



## ***Spearman upheld the real deal in Negro Leagues***

*By Dr. David J. Fletcher, CBM President  
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“He didn’t play...”

This may well be the epitaph for native Chicagoan Alvin “Al” Spearman, the cagey Negro League right-hander, who pitched for the 1950 and 1951 Negro League Chicago American Giants and set a minor league baseball record with 33 consecutive complete-game starts snapped in 1958.

The 89-year-old Spearman died in Chicago on Jan. 14 of complications following a fractured hip. And thus one more connection to a storied part of baseball history is gone, as one by one Negro League veterans succumb to the two barriers not yet conquered – age and time.

Those who remain should be treasured for their memories of when “only the ball was white,” of an institution that preserved African Americans’ desire to play the All-American game, and one that ironically passed into history at the same time the major leagues were fully integrated by the dawn of the Sixties.

“Last week was a difficult one with the passing of Monte (Irvin) and Al,” said Bob Kendrick, president of the Negro Leagues Museum in Kansas City. “The numbers are diminishing and seemingly at an alarming rate.

“We guesstimate that there are approximately 130 players left based on our list. This is with the understanding that there are likely are some lesser-known players on our list who have passed away and their families didn’t inform us. Naturally, the majority of the players still with us are those who played in the late 1950s up to our cutoff of 1960. Those numbers are miniscule as it relates to the pre-integration guys, which is why Monte’s death is so important and leaves such a great void.



**Major League Baseball official Laurel Prieb (left) greets Al Spearman at the Civil Rights Game lunch in August 2013 in Chicago.**

“I believe James “Red” Moore, who will be 99 later this year, is the oldest we have on record. Mr. Moore played for several Negro Leagues teams including the Atlanta Black Crackers. He’s in a nursing home in Atlanta.”

Life-long Chicagoan Spearman had his own special stake in Negro League history. He zealously guarded the integrity of that timeline from older black men trying to financially gain by going around the country at baseball memorabilia shows passing themselves as former Negro League players.

In 2005, Spearman tipped off the Chicago Baseball Museum to one such imposter. In turn, we approached both the Cubs and White Sox about how they had been duped. One fake Negro Leaguer, who fooled the Cubs, had even sang in the Seventh Inning Stretch at Wrigley Field. On Sept. 16, 2005, the *Chicago Tribune*’s John Kass wrote a column “Negro Leagues ‘player’ may not be what he says” that exposed this fake player of which Spearman repeatedly said:” He didn’t play...”

Kass also quoted Kendrick: “You’d think we’d be losing players, because they’re so old now and passing away... But strangely, the numbers are increasing. And some people are looking for their opportunities...but it’s important that we’re able to substantiate guys who played in the league and those who didn’t participate.” Kendrick never forgot Spearman’s honesty, sending a tweet announcing his passing.

### **Telling the truth about a special brand of baseball**

While protecting the Negro League player legacy, Spearman felt it was important for him to educate the younger generation about his professional baseball experiences that occurred on the cusp of integration of baseball.

“When I was playing, the country was divided, everything was either Negro or white,” he said in recent interviews. “Drinking fountains, restaurants, rest rooms, you name it. In organized baseball, there was a gentleman’s agreement not to allow blacks. It wasn’t a matter of ability, it was a matter of color.”

Al was most proud of his efforts to help out the Double Duty Classic at U.S. Cellular Field to educate today’s generation about the Negro Leagues. Since 2008, the Sox have hosted the Annual Double Duty Classic - an event that celebrates the rich history and tradition of Negro Leagues baseball in Chicago and at the same time promotes the next generation of inner-city baseball players. The game is named after Chicago’s very own Negro League superstar and manager, Ted “Double Duty” Radcliffe, who until his death at the ripe old age of 103 in Aug. 2005, was visible at The Cell at either official events or just as a fan who was a guest of the Sox.

Among all teams in Major League Baseball, the Sox are the franchise which possesses the most heritage connecting any team to the past glory of the Negro Leagues, which co-existed for more than a half century with MLB because of the color line that lasted until 1947.

Across the street from The Cell is the site of the longtime center of the Negro League universe: old Comiskey Park. The Negro League East-West All-Star game was played in

Chicago from 1933 through 1960. And old Comiskey was where Spearman pitched for the Chicago American Giants.

Spearman not only played for Double Duty Racliffe when he managed the American Giants in 1950, but also married Duty's niece. Thus Al's daughter Fabienne Anderson was born into Negro League baseball royalty.

