

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE:

**The Role of the Annual Negro Leagues' East-West Classic
Baseball Game in Connecting the Black Community in
Segregated America, 1933-1950**

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*You can take Ziegfield's Follies and Barnum's
Great shows and roll 'em all into one.
You can have the World Series or a Joe Louis fight,
With their action, drama and fun.
But for me—my dear friends—there's only one show
And it's greater than all of the rest.
It's that stupendous, gigantic, colossal attraction
When the East locks horns with the West!¹*
- Wendell Smith, Sports Writer for the *Pittsburg Courier*

The Negro Leagues² were one the most successful black-owned businesses of the Jim Crow era and yet, a frequent failure. At least six different black baseball major leagues and over fifty other minor league, semi-pro, or independent black teams formed and failed between 1920 and 1960. Despite the turmoil in black professional baseball during these years, the annual East-West Classic all-star game of black ballplayers, played at Comiskey Park in Chicago from 1933 to 1960, was one of the most popular events in black culture. This annual event created community for blacks throughout a segregated country where they could collectively express their pride in the accomplishments of their race and the pain of racial prejudice they experienced every day.

While there has been an explosion of scholarship on the Negro Leagues in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, very little has focused specifically on the East-West Classic. Nearly no scholar has examined the East-West Classic as a popular cultural event. This is surprising considering the game often hosted one of the largest crowds to watch a baseball

¹ Wendell Smith, "The Sports Beat: There's Only One," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 17, 1946.

² "Negro Leagues" is a term used to broadly identify the various professional black teams and leagues from 1920 to the full racial integration of Major League Baseball.

game in the country in the 1930s and 1940s—whether played by white or black players. Furthermore, the former chairman of the Society for American Baseball Research's Negro Leagues Committee, Larry Lester, has argued that the game “became the most visible competition in black sports in America.”³ The weekly black newspapers provided extensive coverage of the game as well as the other activities of the weekend and black celebrities who were often there. If, as American cultural historian Lawrence W. Levine has defined, “popular culture is culture that is *popular*; culture that is widely accessible and widely accessed; widely disseminated, and widely viewed or heard or read” (emphasis in original), then the East-West Classic should be considered one of the most significant popular culture events for black Americans during segregation.⁴ Using the game as a case study provides an opportunity to determine how the black community expressed itself through this popular culture event.

Nearly all scholarship written on the Negro Leagues has at least mentioned the East-West Classic. Christopher Hauser recounted that “the ability of the annual East-West game to capture the imagination of baseball fans and the black press often exceeded that of regular league play.”⁵ Lester called it “The pinnacle of any Negro League season.”⁶ Donn Rogosin described the game

³ Larry Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase: The East-West All Star Game, 1933-1953* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 15, Google Books. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Black_Baseball_s_National_Showcase/hyOlfFqihAoC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=black+baseball%27s+national+showcase&printsec=frontcover.

⁴ Lawrence W. Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society: Popular Culture and Its Audiences,” *American Historical Review* 97 (5): 1373, <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy2.apus.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip&db=aph&AN=9302160008&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁵ Christopher Hauser, *The Negro Leagues Chronology: Events in Organized Black Baseball, 1920-1948* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Incorporated Publishers, 2008), 3, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=2093294&ppg=13>.

⁶ Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase*, 1.

as “the single most important black sports event in America.”⁷ Despite these acknowledgments of its significance, the East-West Classic has received little concentrated study other than Lester's.

Historians have studied how the sport of baseball both uplifted blacks and reminded them of their place as second-class citizens. Robert Peterson, the first to write a thorough history on black baseball, wrote that the Negro leagues were “a uniquely American spectacle [that] was at once heroic and tawdry, a gladsome thing and a blot on America's conscience.”⁸ Peterson's book focused on the players and their experiences, nearly ignoring the fans who came out to watch them. In fact, black ballplayers have been the most common subject of those who have written about the Negro Leagues. Lester's book on the East-West Classic noted that the game “became the spirit and life of Negro League baseball, serving to entertain, educate, and ultimately provide a forum to integrate our national pastime many years later.”⁹ However, Lester's primary intent was to publish detailed statistics of each game to prove there was no difference in ability between black and white ballplayers.¹⁰

The business of the Negro Leagues has also been frequently studied. Bob Luke argued that illegal businesses, such as gambling, were necessary for the Baltimore Elite Giants to have enough operating capital to survive in a segregated economy.¹¹ Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nation Rosen observed that segregation created an opportunity for African-Americans “to

⁷ Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues* (New York: Atheneum, 1983), 25.

