



Dr. Black: More Heroes Needed to Stoke Interest

By Paul Ladewski

(Local civil rights historian and educator Dr. Timuel Black will be among the speakers at One Family, Two Teams: The Impact of the Veecks on Chicago Baseball, which the Chicago Baseball Museum will host on Thursday evening.)



When and where did you catch baseball fever?

It began in the African-American community in Chicago in my youth, not so much baseball but 12- and 16-inch softball. We always lived near Washington Park on the South Side, where baseball was part of the community exercise. The players on the Chicago American Giants in the Negro Leagues would come to the park and help us learn how to play the game. They were a fantastic group, and we got to know some of them.

Why was baseball so woven into the fabric of American life at the time?

You know, we didn't have television at the time. We didn't have air-conditioners. I would watch the White Sox play during the day then go down the street and see the American Giants at night. People would sit on their porches and at the playgrounds and talk about baseball. It helped children to like the game and the players who played it.

What's your favorite Jackie Robinson memory?

After Jackie had been recruited by the Brooklyn Dodgers, a group of us went to see him play at Wrigley Field. We pulled for the Dodgers. Jackie dropped the ball once, but we still cheered. A white guy said to us, "Why did you do that?" I told him, "When the Cubs get a Negro player, we'll cheer for him, too." I think he understood that. It took a while, but the Cubs eventually did get black players.

At the time, courage and conviction were in great demand for blacks and whites alike, weren't they?

My late brother was a great basketball player at Tilden High School and the co-captain of the team. They played against Lou Boudreau and Thornton Township in the regional of the state tournament. When my brother went on the floor, the crowd booed. Lou stopped the game and announced, "We won't have any of this until there's quiet." Then the game continued. He was about 18 years old at that time.

In 1947, as Cleveland Indians owner, Bill Veeck rehired Boudreau as player-manager despite some reservations. Did that have a role in the integration of the major leagues?

African-Americans had a great deal of respect for Lou, and it was our feeling that some black players went to Cleveland because of his encouragement. He also was a great basketball player at the University of Illinois. My brother went there on an academic scholarship but wasn't allowed to try out for the team. Lou went to the coach and said it should have black players because they could make it better. His history was pretty well known.

What are main reasons for the disconnect between baseball and African-Americans over the years?

It's hard for me to figure that out. I don't participate as actively as I used to in terms of being at the games, so I don't know if race is the issue.

Do economics have anything to do with it, as some have suggested?

It's not that. There are middle-class blacks who have money. They don't have the interest in baseball that they had in the past. Poor blacks never went to the games like the so-called middle class because they couldn't afford them even when they were less expensive. They went to Washington Park to see the games.

If you were Major League Baseball, what would you do to get blacks interested in the game again?

I would focus on the history of the game and try to connect the current black population with that history. And I would give a great deal of attention to the current stars in the big leagues to restore that passion. The persons who market the game try to find new groups to promote, so more and more, we see Latinos and Asians become the stars who are illuminated. Blacks need more heroes whom they believe will pave the way to the future.

Does that explain why blacks have more interest in the NBA, for instance?

You also see it in tennis and track right now. African-Americans take a certain degree of pride in their athletes, but you don't see as many Joe Louises and Ralph Metcalfes being glorified like in the past. The managers and proprietors of the various sports believe they have a captive audience already.

(Editor's note: Dr. Black lives with his wife in the Hyde Park section of Chicago.)