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Democracy Dies in Darkness

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL

11 weeks after Jackie Robinson's debut, Larry Doby arrived

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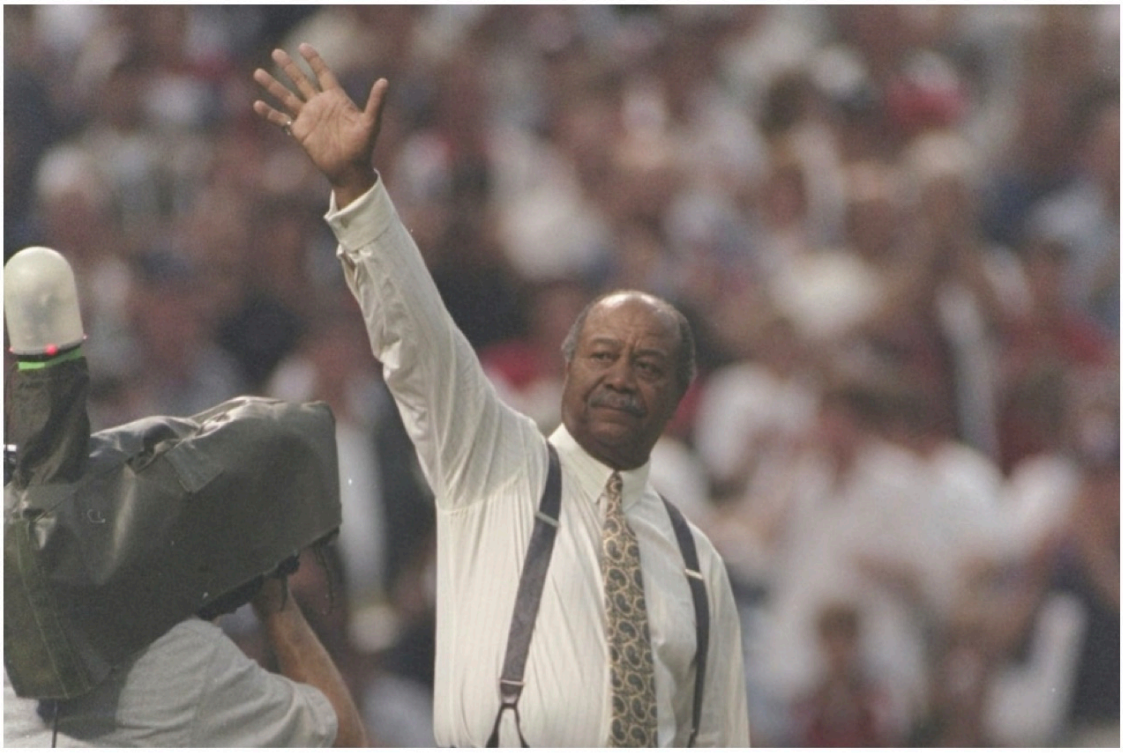


Larry Doby threw out the first pitch before the 1997 MLB All-Star Game in Cleveland. (Doug Pensinger/Getty Images)

Larry Doby, who debuted as the first Black player in American League history 75 years ago Tuesday, could have wound up in D.C. if Washington Senators owner Clark Griffith hadn't whiffed on an opportunity to land him.

In October 1945, Doby was serving with Senators star Mickey Vernon in the Navy on a small island near Guam when they heard on the radio that the Brooklyn Dodgers had signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract.

"I was very surprised, like a lot of people," Doby recalled in 1997. "… Mickey said to me, 'There's your opportunity,' and he wrote a letter to Clark Griffith recommending me. They weren't ready to integrate, though."

Vernon returned to the Senators in 1946 after a two-year military hiatus and didn't miss a beat, leading the American League with a .353 batting average and 51 doubles. Doby rejoined the Newark Eagles of the Negro National League, where he put up similar numbers, hitting .365 with a league-high 10 triples in 59 games.

Before Jackie Robinson made history, he went 7 for 7 in his D.C. debut

The Cleveland Indians signed Doby to a major league contract in the first week of July 1947, a move that player-manager Lou Boudreau called "a routine baseball purchase — in my mind. Creed, race or color are not factors in baseball success."