⁸ Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 3, 15, Google Books, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Only_the_Ball_was_White/BO2RtomcBOoC?hl=en&gbpv=1.

⁹ Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase*, 25.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Bob Luke, *The Baltimore Elite Giants : Sport and Society in the Age of Negro League Baseball* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=4398405>.

exploit markets typically ignored by mainstream business practices."¹² Rogosin saw this segregated economy as the accommodationist strategy of integration favored by Booker T. Washington.¹³ Law Professor Alfred Dennis Mathewson believed the Negro Leagues could have survived in some form in the segregated economy much like sports at Historic Black Colleges or Universities and the Harlem Globetrotters.¹⁴ Most, however, noted the glaring flaw in black-only businesses. The segregated economy in which the Negro Leagues operated, according to Patricia Vignola, "was a temporary salve for African American business."¹⁵ Eventually, she determined, the Negro Leagues were destined to fail as soon as they had to compete with the much larger economy of an integrated society.

Another focus of the historiography of the Negro Leagues has been on what blacks in the pre-civil rights period sought to express through their heroes of the game. American cultural historian Gerald Early argued that "black athleticism is a form of the American pioneer myth of reinvention and discovery... relying as it does on the need for human struggle to transcend race."¹⁶ Agreeing with Early, journalism historian Brian Carroll determined that blacks saw themselves in the players they followed and therefore were able to believe they too could make

¹² Roberta J. Newman and Joel Nathan Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business: Race Enterprise and the Fate of the Segregated Dollar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 5, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=1631079&ppg=18>.

¹³ Rogosin, *Invisible Men*, 33.

¹⁴ Alfred Dennis Mathewson, "Major League Baseball's Monopoly Power and the Negro Leagues," *American Business Law Journal* 35 (1998): 291-292.

¹⁵ Patricia Vignola, "The Enemies at the Gate: An Economic Debate about the Denouement of Negro League Baseball," *Nine* 13, no. 2 (Spring, 2005): 77, ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fenemies-at-gate-economic-debate-about-denouement%2Fdocview%2F210887616%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

¹⁶ Gerald Early, "American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 43, no. 37 (May 23, 1997): B5, ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Ftrade-journals%2Famerican-integration-black-heroism-meaning-jackie%2Fdocview%2F214723823%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

accomplishments in a segregated society.¹⁷ These athletes as heroes, however, often avoided conflict in order to have an opportunity in the white Major Leagues that Joseph Dorinson characterized as disappointing to younger blacks who were inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois in demanding equal rights.¹⁸

For nearly two centuries, the sport of baseball has held a unique place in American popular culture. Walt Whitman, poet and perhaps the first baseball beat writer, reminisced that “[B]ase-ball is our game: the American game: I connect it with our national character.”¹⁹ In Ken Burns's documentary on the sport, columnist Charley McDowell explained that “Baseball has nearly all the qualities and the narrative that the country has. It's competitive. It's spirited. It's got the joshing and its got the intellectual side, the great students of it.”²⁰ Early has opined that “Baseball is also tied to our mystical, sentimental idea of democracy as teamwork and fair play.”²¹ Perhaps the simplest explanation for baseball’s popularity may be its continuity; a sport largely unchanged for over 175 years. Remarkably baseball historian Benjamin G. Rader, “In a world of seething change and uncertainty, baseball continues to offer comfort and reassurance.”²²

¹⁷ Brian Carroll, "Early Twentieth-Century Heroes: Coverage of Negro League Baseball in the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender." *Journalism History* 32, no. 1 (Spring, 2006): 34, ProQuest, <http://ezproxy.apus.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fearly-twentieth-century-heroes-coverage-negro%2Fdocview%2F205359337%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D8289>.

¹⁸ Joseph Dorinson, “Black Heroes in Sport: From Jack Johnson to Muhammad Ali,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 3 (Winter 1997): 130.

¹⁹ Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, vol. 2 (July 16, 1888 - October 31, 1888) (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915), 330, HathiTrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015001684854>.

