



## Not only the ball was white for 1950 Chicago American Giants

*By George Castle, CBM Historian  
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Usually, stories like Louis Clarizio Jr.'s are stumbled upon by chance in some microfilm archive when a historian is looking for something else. The tale's too unusual, too fantastic to find on its own.

Not only is Clarizio's saga true, but the Schaumburg resident is alive and kicking at 81 to tell you all about it.

Most know the basics of the Jackie Robinson story, released in biopic form in the new movie, "24", starring Harrison Ford as Branch Rickey. The years following Robinson's conflict-ridden 1947 breaking of the baseball color line featured a steady drain on talent from the Negro League to major-league organizations cherry-picking the best players. Few realize there was a flip side, very small, but part of history: Negro League teams recruiting a handful of white players to counteract the talent they were losing to the steadily-integrating big-league clubs.

Clarizio, now 81, told his story during an April 11 Chicago press conference drawing attention to the 170-some surviving Negro League veterans in connection to the release the following day of "24."

Former outfielder Clarizio is legally blind. He's hard of hearing. But his memory is active and spirit is high. And he comes prepared. Lugging a suitcase, he pulled out a clip of the June 24, 1950 Chicago American Giants' signing of Clarizio and pitcher Louis Chirban from the Armour Stars, an industrial league team in Chicago. Four other white players were signed into the Negro League in that era. Clarizio is the only survivor.



**Louis Clarizio, Jr. (left) with fellow Negro American League alum Hank "Baby" Presswood.**

For Clarizio, it was a chance to play in a big-league ballpark. The American Giants' home field was Comiskey Park. 'Old Man Comiskey' (actually, young man Chuck Comiskey, 24) loved us," he said. "We'd draw 10, 000 or 12,000 on a Sunday when the White Sox were out of town, and the ballpark would have been empty if not for us."

Clarizio was just like any other eager young ballplayer during baseball's post-war boom. He had big-league dreams. Growing up on Chicago's West Side and graduating from Crane Tech, also the high-school alma mater of George Halas, the outfielder advanced through amateur baseball. Clarizio wrangled a spring-training tryout in 1950 with the Paducah (Ky.) Chiefs farm club of the Philadelphia Phillies, then putting the final touches on the "Whiz Kids" pennant winners later in '50. The projected pay was \$125 a month, thin even for 1950.

But then Clarizio found out Armour meat-packing company was looking for players for its industrial-league team, the Armour Stars. The increase in pay -- \$140 a week, including a job -- was too much to pass up to continue in the lower rungs of pro ball. The schedule was good, too -- two days a week.

### **He found better competition, less pay with American Giants**

Yet the Negro American League was still considered the equivalent of a higher minor league. By then, owners of that league's teams had to take some radical action to counteract the talent drain. According to one newspaper story of the time, the Giants "delivered the first big counterattack to organized baseball's raiding structure." Clarizio and Chirban were the first white players signed in the Negro American League's 17 years of operation. Spearheading the signings was Dr. J.B. Martin, owner of the American Giants and president of the league.

Clarizio was color-blind when it came to the better level of competition. Quitting Armour's pipe shop, he took a pay cut to \$200 a month. He was managed by a Negro League legend -- Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe.

"The first day I came into the clubhouse at Comiskey Park, there were this group of players sitting there," Clarizio recalled. "They said, 'Can this 'grey cat' play baseball?' Thus Clarizio had his nickname, a staple for most Negro League players.

"They didn't like being called black," he said. "They were called 'colored.' They called me 'grey.' Now they call everyone 'dude' or 'big dog.'"

Clarizio ended up with extra duty for the American Giants. At one of the many restaurants that denied service to persons of color, he could go in and take out the orders for his teammates. But that didn't make him immune to racism.

### **A white player who took abuse from whites**

"The restaurant owners insulted me," he said. "When I played the outfield, them red-necks would sit behind me drinking beer out of their bottles. They'd throw their beer at me."

But Clarizio went wherever his teammates went. He didn't necessarily stay at black hotels. "We mostly lived on the bus," he said. "We usually slept on the bus."

Clarizio played for the American Giants the rest of the 1950 season and part of 1951. He then was drafted into the U.S. Army, but avoided combat service in the Korean War. After his discharge, he worked mainly as an electrician.



**NegroLeagueLegends.org founder Gary Crawford tells of the need for more recognition of the Negro American League survivors, numbering more than 175.**

He'll always have his American Giants identity, and is one of the Negro League players Montreal native Gary Crawford, founder of [NegroLeagueLegends.org](http://NegroLeagueLegends.org). would like to see major-league teams, museums and schools recognize more as their numbers dwindle. More than 175 are still living, yet the ranks thin regularly. Crawford said three more ex-players passed away recently.

With the Negro League Museum in Kansas City operating to acclaim, why haven't the veterans been recognized more?

"Out of sight, out of mind," said Crawford, who has long worked in network

TV production at Chicago sports events. "We felt this is going to be a better time (with the release of '42') for Negro League baseball to be in the mind of the American public... most teams don't do anything."

Crawford said the last time the Cubs honored Negro League players at Wrigley Field was in 2004.

Less than a dozen Negro League veterans still live in the Chicago area. Clarizio was joined at the press conference by ex-shortstop Hank "Baby" Presswood, 91; Nathan "Sonny" Weston and Ray "Boo Boy" Knox, both 81, and Heron "CubaLee" O'Neal, 70.

Weston, now living in Sauk Village, Ill., had his own close encounter with Robinson in spring training 1951, when he tried out for the Dodgers before signing with the American Giants.

"He just told me to follow (coaches') instructions and you might meet up with guys who seem like they might be prejudiced," Weston said. "Don't let that worry you, because you're out there for one thing – that's to play the game."

Almost every Negro League alum has stories like Clarizio's and Weston's to tell. They should be nurtured and encouraged. Visit [NegroLeagueLegends.org](http://NegroLeagueLegends.org) for more information on their public appearances.