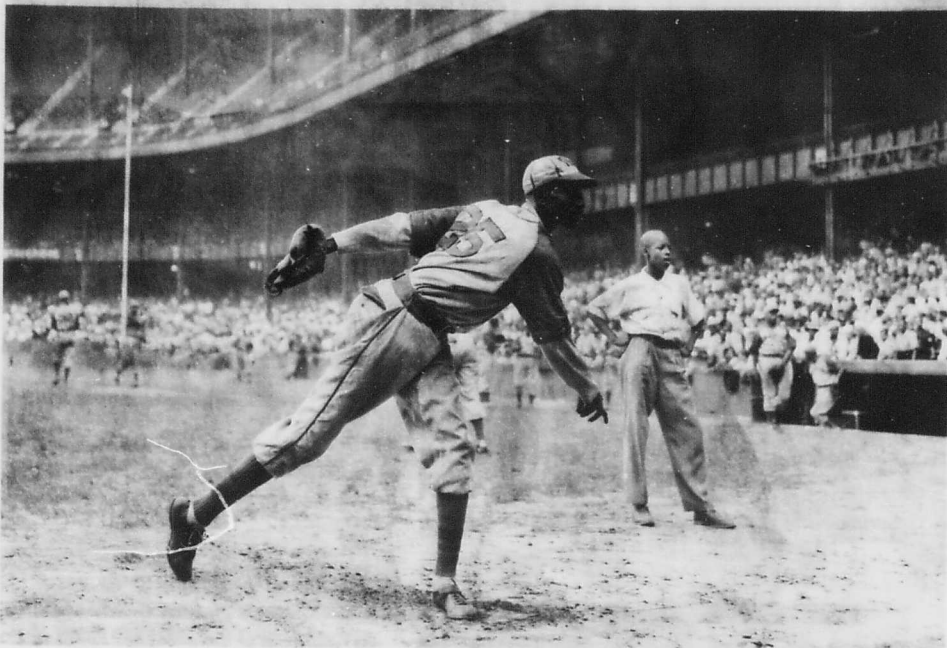


COMMENTARY »



Kansas City Monarchs pitcher Leroy Satchel Paige warms up at New York's Yankee Stadium before a Negro League game between the Monarchs and the New York Cuban Stars on Aug. 2, 1942.

MATTY ZIMMERMAN — Associated Press file photo

Inclusion of Negro Leagues stats in MLB records only enhances baseball's history

By KEN ROSENTHAL — The Athletic

To anyone questioning the legitimacy of making Negro League statistics part of Major League Baseball's official record, I pose this question:

How legitimate were MLB's statistics prior to 1947, when the league was essentially an all-white men's club?

If you want to argue Josh Gibson didn't face the best competition, well, neither did Babe Ruth. And if you want to argue Gibson's newly anointed record-setting 1943 season is less meaningful because he appeared in only 69 games, well, people who follow the sport are forever engaged in such context-driven debates.

The question of whether Hank Aaron or Barry Bonds should be considered the all-time home-run leader is not exactly settled in the minds of many fans, is it?

I understand why some found it jarring to learn Wednesday that Gibson was the new all-time leader in batting average, slugging percentage and OPS. But I found it more jarring that MLB, before declaring the Negro Leagues a major league in 2020, did not fully acknowledge a generation of elite Black professional players.

That's what this is all about, really — acknowledging that Gibson and Oscar Charleston and Turkey Stearnes deserve the same recognition as Ruth, Ty Cobb, Honus Wagner and other pre-1947 greats.

