



One "double duty" superstar greets another at U.S. Cellular Field. Bo Jackson shares a highlight of his day, greeting Duty on one of his frequent appearances on the South Side in the early 2000s. Photo courtesy of Chicago White Sox.

Multi-layered personality gets Duty through a century-plus of life

By George Castle, CBM Historian

Double Duty Radcliffe's personality was as deep as his life was long.

"Duty," as we'll call him throughout this special tribute, was far more than just the affable, involved centenarian appearing regularly at U.S. Cellular Field, lit cigar in hand or mouth, trademark red fedora worn at a jaunty angle.

He was the G-rated pied piper for kids fascinated by this walking, talking baseball man. He was the needler and joker to family and friends. He was the bail-out guy for reporters eager to chat with a living link to Negro Leagues greats. He was a wheelman who didn't mind a 500-mile drive to see a friend or revisit old haunts. And with a twinkle in his eye, a ribald comment and sometimes frisky gnarled old catcher's fingers, he was the ladies man who never lost his eye for a beauty.

Bottom line, Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe exuded life and never acted his age. No wonder he was an active man until the final cancer-wracked year of his uncommonly long life that concluded at age 103 in 2005.

"When I first met him, he was 91," said Kyle McNary, Duty's biographer via his book [*Ted 'Double Duty' Radcliffe: 36 Years of Pitching and Catching in Baseball's Negro Leagues*](#).

"I told my wife he's going to live to 100. He was no ordinary 90-year-old."

Duty was the ultimate people person, attracting them from far and wide, such as McNary making a round trip to Chicago from his suburban Minneapolis home.

“I was driving to Chicago, having dinner with him and driving home the same night,” he said. “I did not know if that was the last time I’d see him. But he lived a long time. He was driving past age 100.”

The Radcliffe line had a strong constitution.

“They had such great, great genes,” Duty nephew Abraham Bunkley said of Duty and third baseman-brother Alex Radcliffe.

Though a fierce competitor in any pursuit ranging from baseball to bridge, “he liked to laugh all the time. He looked at the light side of life,” said great-niece Debra Richards.

Duty was street smart with a PhD in life.

“He didn’t have much (formal) education.” Richards said. “He was pretty much self-taught. He was extremely smart. Through all his travels, he had to learn. You had to survive.”

He made friends easily and would just as soon come to you. McNary found that out when he first researched Negro League baseball, just out of college in the early 1990s.

Negro League reunion over Thanksgiving dinner

“I wrote a letter to Duty (through his sister), not really expecting a reply,” McNary said. “He replied with a hand-written letter. We talked on the phone many times. He said why don’t you write a book about me? We met finally in Nov. 1992, two months after my son was born. He, Lester Lockett, and Bobby Robinson all spent 10 days with me in Minneapolis, and they ate Thanksgiving dinner at my mother-in-law’s. I said if I write a book, I should come to Chicago. He said, no, I’ll come to Minneapolis.”

There was a practical reason Duty jumped into a car, got behind the wheel and drove hundreds of miles without stress. He didn’t like flying and often drove his team’s bus during his heyday. His mind contained personal roadmaps of much of the country.

Negro League historian Larry Lester also got close to Duty in his later years.

“We became good friends,” he said. “A really nice guy, full of fun and a lot of jokes to tell, good, bad and indifferent.”



Kyle McNary, shown here with his late basset hound Lula, became Duty's official biographer and thus was recipient of a lifetime of stories.

Duty referred to Richards, the niece, as “boss” after she began looking after him following the death of wife Alberta, better known as “Bert.”

“A friend said to me: ‘Double Duty Radcliffe is your uncle?’” recalled Richards. “I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Do you know what kind of history that is?’ He started calling me after his wife passed and asked me to take him places. He said he liked the way I took care of my father.”

Debra Richards' father, Henry Richards, like Duty a catcher, played in the Negro Leagues. So did her grandfather, Duty's brother-in-law. So when she became a part-time caretaker and chauffeur, Richards immersed herself in her great-uncle's majestic baseball history.

Black no cool color for Duty

He might protest Richards' choices for him, though. One day she obtained a black suit for Duty to wear to a black-tie affair.

“He said black was for funerals,” Richards recalled. “I said, ‘Duty, everybody's supposed to wear a black suit.’ He said, ‘Don't ever buy me a black suit again.’”

Duty could poke a little fun at himself, though. When he was 96, he was recruited to throw out the first pitch before a Schaumburg Flyers independent baseball game managed by ex-White Sox player Ron Kittle. Self-professed Emery ball master Duty mimicked doctoring up the ball before delivering the toss.

On either side of his 100th birthday, Duty loved going out to the ballpark and analyzing the game that framed his life.

“He loved going to every baseball game,” Richards said. “Negro League players got in free (at The Cell). When it got to the point where he couldn't drive, I'd drive him or the White Sox would send someone to get him.”

Holding court at a game was Duty's spiritual lifeline.

“He'd sit in a special section (at The Cell),” said Lester. “He gave me tips on baseball and tips on life. He would share thoughts about how the game was developing.”



Duty in civvies during his heyday. But he didn't like niece Debra Richards buying him a black suit.

While watching the Sox in the early 2000s, Duty grew to like a fast-working, strike-throwing lefty to whom he could especially relate. A photo of the young and old – Mark Buehrle greeting Duty at The Cell – is one of the most treasured in Richards’ collection. Duty also met rookie manager Ozzie Guillen.

