

Westfield of dreams: Pitcher recalls final East-West Game at Comiskey Park

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By most accounts, no more than 10,000 fans were on hand that Aug. 20 afternoon, but a 20-year-old kid named Ernie Westfield was too slack-jawed to notice that sort of thing.

Forty-nine years ago this month, Westfield took the mound for the start of the Negro League East-West All-Star Game at Comiskey Park. The Birmingham Black Barons pitcher had heard about the grand, old ballpark on the South Side of Chicago, but until this Saturday afternoon, it had been only a field in his dreams.

“I was in awe of the field and the landscape,” recalled Westfield, a Cleveland, Tenn., native who currently resides in Champaign. “In Birmingham, I played at Rickwood Field, where the White Barons played, and it was somewhat similar. But there was nothing like old Comiskey Park.”

The 1960 East-West All-Star Game was to be the 27th and final one played at Comiskey Park, whose name had been synonymous with the event for 25 years. From the 1933 to 1957 seasons, it was the site of at least one East-West All-Star Game. Of the 36 such games that were played, Comiskey Park hosted all except nine of them.

“I started to warm up way ahead of time,” Westfield said. “I could hear my ball hiss in bullpen. I had my good stuff, oh, yeah.”

Westfield allowed three runs (one earned) in three innings and did not figure in the decision. The East team went on to win by an 8-4 score.

The West team roster featured Kansas City Monarchs shortstop Ike Brown and Monarchs outfielder Frank Williams, who was the older brother of Billy, the future Cubs great.

Two years later, Brown signed a contract with the Detroit Tigers, and in 1969, he became the last Negro League product to play in the major leagues.

“Ike got a hit me off the first time and a hit off somebody the second time,” Westfield said. “He was a very good player.”

Westfield considered Williams to be the best Negro League hitter that he faced in his career. “He should have been in the major leagues already,” Westfield said. “He swung a mean bat.”

The East-West All-Star Game was organized by Gus Greenlee, the Negro National League president and Pittsburgh Crawfords team owner. Major League Baseball hosted its first All-Star Game one month earlier, and Greenlee believed

that the Negro League would benefit artistically and financially with one of its own.

For the brunt of its 32 years, the annual event showcased the best African-American talent in the country, a list that included James (Cool Papa) Bell, Leon Day, Bill Foster, Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, Ted (Double Duty) Radcliffe and Jackie Robinson among others. The West squad had a 20-16 advantage.

The East-West All-Star Game was responsible for two innovations that Major League Baseball would implement years later. The respective teams were chosen in a vote of the fans, the results of which were tabulated by the Chicago Defender and Pittsburgh Courier, two of the most prominent African-American newspapers in the country at the time.

A second East-West All-Star Game was played in the 1938, 1939, 1942, 1946, 1947 and 1948 seasons. Likewise, Major League Baseball staged two games in the 1959 to 1962 seasons as a way to generate additional revenue for the players' pension.

In 1959, the Boston Red Sox became the last major league team to integrate, and as the more talented black players began to migrate to the big leagues, the Negro League dwindled in talent and numbers. In the 1960 season, it consisted of four teams – the Black Barons, the Monarchs, the Detroit-New Orleans Stars and the Raleigh Tigers.

The Negro League had hoped to become a feeder system for the major leagues, but a plan never materialized. The league ceased operations one year later, and Westfield was among the players who were left to barnstorm around the country. In 1962, the final East-West All-Star Game was played at Municipal Stadium in Kansas City.

"The league was on its last legs, but we continued to play," Westfield said. "We just didn't play each other. We traveled around the country. It wasn't the Negro League, but it was for more money. We started to play against white teams, and that was a bigger attraction."

In 1977, an ankle injury forced Westfield to leave the game permanently, but not before he had earned a spot in East-West All-Star Game history.