Indians owner Bill Veeck said Robinson had proved to be a legitimate major leaguer. "So I wanted to get the best of the available Negro boys while the grabbing was good," he said. "Why wait? Within 10 years Negro players will be in regular service with big league teams, for there are many colored players with sufficient capabilities to make the majors."

Doby, then 23, played in his first game July 5, 1947 — becoming the second Black player in modern baseball history, less than three months after Robinson broke the sport's color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Griffith, meanwhile, dug in for years after other teams integrated.
"I will not sign a Negro for the Washington club merely to satisfy subversive persons," he said in a 1952 Sporting News retrospective piece at 82. "I would welcome a Negro on the Senators if he rated the distinction, if he belonged among major league players."

The Senators didn't sign a Black player until 1954 — making them one of the last teams to do so.

An escort from the team owner

As Griffith refused to rock the boat in D.C. — still a Southern, segregated city at the time — Veeck made the historic decision to integrate the American

League midway through the 1947 season. But he later confessed to having doubts about whether *his* city was ready.

"It is usually overlooked, but if Jackie Robinson was the ideal man to break the color line, Brooklyn was the ideal place. I wasn't that sure about Cleveland," he wrote in his autobiography, "Veeck as in Wreck."

Veeck recalled receiving 20,000 letters after signing Doby, "most of them in violent and sometimes obscene protest. Over a period of time I answered all. In each answer, I included a paragraph congratulating them on being wise enough to have chosen parents so obviously to their liking."

"Signing Doby was Veeck's first defining moment as a major league owner," wrote Paul Dickson in "Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick." The move "gave him a voice as a progressive and social critic."

In a 1997 New York Times interview, Doby praised Veeck as a man who "didn't see color. To me, he was in every sense colorblind. And I always knew he was there for me. He always seemed to know when things were bad, if things were getting to me. He'd call up and say: 'Let's go out. Let's get something to eat.' "

Bill Veeck, left, with Larry Doby on July 5, 1947. (AP)

Veeck escorted Doby onto the field at Chicago's Comiskey Park for his first game, posed for photos with the rookie and patted him on the back with these words of advice: "Just remember you're only another baseball player. Keep loose and be a good rapper."

"I'm really nervous," Doby told sportswriters. "Last night on the train was the first time in four nights I got any sleep."

He received a loud ovation from the Chicago fans when he came out on the field before the game and again when he came up as a pinch hitter in the seventh inning. Doby struck out with runners on first and third and one out but got another ovation as he returned to the dugout.

But the response from his teammates was quite the opposite — several refused to shake his hand when their manager introduced him, the New York Times later reported.

Washingtonians got an early glimpse at Doby, who helped swell crowds for a weekend series at Griffith Stadium a few weeks later. The Senators averaged 16,500 fans for the three games — a big increase over their average crowd of just over 11,000 that year — but Doby played in only one of them, going hitless in two at-bats, dropping him to 2 for 16 for the season. The Washington Post reported that despite the slow start, "there is a calm assurance about the big Negro boy that the future will work out all right."

"So far I've been pretty much a flop but maybe I'll get into this kind of pitching in a little while," Doby said after the one game he appeared in. "It's good, this big league pitching. It's awful good, really." Unlike Robinson, Doby went straight from the Negro Leagues — where he had been hitting .354 — to the majors without a minor league stint in between. He admitted he might fail with the Indians.

Years later, Doby expressed appreciation for the support he got from Washington fans. In a twist, the segregation of Griffith Stadium wound up making him feel welcome. As David Maraniss wrote in The Post in 1997, Black fans were relegated to the bleachers, close to Doby's position in the outfield.

"When people say, 'You played well in Washington,' well, I had a motivation factor there," Doby told Maraniss 50 years after he broke in. "I had

cheerleaders there at Griffith Stadium. I didn't have to worry about name-calling. You got cheers from those people when you walked out onto the field. They'd let you know they appreciated you were there. Give you a little clap when you go out there, and if you hit a home run, they'd acknowledge the fact, tip their hat."

'The crap I took was just as bad'

Doby called the question that he got asked most often — did Robinson make it easier for him? — "one of the stupidest questions that's ever been asked. Think about it. We're talking about 11 weeks — 1947. Now it's 50 years later and you still have hidden racism, educated racist people. How could you change that in 11 weeks?"