In 2013, Spearman attended MLB's Civil Rights Game at The Cell and was honored at the luncheon at the downtown Marriott. Several active Sox players made a special effort to meet Al.



Al Spearman (second from left, kneeling in first row) in a 1950 Chicago American Giants group photo.

Spearman's final appearance at The Cell was at the 7th Annual Double Duty Classic on June 24, 2014 with best friend Donald Curry, the former owner of the cutting-edge Negro League Cafe in Bronzeville. Curry now operates [Southern Pitch Food Truck](#) that also honors the Negro League past.

And, this past June, Spearman spoke at the SABR Chicago national conference along with Negro League veteran Ernie Westfield.

Until his death, Al looked like he could still take the mound and get hitters out with guile and gumption. During his playing days he filled out his 6-foot-1 frame at 185 pounds and did not deviate much from that size the rest of his life.

A product of the Chicago Industrial Leagues who also had been a Gold Gloves boxer, Spearman launched in 1949 a ten-year international professional baseball career that included stops in Japan, Mexico, and Canada.

Spearman broke in with the 1949 Kansas City Monarchs and roomed with Elston Howard, the future New York Yankee catcher who broke the color line for the Yankees in 1955. He knew all the Negro League royalty and played alongside Satchel Paige in Canada in 1951.

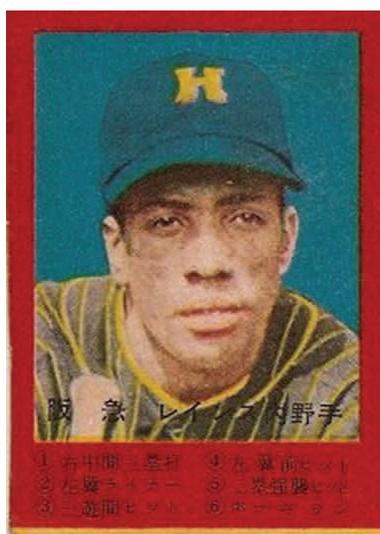
### **An ironman in the minors**

Spearman twice led a minor league in ERA. During a remarkable 18-month period in the late 1950s, he spun one of the most unheralded feats in all of Minor League Baseball—pitching an astounding 33 consecutive complete games.

In 1958, he threw 28 complete games while posting a 20-9 record for Stockton in the California League.

Spearman was a side-arming right-handed pitcher. “My best pitch was what the batter’s weakness was,” he said. “Most hard-throwing pitchers are wild and the more a batter sees a pitch, he gets his timing. I had pretty good control. So they didn’t see too many pitches that I threw.”

Spearman had professional connections with both the Sox and Cubs. He signed with the South Siders in 1951, then ended his career in the Cubs organization with then-Triple-A Houston in 1960. He interrupted his minor-league career in 1955, playing for Hankyu of the Japanese Pacific League. Throughout this period, he believed African-American players advanced too slowly through the minors as a result of quotas on players of color on big-league rosters.



**Al Spearman's card with Hankyu of the Japanese Pacific League in 1955.**

Disgust with Jim Crow laws in the South led Spearman to finally call it quits. He went home to Chicago to work as a salesman for the 7-Up Bottling Co.

For decades afterward, the Negro Leagues still had a special hold on Spearman. A chapter in Joe Posnanski’s *The Soul of Baseball: A Road Trip Through Buck O’Neil’s America* (Harper Collins 2008) details the funeral of Double Duty in Aug. 2005. Posanaski talks about Spearman trying to protect the legacy of the Negro Leagues and all the exploiters in attendance at Duty’s funeral.

Negro League Museum Founder Buck O’Neil was quoted before his 2006 death: “The story of the Negro Leagues is one of sheer determination and devotion. Strong-willed, dedicated athletes, who simply refused to accept the notion that they were unfit to share in the joys of our national pastime. We were baseball players, first and foremost; who forged a glorious history in an inglorious era of American segregation.”

In the end it was Spearman, who in his final years, wanted to keep the Negro League legacy untainted by profiteers. He was asked several times what was wrong with a few old men putting some money in their pockets, whether they played or not?”

He would not compromise his principles: “There was a real John Washington (referring to the deceased Negro League ballplayer who died in 1999, but had his imposter out called out by Kass in 2005). The real John Washington was a good ballplayer. He had a history. His history shouldn’t be changed. The history of the Negro Leagues shouldn’t be changed.”

“He didn’t play...” Al Spearman played. And he played well.

A memorial service was scheduled later in January.