²⁰ Charley McDowell in *Baseball, Part 1: Our Game*, directed by Ken Burns (Public Broadcasting Service, 1994), 19:30-19:46, Alexander Street, a ProQuest Company, <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/watch/part-1-our-game?context=channel:ken-burns-baseball>.

²¹ Early, "American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson," B4.

²² Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game*, 4th ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 12, ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/apus/reader.action?docID=5625092&ppg=12>.

For African Americans, the love for the sport was possibly greater than that of whites during segregation. Playing the same game as whites, blacks could prove their equality “in a way that common people understood.”²³ Examining laws and practices that changed so that baseball could be enjoyed on Sundays further solidifies the significance of baseball in black communities. The *Chicago Defender*, one the most widely read black weekly newspapers, supported laws to allow Sunday baseball noting that “The thousands who attend the Sunday games of the American Giants, for instance, are conserving their health keeping out in the open; they are surrounded with the refining influence of women, they are removed from the gambling table and other forms of vice and are spending only a nominal sum for an afternoon's pleasure.”²⁴ Negro Leagues player and coach for the Kansas City Monarchs, Joe “Buck” O’Neil, commented that preachers started their Sunday services an hour earlier so their flock could go to the game.²⁵ Cultural critic Early summarized that due to the Negro leagues, “blacks developed a more elaborate and enduring institutional relationship with baseball than with any other sport.”²⁶

Blacks had played baseball as early as whites, several appearing on professional teams, until post-reconstruction racism prompted a “gentleman's agreement” among baseball’s white owners not to hire black ballplayers. After that, to play ball, black players organized their own teams and travelled the country “barnstorming.” These teams would play any other team, white or black, so long as the game attracted paying fans. Frequently, these teams would fail, though,

²³ Rogosin, *Invisible Men*, 35.

²⁴ "Sunday Baseball," *Chicago Defender*, June 21, 1919.

²⁵ Joe "Buck" O'Neil in *Baseball, Part 5: Shadow Ball*, directed by Ken Burns (Public Broadcasting Service, 1994), 14:44-15:09, Alexander Street, a ProQuest Company, <https://video-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy1.apus.edu/watch/part-5-shadow-ball/transcript?context=channel:ken-burns-baseball>.

²⁶ Early, "American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson," B4.

because of the uncertainty of scheduling enough games that paid the bills. Recognizing that organizing into a league could create a more consistent group of high quality teams to compete against to attract fans, owners of six black ball clubs met in February of 1920 at the Paseo YMCA in Kansas City, Missouri and organized the Negro National League.²⁷ Another five leagues would form and fail until the 1950s when Major League Baseball became fully integrated.²⁸ Despite the turmoil of organized black baseball, an annual all-star game at Chicago's Comiskey Park managed to consistently capture the attention of baseball fans.

Begun at the height of the depression, the East-West Classic (also known as the East-West All-Star Classic, East-West All-Star Game, or East-West Game) became among the highest attended baseball games, white or black, from 1933-1950. Sportswriters Roy Sparrow of the *Pittsburg Sun-Telegraph* and secretary of the Pittsburg Crawfords, and Bill Nunn of the *Pittsburgh Courier*—likely inspired by the first Major League All-Star Game on July 6, 1933 at Comiskey Park in Chicago—convinced Gus Greenlee, owner of the Pittsburg Crawfords, Tom Wilson, owner of the Nashville Elite Giants (later the Baltimore Elite Giants), and Robert Cole, owner of the Chicago American Giants to stage a Negro Leagues all star game, also at Comiskey Park.²⁹ Promoted as the “game of games,” the first East-West Classic on September 10, 1933 drew an estimated “howling, thundering mob of 20,000 souls” who were treated to a game in which “its promise was fulfilled.”³⁰ “Except for a radio broadcast of a Joe Louis fight,” East-

²⁷ Ira F. Lewis, “National Baseball League Formed,” *The Competitor* 1, no. 3 (March 1920): 66-67, HathiTrust, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/coo.31924093251936>.

²⁸ “Negro Leagues,” backlit display in Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, Kansas City, Missouri. See also Hauser, *The Negro Leagues Chronology*.

²⁹ “East vs. West Game to Aid League Fund,” *Kansas City Call*, July 26, 1935; Cum Posey, “Posey’s Points,” *Pittsburg Courier*, August 15, 1942.

