

Negro Baseball Leagues Comes to TV

Written by Robert ID739

Friday, 21 January 2005 07:58 -

Imagine throwing your 50th lifetime no hitter and then walking home still wearing your dusty game clothes because you're not allowed to shower in the stadium you just helped sell out.

Or, picture hitting the only home run ever out of Yankee Stadium and being told you can't celebrate with dinner in a restaurant down the road because of the color of your skin.

Negro Baseball League players didn't have to imagine. These were real-life inequalities they dealt with on a daily basis from 1920 to 1947.

After all, America was a segregated society in those days with "No Blacks" on the doors of most hotels, restaurants, theaters, and restrooms, etc., all across America -- with no Blacks in Major League Baseball either.

Like those players, who were always hopeful they would get a shot to play in the major leagues, Kansas State University President Jon Wefald has long hoped people would someday be able to do more than just imagine this era. For several years, Wefald has been lobbying to have a movie made on the days of Negro League Baseball. Recently, his lobbying efforts finally paid off.

Dick Robertson, president of Warner Bros. domestic television distribution, said the Hollywood motion picture company plans to honor the legacy of black baseball players from that era with a television miniseries right after the 2006 World Series that chronicles the history of the Negro Leagues. Robertson made the announcement recently at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum's fifth annual Legacy Awards at the Gem Theater in Kansas City, Mo.

Wefald's interest in the Negro Baseball Leagues began a few years ago when he visited the league's museum in Kansas City. He also has become good friends with Buck O'Neil, the 93-year-old former first baseman and manager for the Kansas City Monarchs. Wefald eventually wrote a paper on the history of some of the great Black teams and players of the league from 1920 to 1947 -- the year Jackie Robinson made history by breaking into the major leagues.

Negro Baseball Leagues Comes to TV

Written by Robert ID739

Friday, 21 January 2005 07:58 -

The film will feature two of the great surviving former Negro League Baseball stars, Buck O'Neil and Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe. The Kansas City Monarchs will be featured in the four-hour television movie and it will probably highlight as well the legendary accomplishments of one of the great pitchers in the history of baseball, Satchell Paige, and one of the greatest home run hitters ever, Josh Gibson.

"It's a story about great people achieving great things in a segregated society governed by the so-called separate but equal Jim Crow laws of the first half of the 20th century," Wefald said. "It's a great story about America at its best and at its worst. In my mind, these Negro League players were the "Players of Hope." I think the American people would be fascinated by their story."

The Negro Baseball Leagues came into existence in the 1920s, when baseball was truly America's sport. "The truth is some of the greatest baseball players in the entire history of American baseball were these same black players who played in the Negro Baseball Leagues from 1920 to 1947," Wefald said.

"They loved playing baseball," Wefald continued. "They aimed to be the best. They strove for excellence. Deep down, they still believed in America and I think they knew that someday, somehow, America would become a land of opportunity for everyone."

Despite being treated as second-class citizens, Wefald said that players like Satchell Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Oscar Charleston, Judy Johnson, and Josh Gibson were, perhaps, five of the greatest baseball players in America in any league in the 1930s during those years. The Pittsburgh Crawfords, from 1934-36, might have been the best baseball team in America. Wefald said the movie will show players of will and determination who would never, never give up while facing severe discrimination.

"They were the players of hope who believed that someday, somehow they would achieve the American dream and that America would become an even greater nation," Wefald said. "I think most Americans realize today that there were a multitude of black athletes who played in the Negro Baseball Leagues in the period from 1920 to 1940 that would have been stars in the white Major Leagues. Ironically, in many ways, sports -- especially big-time sports in America -- became a huge vehicle for the transformation and integration of American society," Wefald said.

Negro Baseball Leagues Comes to TV

Written by Robert ID739

Friday, 21 January 2005 07:58 -

Wefald said he is thrilled to be able to play a small role in the telling of this fascinating story. He admits "luck" played a big part in seeing this project to this stage.

"What are the chances of a paper being written by someone in Kansas being the impetus of a movie," Wefald said. "One in a million. Like the Negro League Baseball players, I was always hopeful. It took a lot of luck and hard work of getting this paper in the hands of someone who knew someone who could get this dream to become a reality."

Suzanne de Passe, the chairman and CEO of de Passe Entertainment, has been named executive producer of the movie. de Passe is the executive producer of popular cable television shows "Sister, Sister" and "Smart Guy," as well as highly acclaimed and award-winning mini-series such as "Lonesome Dove" and "The Jacksons: An American Dream." The recipient of an Academy Award nomination for co-writing the screenplay "Lady Sings The Blues," de Passe won two Emmy Awards and NAACP Image Awards as executive producer of "Motown 25: Yesterday, Today, Forever" and "Motown Returns to the Apollo."