historic home of the Birmingham Black Barons, which played in the Negro Leagues between the 1920s and the 1960s — and that included baseball legend Willie Mays, who died on Tuesday at the age of 93.

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/reggie-jackson-racism-birmingham-alabama-1.7242307>

Reggie remains “Reggie,” inimitable. As a player, the man loved the spotlight, and did some astonishing things in it; he continues to welcome it and does his best to stand out when in it. If Reggie, so full of ego, could be intimidated, this says something. (Maybe it says offense was so ready to be taken, though not the fault of a proud unbowed/”unbowable” Black man.) But then, Reggie came to the South from a different time and place. Born and raised in Pennsylvania, shifted to Arizona on a football, then baseball, scholarship, Reggie did not grow up Southern as Mays and Aaron and, to some degree, Robinson (born in Georgia, raised in southern California) did. The overt racism of the Segregated South was something they were accustomed to; the likes of Reggie were not. Bob Gibson, so fierce, the proudest of Black men, was from Nebraska. My conjecture is that the racism Bob, and then Reggie, knew before entering the South was “milder” and less “in your face.” Towering as the stature Bob Gibson earned in St. Louis was, this was still Missouri with racism even in its sports teams notorious for being as “Southern” as anywhere. Ask Roy Shivers, CFL Hall of Famer, about to be inducted into the Roughriders Plaza of Honour. (Maybe they were waiting for Jim Hopson, Roy’s nemesis daring to intrude on Roy’s kingdom, to be out of the picture before this could comfortably happen.)

The (Canadian legendary) sports writer, Trent Frayne, while covering Blue Jays baseball, wrote once of taking Reggie and some teammates to Niagara Falls on an off-day, only to have Reggie not recognize him the next day.

I did not like George Steinbrenner—too much bombast like Trump, doing far more harm than good as a meddler—but I have always enjoyed his epithet for Dave Winfield, when the principal owner of the Yankees and its high-paid star feuded. Big Dave had had a good start to a season, after some disappointing ends to other ones, leading George to dismiss Dave as only “Mr. April.” TJB