³⁰ Al Monroe, “20,000 See West Beat East in Baseball ‘Game of Games,’” *Chicago Defender*, September 16, 1933.

West Classic chronicler Larry Lester wrote, “this game was the biggest sporting event in black America.”³¹

The game had a few critics initially. Fans voted for their favorite players for the game but most of the first game’s all-stars were from the Pittsburgh Crawfords and Chicago American Giants, two of the three teams whose owners were to profit from the game. Bill Gibson, sportswriter for the black weekly *Baltimore Afro-American*, sensed that the game was a scam. Bitterly, Gibson wrote “Why kid the fans into believing that they are the ones making the selections when at this very minute it is pretty definitely understood just what players will be cut in on the gate.”³² Others, such as Frank A. Young, sportswriter for the *Kansas City Call*, did not believe the promoters would do “something worthwhile with the net proceeds.”³³ Cumberland Willis “Cum” Posey, owner of the Homestead Grays and a cross-town rival of the Crawfords, refused to allow his players to participate in the game because he claimed that the proceeds of the game should go to a charitable cause.³⁴ However, it was more likely he was upset about being left out of the profits from the game. By 1935 most criticism faded when the promoters agreed to share the proceeds with all teams who had players in the game and, most importantly, proved, “A superior contest between the best Negro players was promised and given in '33 and '34.”³⁵

As criticism faded, attendance grew. According to estimates from the black weeklies, attendance fluctuated between 20,000 and 33,489 fans from 1933-1939. This was a solid draw

³¹ Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase*, 1.

³² "Bill Gibson Hops on East vs West Tilt," *Kansas City Call*, July 27, 1934.

³³ Frank A. Young, "All-Star Baseball Game This Year Brings Praise," *Kansas City Call*, August 2, 1935.

³⁴ "Posey Raps All Star Game," *Kansas City Call*, July 27, 1934.

³⁵ "East vs West Game to Aid League Fund," *Kansas City Call*, July 26, 1935.

considering that blacks had experienced much higher unemployment than whites during the Depression and therefore, as a group, had less disposable income. When World War II ramped up, though, so did black employment. Attendance at the East-West Classic soared.³⁶ A reported “Fifty thousand fans watched the 'dream game' at Comiskey Park, Chicago [in 1941]. It was the largest crowd to ever attend a sport event in Negro history.”³⁷ According to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, from 1942-1948, the East-West Classic had higher attendance numbers than Major League Baseball's All-Star Game.³⁸

Extraordinary baseball was not the only draw for the game. In 1935, the *Chicago Defender* narrated the scene in the stands:

From far and near came fans to root for the team of their choice and the cultured crowd enjoyed the delightful afternoon immensely. Much visiting was done as friends met friends they hadn't seen for a number of years. Comiskey Park was a joyous scene of beauty what with the blue and black shirts of some of the men against the background of their light suits and the lovely colors worn by the ladies mingling with those of the darker suits of still other men present.³⁹

Most reports of the game also included articles on who was there, what they did, and what they wore. As Sam Lacy, writer for the *Baltimore Afro-American* remembered, “It was a holiday for at least 48 hours. People would just about come from everywhere, mainly because it was such a spectacle.”⁴⁰ The *New York Age* reported, “Many parties, cabaret and house; teas and smokers

³⁶ Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Fall of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), Preface, Kindle, <https://read.amazon.com/kp/embed?linkCode=kpd&asin=0812220277>.

³⁷ Frank A. Young, August 2, 1941, *Chicago Defender* in *Black Writers/Black Baseball: An Anthology of Articles from Black Sportswriters Who Covered the Negro Leagues* rev. ed. by Jim Reiser (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2007), 64.

³⁸ It is worth noting that in some years, the Major League All-Star Game was played in smaller stadiums than Comiskey Park where the East-West Game was played. Also worth noting is that there was no Major League All-Star Game in 1945. Nevertheless, the high attendance at the East-West Classic was a significant achievement for the Negro Leagues.

³⁹ "Baseball Holds Attention of Registerites," *Chicago Defender*, September 17, 1935.

⁴⁰ Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase*, 3.

preceded the third annual East-West baseball classic on Sunday...⁴¹ The East-West Classic became much more than just a good baseball game.