Or as he told Jet magazine in 1978: "Jackie got all the publicity for putting up with [racial abuse]. But it was the same thing I had to deal with. He was first, but the crap I took was just as bad. Nobody said, 'We're going to be nice to the second Black.'"

In his first year with Cleveland, Doby hit .156 in 32 at-bats, mostly as a pinch hitter. The next season, the team brought in Hall of Fame outfielder Tris Speaker to tutor the young player, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported in 2012: "Once rumored to have been a member of the Ku Klux Klan, Speaker became Doby's advocate and showed no signs of racial prejudice."

Roy Campanella, Larry Doby, Don Newcombe and Jackie Robinson at the 1948 All-Star Game in Brooklyn. (AP)

Doby hit his stride that year, batting .301 to help lead the Indians to the 1948 World Series title — still the franchise's most recent. As Boudreau, the player-manager, said in September 1948: "Without Doby, we would not be fighting for the pennant. We probably would have been in fourth place."

After Doby hit a home run off Boston Braves star Johnny Sain that helped the Indians win Game 4, a photo went on the wire of Doby and a White teammate, pitcher Steve Gromek, embracing cheek-to-cheek with wide grins. The picture generated a lot of attention — what we would call going viral today.

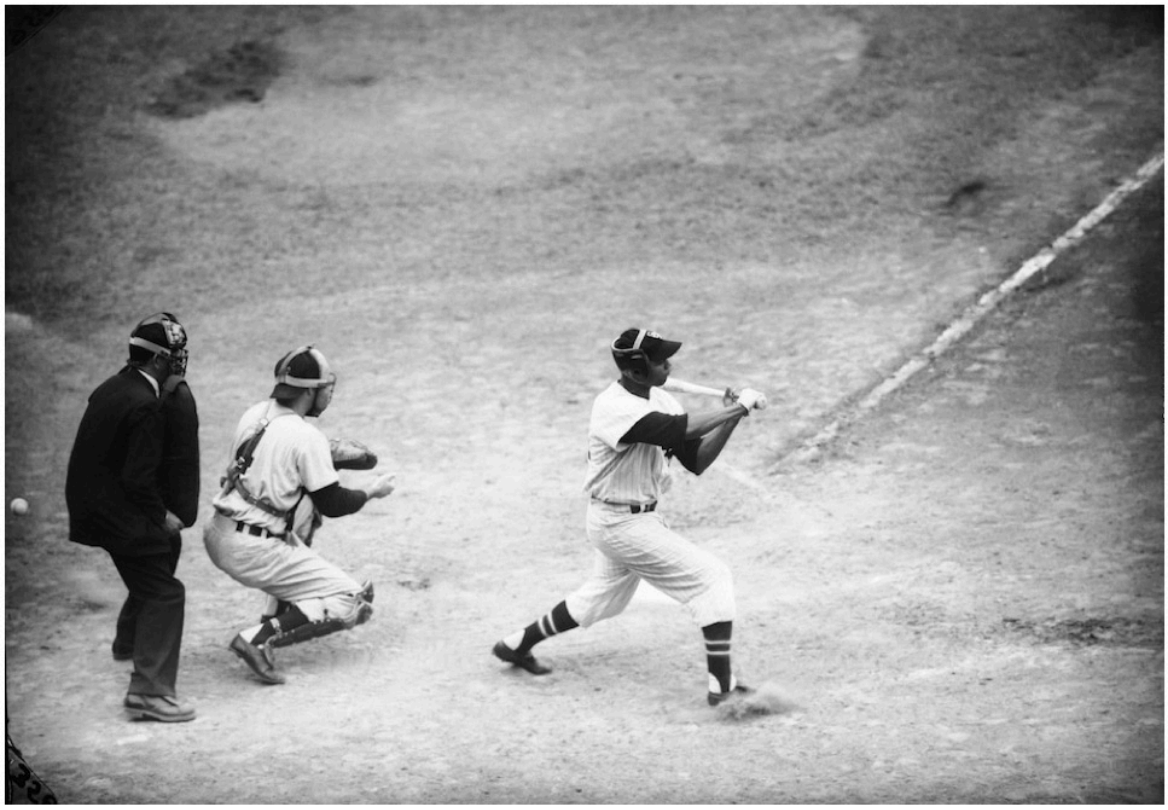
Jackie Robinson's last plea to MLB: 'Wake up' and hire Black managers

"That was a feeling from within, the human side of two people, one Black and one White," Doby said later. "That made up for everything I went through. I would always relate back to that whenever I was insulted or rejected from hotels. I'd always think about that picture. It would take away all the negatives."