By the time Duty settled into his South Side baseball seat, the designated hitter was old hat in the American League. That was one subject on which you didn’t want to get him started.

“Duty never heard of in his life anything like the DH,” said Richards. “If you can’t play in the field, you can’t bat.”

At his ballpark appearances, he served as the ultimate ambassador for the Negro Leagues this side of Buck O’Neil. He was a fervent believer in the quality of the product. And he knew the value of his good name.

Duty good bargainer for himself

“Most of the ballplayers loved Duty,” said McNary. “Some were jealous. Buck Leonard was like Lou Gehrig. Duty wasn’t as good a player as Buck, but Duty made more money because he asked for it. It was like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. Babe was pissed off at (Gehrig) because he didn’t ask what he was worth. Babe was the opposite.

“Duty made more money than most, and afterward he and Buck (O’Neil) were the best ambassadors for the Negro League. They earned every dime because they put in the time, talked to anyone, signed autographs.”

Those positive vibes about his life’s journey came in handy. Duty made it to the century mark without much apparent bitterness over opportunities denied during the Jim Crow era – born too soon for big-league consideration – with all the outrages, insults and literal threats to his life.

Two cities far north of the Mason-Dixon Line were rated by Duty as the worst for a man of color. He told Richards he considered Green Bay a Jim Crow town. McNary heard Duty label Albert Lea, Minn., as the worst on the circuit when he played for Rochester, Minn.

Spurring him on was the desire to prove he was the best against both black and white competition.

“Reading between the lines, you can feel he paved the way for Jackie Robinson, Larry Doby and others,” Lester said. “Someone had to make a stand. It wasn’t so much about being satisfied with playing in the Negro Leagues, but it was more about being an athlete who wanted to compete against the best.

“That goes toward white athletes. I may be the best pitcher in my league, but am I best the pitcher on the planet? You want to play against the best regardless of skin color. We found that out when many of the best black and white players competed in Latin America on an even playing field.”

Bunkley dodges nightsticks, then goes on the point in ‘Nam

Both Bunkley and Richards endured experiences befitting their uncle’s long journeys through an intolerant world.

Bunkley was a civil rights worker who was present at the violence-marred march through Selma, Ala. in 1965.

“They didn’t get a chance to hit me,” he said of the club-swinging state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. “It’s something I felt I needed to do. I kicked myself in the behind. You’ve got to work to make things better.”

Richards, a supervisor in the Census Bureau, remembered going with a cornrows-bedecked co-worker to a home near Merrillville, Ind., two decades ago. The homeowner would only talk to Richards, who had much lighter skin than her colleague. He agreed to answer their questions only over the phone. His farewell to the women: Don’t let the sunset touch your backs, meaning get out of here ASAP.

Bunkley, who has vision troubles he links back to the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam, was a combat veteran in that war. Turning down an overture to join the elite Green Berets because of its six-year commitment, he served as a point man on long-distance recon patrols. Although he was not wounded in action, Bunkley suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder.

“It comes back all the time,” he said. “I had an incident where I fell, hurt my face, and four teeth got knocked out. My instincts when I hit the ground was I was looking for my rifle.”

No matter what negatives his family endured, Duty could always brighten their lives with his persona and his encyclopedia of baseball and life stories.

Endless stories of Baseball Babylon

The more ribald side featured Duty’s love of women. As only an occasional drinker, the women who followed around ballplayers were his only supposed weakness. To listen to Duty, he apparently was in Babe Ruth’s league with his dalliances, both quality and quantity.



Vietnam veteran Abraham Bunkley, Duty's nephew, shows his uncle's autographed bat and trademark red fedora.

Other players attempted to get on Duty's team in enjoying the pleasures of baseball celebrityhood. According to Duty's own memoirs with McNary, one such man was Jackie Robinson, his Kansas City Monarchs teammate in 1945.

"We were roomies," Duty said. "He wanted to room with me because he knew all the girls used to hang around me all the time."

One of Richards' most treasured photos was taken when Duty appeared on Jimmy Kimmel's ABC-TV show in 2003. Wearing a Bismarck grey road jersey, Duty had an all-knowing smile posing with Tyra Banks. At 100, he no doubt wished he was 40 or more years younger to take care of pressing business.

The ability to tell such stories of Baseball Babylon endeared Duty to chroniclers of the Negro League in his golden years. He was the must-call of anyone constructing accounts of that bygone brand of baseball.

"He was one of the few (remaining) players who actually played with or against Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Willie Wells, Willard Brown and Turkey Stearns," said Lester. "He batted against Hilton Smith and Ray Brown. So he could give us an eyewitness account of playing against the future Hall of Famers. The younger players couldn't do that.



Duty was in his element being attended to by Tyra Banks at the Jimmy Kimmel Show in 2003.

"So he had a special place in every writer's rolodex. He played during the heyday of the period. He could tell you their habits, what they liked to eat, their superstitions. What it was like traveling and eating on 50 cents or \$1 a day."

Duty's place in the all-time Negro League lineup is secure.

"Without a doubt, one of the most colorful ballplayers to ever play the game," said Lester. "He was a promoter of black baseball history. So much fun to be around, so alive, so active. Made the game better if you watched the game with him. He never talked about his handicap of being in a wheelchair. It was never a burden to be in his presence. He always had that cigar with him — El Productos."

The cigar was certainly a sign of satisfaction and ease of one's self. That was Duty at his most sharply defined.