As the game gained in popularity, the black press began to connect the game with the larger segregated black experience. Bill Nunn of the *Pittsburgh Courier* triumphantly reported that fans of the 1937 East-West Classic “witnessed a type of baseball that has definitely stamped the brown athletes as a worthy rival to major league luminaries,” later howling, “But there was tragedy in their ability...the tragedy of being born in a country where ability is 'ear-marked' by color!”⁴² Then, Nunn attached the black athlete to the common black man when he declared this game was “our big opportunity to show...under perfect conditions...just what we are capable of producing through the years.”⁴³ Finally, calling his race to action, Nunn implored that “These men...pioneers in their field...are deserving of the moral and financial support of the fans.”⁴⁴

When the United States entered World War II and sent white and black men and women to war, black writers began pointing out the hypocrisy of fighting for freedom abroad while simultaneously denying freedom from citizens of color at home. Using this to argue for civil rights, the black weekly newspaper *Pittsburgh Courier* began the “Double V” campaign: “victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad.”⁴⁵ Baseball provided a perfect and highly visible example from which to highlight the Double V fight. Explained Fay Young, Sports Editor of the *Chicago Defender*, “At a time when all America

⁴¹ Fred D. Downer, "Chicago Gay for East-West Game," *New York Age*, August 17, 1935.

⁴² William G. Nunn, "'Don't Kill the Goose that Lays the Golden Egg,' Nunn Warns Moguls; Lauds Game's Stars," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 14, 1937.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ "The Courier's Double 'V' for a Double Victory Campaign Gets Country-Wide Support," *Pittsburg Courier*, February 14, 1942.

is asked to present a solid front in an all-out effort to win the war against the Axis powers, it would seem logical, as well as the most sensible thing to do, to drop the ban which has kept the black player out of organized minor and major league baseball and allow him—as an American citizen—to rightfully participate in our greatest of American sports.”⁴⁶ Rather than commenting on the talent of black ballplayers as Nunn had earlier, Young noted their ability to attract fans (and money). Young argued “with the East versus West All-Star game attracting better than 48,000 in 1941 and better than 45,000 in 1942, no [Major League] owner can continue to sit idly by and twirl his thumbs, allowing that kind of money to slip away from him.”⁴⁷ Again, the East-West Classic was being used to express pride in the achievements of black athletes and, by extension, all African Americans, point out the harms of segregation not only for blacks, but whites too, and call blacks to action by attending the East-West Classic as a way to have their voices heard. “By examining the values, goals, and actions held up by the black press as those to model and mirror,” journalism historian Carroll probed, “it is perhaps possible to better understand what the black community of the period sought in its hero figures and important people and, therefore, how its members saw themselves and who they hoped to become.”⁴⁸

Fans were drawn in immediately to identify with East-West Classic because they were asked to choose the all-stars. Thousands of ballots were clipped out of the *Chicago Defender*, *Kansas City Call*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, and other black weekly newspapers and mailed in to the Negro National League office in Pittsburgh. Each week, as the

⁴⁶ Fay Young, "Challenge to the Big Leagues: Barring of Negro Players in Major Leagues Flouts Democratic Ideals of War," *Chicago Defender*, September 26, 1942.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Carroll, "Early Twentieth-Century Heroes," 34.

game got closer, the papers would publish the vote tabulations creating additional excitement for the game. “As interest in the classic grows apace,” the *New York Age* reported, “the merits of the individual players are being hashed, rehashed and discussed in barber shops, on street corners, in apartment buildings, in mills, factories and among all who consider themselves experts on the great national pastime.”⁴⁹ This level of involvement meant that “It’s the fans [who] own [the] classic,” the *Kansas City Call* declared, “and again they’ll have the complete say [in] who plays in it, even as to the two rival managers.”⁵⁰ In this way, the black press connected their readers to the players to the point where each voter felt like they were on the field. Early called this identification with black athletes as “a crucial expression of their cultural assertion.”⁵¹

Fans at the East-West Classics were dazzled by the athletic prowess of their chosen all-stars but the game travelled far beyond Comiskey Park because of the black weekly newspapers. As Lester explained, “black presses promoted the East-West classics, giving fans across the country an opportunity to discover many stars...”⁵² Since, as cultural historian Levine has taught, “people did not necessarily [have to] experience” an event personally to be a part of it, reading the accounts in the papers was nearly the same as if they were in the stadium.⁵³ The papers themselves recognized their part in using the game to build community for blacks across the country. In 1941, Frank A. Young, sports editor of the *Chicago Defender*, was unapologetic when he wrote, “the success of the game was made by Negro newspapers and the daily press. ... It was

⁴⁹ “East-West Baseball Classic in Chicago Attracts National Attention,” *New York Age*, August 26, 1933.

