

BASEBALL UNDER GLASS

Remembering a Cubs pioneer in integration

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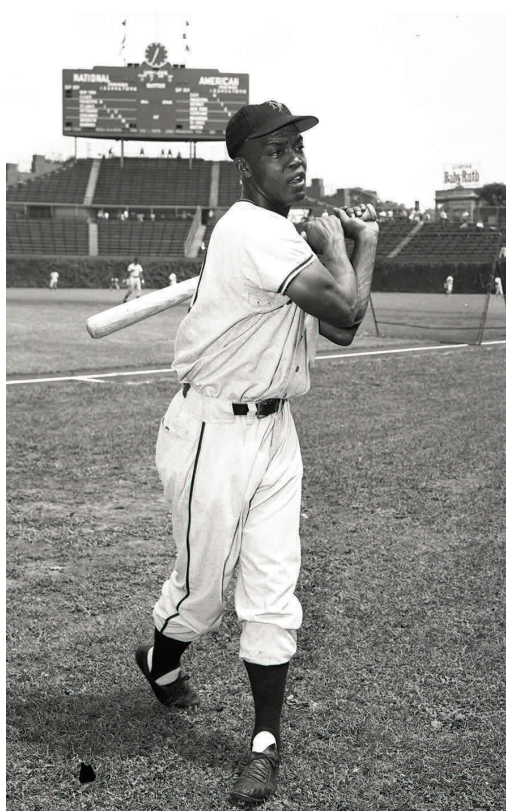
You can say with certainty Monte Irvin led a life well-lived, a life that took him to Wrigley Field at a key point in history even though the Cubs were downtrodden.

The baseball legend, one of the most respected old-timers in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, died at 96 on Jan. 11. The former outfielder was a Negro League star, top run producer for the 1951 miracle New York Giants, a world champion with the Giants in 1954, one of MLB’s first African –American officials in the commissioner’s office and an advocate for Negro League inductees into the Hall of Fame.

But amid Irvin’s eventful existence was an important footnote in MLB, and Chicago, baseball history. His arrival in 1956 for a one-year stay at 37 in his final big-league season as the Cubs’ more-or-less regular left fielder represented an important step in integration of the game.

Along with center fielder Solly Drake, pitcher Sam “Toothpick” Jones and the established, star double-play combo of shortstop Ernie Banks and second baseman Gene Baker, Irvin enabled the Cubs to become the second big-league franchise fielding a majority African-American lineup.

Teams that had integrated by 1955 did so somewhat cautiously and did not start a majority of five African Americans until Opening Day, April 17, 1956 at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. With second baseman Charlie Neal’s big-league debut that afternoon, the Dodgers also started pitcher Don Newcombe, catcher Roy Campanella, third baseman Jackie Robinson (beginning his final season) and left fielder Jim Gilliam, shifted to the outfield to make room for Neal and Robinson in the infield.



Monte Irvin visiting Wrigley Field early in his New York Giants career. Photo credit National Baseball Hall of Fame Library.



(From left) Ernie Banks, Gene Baker, Sam Jones and Solly Drake helped Monte Irvin fill out the Cubs' first majority-black lineup on April 20, 1956 at Wrigley Field.

Three days later, on April 20, the Cubs quintet of players of color took the field and whomped the Reds 12-1 in the home opener before 13,973. Jones pitched a four hitter with nine strikeouts, Banks slugged a two-run homer, and Drake, Irvin and Baker combined for seven hits and six runs scored.

The sheer impact of the Cubs fielding a majority black lineup was dulled, though, in '56. The team slumped to a 60-94, seventh-place record, with dissension riddling the clubhouse. Irvin and the home-grown Drake were gone after the season. A housecleaning swept out GM Wid Matthews in favor of organization loyalist John Holland in Oct. 1956. Oklahoma native Holland rolled back the pace of integration for a half decade, until Billy Williams, Lou Brock, George Altman and Bahamas native Andre Rodgers joined Banks in the lineup for 1962. Within two years, Holland again thinned that grouping.

For all his faults, former Branch Rickey assistant Matthews had quickly integrated the roster after Banks finally broke the North Side color line in the waning days of the 1953 season. Irvin was his final pickup for that 1956 lineup, coming over from the Giants in the Rule 5 draft late in 1955.

Irvin might have had a longer big-league career, bypassing the Cubs, had he not had to wait for Robinson to break the game-wide barrier. He was 30 by the time he made his debut with the Giants in mid-season 1949. The Giants were the fourth team after the Dodgers, Indians and Browns to integrate. He had the fate of a number of racial pioneers who lost some prime seasons simply because of the discrimination of the time and the relatively leisurely pace of integration after Robinson – and even after Banks's debut.

Cubs fans certainly did not see Irvin at his best. He had 15 homers and 50 RBIs with a .271 average in 111 games, five years after a dream '51 season that included an NL-leading 121 RBIs on 24 homers, 19 doubles and 11 triples. He had a .415 on-base percentage.

Irvin's greatest feats, on and off the field, sandwiched his cameo Cubs career.

He was a Negro League star with the Newark Eagles. At one point, Irvin was considered a prime candidate for the Robinson role. But the Dodger had all the personality prerequisites the stealthful Rickey had desired to handle the stressful task of breaking the color line.

After his career, Irvin was a scout with the Mets before serving nearly 20 years under Bowie Kuhn and successors as a commissioner's office public relations specialist. He became the fourth Negro Leaguer after Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard to gain entrée to the Hall of Fame.

"Monte Irvin's affable demeanor, strong constitution and coolness under pressure helped guide baseball through desegregation and set a standard for American culture," said Hall of Fame president Jeff Idelson.

"His abilities on the field as the consummate teammate are undeniable, as evidenced by World Series titles he contributed to in both the Negro and Major leagues, and a richly-deserved plaque in Cooperstown. He was on the original committee that elected Negro Leagues stars to the Hall of Fame, something for which the Museum will always be grateful."

Until his death the second-oldest living Hall of Famer after Bobby Doerr, Irvin could not have been pleased African-American participation in MLB has declined to and stalled at around 8 percent for the last decade. He was part of a movement, full of hard work and harrowing experiences, that righted a 75-year wrong in baseball.

Irvin helped prove Cubs fans, watching their team in an all-white section of Chicago, would accept more than tokenism as the game underwent necessary changes.

Too bad that experience doesn't seem to translate to a game in a new millennium.