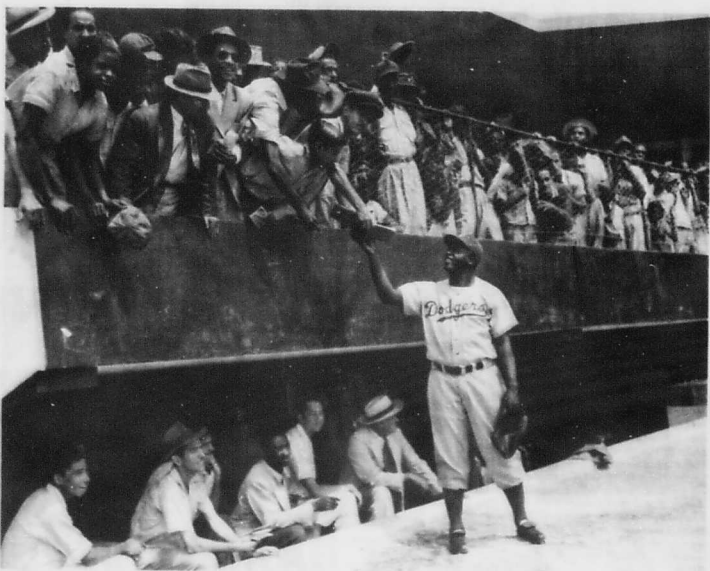
Yes, Gibson, Charleston and Stearnes are among the Negro League players in the Hall of Fame. The difference now is their statistics will be a formal part of the baseball narrative, increasing awareness, sparking curiosity. As Reds pitcher Hunter Greene put it, "I'm going to have to do a little bit more research and understand some of the history to kind of rewire my brain on some of the best players."

"People will be, I don't know if upset is the right word, but they may be uncomfortable with some Negro League stars now on the leaderboards for career and seasons," Larry Lester, an author and longtime Negro League researcher, told The Athletic's Tyler Kepner. "Diehards may not accept the stats, but that's OK. I welcome the conversations at the bar or the barbershop at the pool hall. That's why we do what we do."

Lester was part of a 17-person committee, comprised of historians, writers and statisticians, as well as a former player and GM, that determined which Negro League games counted toward the official record. The sole goal of the committee members was to achieve historical accuracy. Some worked tirelessly to document Negro League records even before MLB became interested. And the committee will continue trying to assemble the most complete account of Negro League games possible, adjusting as more information becomes available.

Blasphemy, you say? Numbers are immutable?

Plausible. As The Athletic's Marc Carig wrote in 2021, "No official records of the American



Jackie Robinson, first baseman of the Brooklyn Dodgers, returns an autograph book to a fan in the stands, during the Dodgers' spring training in Ciudad Trujillo, now Santo Domingo, in the Dominican Republic, on March 6, 1948.

Associated Press, Raychello

League exist before 1905. For a period in the 1910s, the National League recorded win-loss records for pitchers. But the American League did not, because league president Ban Johnson believed them to be a poor judge of a pitcher's performance. When the RRI became an official statistic in 1920, some scorers did not understand the rule, leading to chaos in the records."

Such gaps in information are nothing new. Ty Cobb's career totals for runs, hits and batting average vary (though admittedly not by much), depending upon the source. The 60-game COVID season in 2020 disrupted the standard 162-game record-keeping. So did, ahem, the strike-shortened seasons in 1981, 1994 and '95.

The Negro Leagues presented a different challenge for those trying to set the record straight, not only in uncovering the right information, but also in determining which information to use. Yet take it from John Thorn, 77, who has been MLB's official historian since 2011. None of this work would have been necessary if baseball had not been

segregated in the first place.

"Shortened Negro League schedules, interspersed with revenue-raising exhibition games, were born of MLB's exclusionary practices," said Thorn, who headed the statistical review committee. "To deny the best Black players of the era their rightful place among all-time leaders would be a double penalty."

But for more than half a century, that penalty was in effect.

When the Special Baseball Records Committee (SBRRC) first assembled in 1968-69, the group never considered or discussed the Negro Leagues. It recognized not only the NL (1876 to the present), the AL (1901 to the present) but also four other leagues that existed between 1882 and 1915. Against that backdrop, excluding the Negro Leagues was even more illogical.

Why not acknowledge Negro League statistics, but keep them separate from MLB's? This strikes at a sensitive issue. Any celebration of MLB's embrace of the Negro Leagues should be muted, considering how long the league kept out Black players. The merging

of stats risks glossing over that point. It's a complex question without an easy answer. Still, the idea is to end separation, not perpetuate it.

Why not make stats from the Japanese, Korean and other foreign leagues official as well? When I asked Thorn about that, he said he anticipated such "conceptual drift." The difference, he added, is that none of those leagues offers the evidence of major-league caliber play required by MLB — though Japan's Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB), in his estimation, is inching closer. The current version of NPB also did not take shape until 1950, after MLB's color line was broken.

Baseball's history is what separates it from other sports. Fans compare players from different eras, trying to figure out who was best. These comparisons are almost always imperfect, apples to oranges. And so it will be with Negro League players. I can't say if Josh Gibson was better than Babe Ruth. But I'm sure eager to advance the discussion.