⁵⁰ “Chicago Prepares for All-Star Game Between East and West with Added Interest,” *Kansas City Call*, July 19, 1940.

⁵¹ Early, “American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson,” B5.

⁵² Lester, *Black Baseball's National Showcase*, 1.

⁵³ Levine, “The Folklore of Industrial Society,” 1394.

the Negro press that carried the percentages, the feats of the various stars all through the year, and it was the readers of the Negro newspapers who had the knowledge of what they were going to see.”⁵⁴ Radio and white daily newspapers virtually ignored black baseball so Young, rightfully, was touting black newspapers as the only ones bringing this popular event to blacks who could not attend and creating a sense of community through this shared experience.

Further connecting the black community was the black press’ coverage of the social scene surrounding the game. Headlines blared: “Baseball Holds Attention of Registerites: East-West Game Seen by Large Assemblage of Exclusives” (*Chicago Defender*, August 17, 1935), “Chicago Gay for East-West Game: Private Parties, Teas Feature 3rd Annual Baseball Classic” (*New York Age*, August 17, 1935), “East-West Social Crowd is Largest Ever” (*Chicago Defender*, August 14, 1937), “The Women Take to East Vs West Baseball Classic” (*Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1941), and “GrandHotel is Sports Mecca” (*Kansas City Call*, August 23, 1946). Many stories were written about who was at the game and what they wore. “In the milling sea of faces,” the *Chicago Defender* reported of the people in the stands, “the 'upper strata' was much in evidence.”⁵⁵ The article went on to name dozens of well-known middle- and upper-class blacks as well as what some of them wore. “A preview of fall styles met the eye in the striking garb of feminine fans, among whom were seen Mrs. Marva Louis Barrow, in black crepe and black accessories, beautiful chapeau trimmed with duchess blue feather plume; her sister, Portia, in white fluffy furs; Mrs. Edith McCree Thompson in...”⁵⁶ The game was a place to be seen (see

⁵⁴ Young, August 2, 1941, *Chicago Defender* in *Black Writers/Black Baseball*, 64.

⁵⁵ "Chicago's Elite Add Glamour to Sixth Annual All-Star Baseball Classic as East Vies with West for Honors," *Chicago Defender*, August 27, 1938.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

examples of the fashions worn at the 1941 East-West Classic on the next page). Three-time Negro Leagues all-star Buck O'Neil recalled that "The weekend was always a party. All the hotels on the South Side were filled. All the big nightclubs were hopping... If you were anybody, you were at the East-West Game."⁵⁷

Another way baseball offered an opportunity for Early's "cultural assertion" for blacks during segregation was expressing pride for their race. First was simply the success of the event itself which Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier* declared was "the greatest business venture ever attempted by Negroes in the sports world."⁵⁸ The game's success stretched into the local black economy. Newman and Rosen's study of America's segregated economy found that "Black hotels as well as dining establishments, saloons, and nightclubs had long been the beneficiaries of the influx of fans, players, and to a lesser extent media, flooding into Chicago for the annual East-West Classic."⁵⁹ "Most importantly," Carroll explained, "baseball represented a point of pride and an outlet for leisure for a segregated society striving to hold up its collective head."⁶⁰

Secondly, the play on the field generated immense racial pride. The third annual East-West Classic in 1935 was instantly recognized as not only a historic event but a clear indication that black ballplayers were at least as good as, if not better than, white major leaguers. The game was tied 4-4 after nine innings and then tied again 8-8 after the tenth frame. In the bottom of the eleventh inning, the West's George "Mule" Suttles smashed a three-run blast over the centerfield wall at Chicago's Comiskey Park "that fans in years to come will tell their children, their grand-

⁵⁷ Buck O'Neil with Steve Wulf and David Conrads, *I was Right on Time: My Journey from the Negro Leagues to the Majors* (New York: Simon & Shuster Paperbacks, 1996), 123.