Gromek later recalled to the New York Times that back home in Hamtramck, Mich.: "People who were close to me would say, 'Steve, how can you do it?' That stuff didn't bother me."

Doby led all Indians regulars with a .318 batting average and a .500 slugging percentage in that World Series. He would play 13 seasons in the major leagues, helping the Indians return to the Fall Classic in 1954, when he hit 32 homers and drove in 126 runs, finishing second in the MVP vote to New York Yankees catcher Yogi Berra.

That year, Washington's first Black player, Cuban-born Carlos Paula, made his debut, going 2 for 5 with two RBI in a victory over the Philadelphia Athletics on Sept. 6.



Larry Doby, shown in 1956, retired in 1959. (Charles Knoblock/AP)

Doby retired in 1959, and Robinson wrote in a 1965 column that Doby had sought a job at the executive level.

“The men in control, the men at the top are not really ready to give a Negro a chance at the top — unless he is the kind of Negro they can count on to be an errand boy,” Robinson wrote in the Chicago Defender, a Black newspaper.

“Larry Doby gave his all to the game. He is intelligent. He could make a meaningful contribution in the front office. But Larry Doby has a characteristic in common with me. He is outspoken. They do not want a Negro like that. … There is a brick wall which confronts the Negro player when his playing days are over.”

But Doby did get a shot at managing years later. Veeck, the former Indians owner, tried to buy the Senators in 1967, and he planned to install Elston Howard as the sport’s first Black manager. He wound up buying the Chicago White Sox, hiring Doby halfway through the 1978 season to replace Bob Lemon. That made Doby the second Black manager following Frank Robinson, who had piloted the Indians from 1975 to 1977.

The White Sox went just 37-50 under Doby and fired him after the season, and he never managed again. Doby died in 2003.

“Baseball wasn’t the all-American game in 1947, because all Americans couldn’t play,” Doby told the Chicago Tribune in 1987. “And it’s still not the all-American game, because all Americans cannot work in most positions in baseball, even though they are qualified,” he added, citing the scarcity of Black managers, coaches and executives.

“How they can keep saying it’s hot dogs and apple pie and motherhood and all that, I don’t know.”

Larry Doby deserves all the credit Jackie Robinson has received. Indeed, when Robinson signed his contract, Doby was serving in the South Pacific during WWII. He also went straight into the major leagues, in a tough town (Cleveland), whereas Jackie started in comparatively friendly minor league Montreal before moving on to Brooklyn, described here as much better suited.

Each experienced, in spades, both abuse and tokenism, being held up as “proof” of the tolerance of White people willing to exploit them while continuing to disdain Black people otherwise. I grew up with a modest measure of it, in that I worshipped “Negro” athletes—Willie Mays, Bob Gibson, George Reed—while still retaining Color prejudices, most of which I didn’t even recognize at such.

Another “good” thing South Africa did for me, living there as a young White man on the make, was make evident what these preconceptions were and force me over time to reckon personally with them. The inevitable crippling problems Black governments have had since the fall of apartheid complicated this, delaying the process; it seemed at times as though dim White views of Black capacities were prescient. But it still took far too long to see past my still-token “antiracist” pretenses at being tolerant and respectful, to see Blacks as just “people” with virtues and flaws like any other. Culture may run deep, but the dominant majority of any lesser tendencies in African—and African-American—communities are the fallout of systemic racism, poverty, and willful White prejudice. Can the grievous flaws in mainstream society driven by Whites—epitomized in apartheid and segregation—be explained with equal compassion?

We Whites don’t want to see these traits in ourselves, or our forebearers, and we fear to do so will somehow place us at a disadvantage with obligations to compensate those discriminated against. Not many feel the “privilege” they are accused of exploiting. Failure still seems worrisomely real as a possibility. TJB