

IDEAS

# Negro-League Players Don't Belong in the MLB Record Books



And neither do white players from the segregation era.

By Malcolm Ferguson



Illustration by Matteo Giuseppe Pani. Source: Getty.

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On May 29, Josh Gibson became Major League Baseball's all-time leader in career batting average, slugging percentage, and on-base-plus-slugging percentage. He is now also the single-season record holder for each category. What makes the achievement particularly unusual is that Gibson has been dead since 1947. He never played a single out in the major leagues.

Gibson's new status is the result of a change that was first announced in 2020, when the MLB decided that the seven main Negro leagues would retroactively be granted "major league" status. This required integrating into the official MLB record database the statistics of more than 3,400 Black players who had been barred from playing in the American League or the National League because of their skin color. The process culminated with the May 29 statistical update. Suddenly, the all-time stat leaderboards are crowded with names unfamiliar to most baseball fans: Oscar Charleston, Turkey Stearnes, Mule Suttles.

The desire to validate the contributions of athletes who were unfairly denied the chance to play in the major leagues is noble. But the change is nevertheless misguided—a way of retroactively integrating Major League Baseball, reducing decades of segregation to a footnote and minimizing the actual discrimination that Black players faced. If the sport really wants to own up to its history, it shouldn't pretend that Major League Baseball has been one big, happy family all along. Instead of absorbing Negro-league statistics and the mythic figures behind them, the MLB shouldn't count *any* statistics—Negro league or major league—accumulated during the era when Black and white players were prohibited from competing against each other.

The Negro leagues were formed by baseball's hard color line. Black players and teams were rejected by the official amateur baseball network in 1867, and then at the professional level in 1876. In response, Black players formed their own leagues. The heyday of Black baseball under Jim Crow began in 1920, with the founding of the Negro National League. The Negro-league game was fast, flamboyant, and popular, and produced such giants as Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Buck Leonard, and Gibson. The Negro National League folded in 1948, a year after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier as the first Black major leaguer. The Negro American League struggled through the '50s, as more Black players joined the MLB, and finally shut down at the end of the decade.

Read: How the Negro leagues shaped modern baseball

In 1969, the five white men who made up pro baseball's Special Baseball Records Committee gathered to assist in the creation of the seminal Baseball Encyclopedia, a compendium of statistics that attempted to cover the full history of major-league baseball. This required deciding which circuits over the sport's near-century of existence were good and competitive enough to be

considered “major league,” aside from the obvious National League and American League. The group didn’t even consider classifying the Negro leagues as “major,” but it did grant that legitimacy to six segregated white circuits, some of which were notably worse than the Negro leagues.

That didn’t shift until 2020, when the MLB, like much of corporate America, found itself struggling to respond to the racial-justice protest movement sparked by the killing of George Floyd. The league had long justified the omission of Negro-league stats by pointing to the Negro leagues’ sporadic scheduling, shorter seasons, erratic playoff formatting, and lack of contemporaneous media coverage. Activists argued that, if the MLB was willing to treat the 60-game, COVID-shortened season as an official one, then Negro-league seasons should count too.

The activists had a point. Excluding the Negro leagues from major-league status on the grounds that their seasons were less organized and less well documented essentially amounted to punishing Black baseball players for the consequences of Jim Crow. But incorporating the Negro leagues into the official history of Major League Baseball is the wrong way to correct that historic injustice.

The Negro leagues and major leagues were quite distinct from each other. Negro-league players slept in segregated hotels and rode in the back of public buses. They faced racist vitriol from hostile crowds and played in ballparks that lacked showers and other standard amenities—or denied them to Black players. The game that developed under these exclusionary conditions looked, sounded, and felt different from the MLB. It was faster and more aggressive, featuring much more fluid baserunning. Spit- and dirt-balls were prevalent. The Negro leagues were the first to introduce night games—the Kansas City Monarchs owner J. L. Wilkinson prioritized getting working-class fans in the stands—as well as shin guards and batting helmets. Thanks to player-friendly salary-negotiation rules, Negro-league stars switched teams much more often.

Most important, the Negro leagues were Black, and the major leagues were white. Until the color line fell, Black players didn’t play against the best white competition, and white major leaguers didn’t play against the best Black competition. (The color line also kept most Latino ballplayers, who weren’t

considered white, out of the major leagues; some played in the Negro leagues, others in Latin America.)

“Babe Ruth never hit a home run off a Black pitcher, and Josh Gibson never hit a home run off a white pitcher,” Larry Lester, a Negro-league statistician, told *The Athletic* in May. Lester meant this as a point in favor of the database addition. But the truth of his comment is exactly why Negro-league stats shouldn’t be lumped in with MLB stats: None of the leagues, white or Black, were really “major” until they were integrated. Adding Black players to the historical database doesn’t change that fact. The MLB shouldn’t get to call Josh Gibson its new batting leader, because the MLB made sure that he never had a chance to play in it. But Ty Cobb, who held the all-time hitting crown from his retirement in 1928 until his replacement by Gibson, shouldn’t be considered the leader either, because his league was segregated.

If the MLB wants to recognize the impact that segregation had on the game, it should begin counting its official statistics on April 15, 1947, the day Jackie Robinson became a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Everything that happened before then still happened, and still mattered: the Negro leagues, Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig. It just doesn’t merit the title of Major League Baseball.

A post-integration batting average leaderboard would have Ted Williams, who was white, in the No. 1 spot. Tony Gwynn, who was Black, would be No. 2. Williams is widely considered to be the greatest hitter of all time; Gwynn is not too far behind. Both played against the best competition of their era. It is no insult to the players who came before integration to recognize that.

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