⁵⁸ Wendell Smith, "'Smitty's' Sports Spurts: The 'Great McDuffie' Will Pitch," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 12, 1944.

⁵⁹ Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business*, 145.

⁶⁰ Carroll, "Early Twentieth-Century Heroes," 36.

THE EAST-WEST BASEBALL GAME THROUGH EYES OF CHICAGO DEFENDER CAMERA



"The East-West Baseball Game Through Eyes of Chicago Defender Camera," *Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1941.

children and their children's grand-children about," winning the game.⁶¹ As Suttles rounded the bases, the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote of the jubilant crowd, "Society had no modesty—straw hats had no value."⁶² "There were brilliant bits of fielding, terrific hitting and sensational base-running," the *Pittsburgh Courier's* sports editor conveyed about the game.⁶³ "And the fans got a show which would rival Barnum and Bailey's greatest efforts with the principals including super stars of the games which they had picked themselves by and dreamed about to represent the two sections."⁶⁴ By reminding fans that they were responsible for the players who were at the game, the *Courier* implied the fans were responsible for the thrilling display of athleticism on the field. Here again, the black press drew a parallel between the players and their readers.

While the East-West Classic provided blacks with community and a place to express pride in their race, the game also provided space with which to share their pain of segregation. Bob Luke, author of several books on the Negro Leagues, explained that "Negro league ball games offered blacks a sanctuary where they could get away from such [racist] treatment for a couple of hours."⁶⁵ Describing his experience at Newark Eagles's games, poet and social critic Amiri Baraka recalled, "It was like we all communicated with each other and possessed ourselves at a more human level than was usually possible out in cold whitey land."⁶⁶

Resentment about segregation was frequently articulated in the black press. "The majority of the

⁶¹ William G. Nunn, "Mule Suttles 'Steals' East-West Classic Again; Drives Ball 475 Feet for Eleven Inning Homer to Break Deadlock; West Cops," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 17, 1935.

⁶² Fred D. Downer, "Chicago Gay for East-West Game," *New York Age*, August 17, 1935.

⁶³ Chester L. Washington, "Ches' Sez: Fans' Dream Comes True," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 17, 1935.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Luke, *The Baltimore Elite Giants*, 12.

⁶⁶ Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997), 43, Google Books, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Autobiography_of_LeRoi_Jones/Z-C4E3zdBxkC?hl=en&gbpv=1.

stars in the big battle are big leaguers, only color has kept them out,” lamented *Pittsburgh Courier* sports editor Wendell Smith.⁶⁷ Acidly, Lucius C. Harper of the *Chicago Defender* spit, “Baseball accepts convicts, aliens, but no negroes... the only American national sport that ostracizes the black man from participation.”⁶⁸ There was no official rule preventing Major League clubs from hiring black ballplayers and white players, managers, and even some owners acknowledged they could use the talent of Negro Leagues players. Frustratingly, as was also a common refrain heard by many blacks during segregation, whites would lay the blame for not hiring black players on some farcical nonsense. One example was New York Yankees president Larry MacPhail's statement to the New York State Fair Employment Practices Commission released toward the end of the 1945 season. MacPhail claimed that the Yankees could not sign black ballplayers, and therefore did not have to comply with the recently passed non-discrimination law in New York, because the players had contracts with the Negro Leagues. Then he claimed that even if he could sign them, none would make it in the Major Leagues. Don De Leighbur of the *Kansas City Call* excoriated this circular logic. De Leighbur taunted,

All you have to do, Larry, is to look at your white semi-pro clubs, many of which have better organization than the average Negro league club, and see how these players compare with colored boys who LACK what they receive as a matter of routine. And last of all, Larry, in most of the games played by picked Negro teams and clubs made up of your sainted and hallowed major minor leaguers, the Negro clubs have prevailed.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Wendell Smith, "'Smitty's' Sports Spurts: Majority of Players in 'Dream Game' Good Enough for Big League Teams," *Pittsburg Courier*, August 15, 1942.

⁶⁸ Lucius C. Harper, "Dustin' off the News," *Chicago Defender*, August 3, 1940.

⁶⁹ Don De Leighbur, "Larry McPhail (sic) Tells Why Negro Ballplayers are not in Major League," *Kansas City Call*, October 5, 1945, Kansas City Library, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Less than a month after MacPhail's statement, the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to a minor league contract with their club in Montreal. Two years later Robinson, was Major League Baseball's Rookie of the Year.

Breaking the color barrier in Major League Baseball made Robinson an instant hero in the black community. Fans flooded every Major League park where Robinson played and the East-West Classic instantly became a showcase for Major League scouts.⁷⁰ The fate of the annual game, though, was foreshadowed by an observation from *Kansas City Call* sports columnist John L. Johnson that a large number of fans brought portable radios to the 1948 Classic. "Each of these radios was tuned to the games of the Cleveland Indians [with Larry Toby and Satchel Paige] or the Dodgers [with Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella]. Frequently the listeners would become so absorbed in the play of those far away games that for a moment, or for several moments, the East-West game did not exist for them."⁷¹

Cum Posey, owner of the Homestead Grays, spoke for most Negro Leagues owners when he wrote that "We have a definite object in view. That object is entrance of Negro Leagues into White Organized Baseball and entrance of Negro Players into the Major Leagues."⁷² However, integration turned out to be bad for Negro Leagues owners. Newman and Rosen, found that "As the mainstream business community continued to open its doors ever more widely to black dollars, businesses catering solely to black consumers could no longer bank on the use of the dated rhetoric of race pride to appeal to their celebrity clientele."⁷³ After 1948, the East-West

⁷⁰ Fay Young, "50,000 and Major League Scouts See West Beat East in Great Game," *Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1947, Chicago Public Library, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁷¹ John L. Johnson, "Sport Light," *Kansas City Call*, August 27, 1948.

⁷² Cum Posey, "Posey's Points: Release Negro National League," *Pittsburg Courier*, March 26, 1938.

⁷³ Newman and Rosen, *Black Baseball, Black Business*, 170.

Classic saw significant drops in attendance. While the game continued until 1960 at Comiskey Park, fans had largely abandoned it after 1950. The effect was felt by more than just Negro Leagues owners. There was a “great cost—financial and otherwise—to Black baseball and the African American community broadly.”⁷⁴ The sense of community blacks had attained around the East-West Classic faded. A singular place to express pride in their race and rage for the racism they continued to face also was lost. As cultural historian Gerald Early has grieved, “once the Negro leagues died... baseball ceased to have an institutional presence in black life...”⁷⁵

The East-West Classic was among the greatest unifying forces for the black community during the Jim Crow era. Fans chose the players making them feel invested in the game and its cause which they understood was to prove black ballplayers—and themselves by extension—were equal to whites. The game, which often drew more fans than every other Major League game played on the same day, brought attention to these talented ballplayers and created a community with the help of the black press. Beyond community, “for black folks, the East-West Game was a matter of racial pride,” preached O’Neil.⁷⁶ Additionally, the annual game provided a common place to express discontentment with segregation. While the East-West Classic was the springboard for the integration of baseball, it also caused its own obsolescence, crumbling the connectedness the black community had created around it. Nevertheless, during its nearly twenty years of relevance, the East-West Classic was “a ripsnorting, humdinging battle from start to

⁷⁴ Japheth Knopp, “Negro League Baseball, Black Community, and The Socio-Economic Impact of Integration,” *Baseball Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2016), Society for American Baseball Research, <https://sabr.org/journal/article/negro-league-baseball-black-community-and-the-socio-economic-impact-of-integration/>.

⁷⁵ Early, “American Integration, Black Heroism, and the Meaning of Jackie Robinson,” B5.

⁷⁶ O’Neil with Steve Wulf and David Conrads, *I was Right on Time*, 121.

finish."⁷⁷ "And we were intimate with [the players] in a way and they were extensions of all of us, there, in a way that the Yankees and Dodgers and whatnot could never be!"⁷⁸

⁷⁷ "Chicago Prepares for All-Star Game Between East and West with Added Interest," *Kansas City Call*, July 19, 1940.

⁷⁸ Baraka, *The Autobiography of Leroi Jones*, 42.

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Professor feedback:

This is a REALLY good paper. Your first sentence of paragraph two is the type of scholarship that I most like to see from students. This is an original topic and well researched. I believe you could present this at a conference or work towards publication.

- Dr. Mark Bowles