



THE CATCHER'S MITT

SABR DETROIT

ISSUE 02

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Detroit Chapter Update:

At the January meeting Peter Hoyos was announced as Chapter President and Brandon Robetoy as Secretary. Founder and former President Gary Gillette will serve as Chapter Chair. Steve Weingarden remains Vice President.

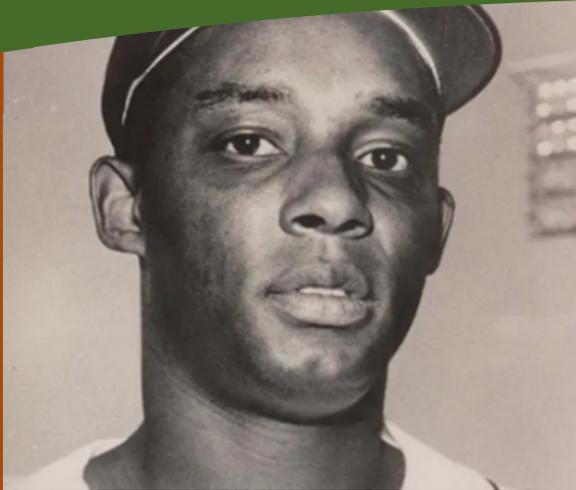
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On the Bases...

Letter From the Editor P.1

February 2nd Meeting Recap P.1

Letter From the Editor

Before he passed away on January 6th, I knew Lenny Green only as a brief member of the '68 Tigers. As so often happens after someone leaves this earth, I've since learned many interesting things about the 12-year major league veteran. I won't spoil the contents of this issues articles because we have some touching tributes from Gary Gillette, Stu Shea, Rod Nelson, and Thom Henninger. Green played in 1,136 games in the majors but as you'll find out, his legacy is far greater than any numbers can tell.

Brandon Robetoy

February 2nd Meeting Wrap Up

There was neither a groundhog nor a shadow to be observed on February 2nd as the Detroit Chapter met within the confines of the Detroit Public Library on a sunless Michigan winter day. The meeting opened with trivia centering around the subjects of at hand. After stumping many of us with his trivia questions, Peter Hoyos shared a book review of Bill Freehan's "Behind the Mask". Although you don't hear much about it today, it was released before it was common to divulge inside info about the locker room and team chemistry. Freehan's book is sometimes blamed for the Tigers' disappointing 1970 season which was discussed and the subject of much debate.

Gary Gillette took time to share his collection of Negro League baseball cards. Gillette's collection consists of a variety of special releases that have been issued over the last few decades. Sadly, contemporary cards of Negro Leaguers are non-existent or relegated to foreign issues where they played winter ball. Meeting participants passed around Gillette's cards in three-ring binders as he described some of the more notable cards which were also displayed on the projection screen. Attendees also discussed Jackie Robinson and his impact as we recently passed 100 years since his birth.

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February 2nd Meeting Wrap Up Continued

Memories of Lenny Green from several contributors were read by Gary Gillette. These provided the foundation for the articles within this issue.

Author Mike Betzold talked about his new book "Tiger Stadium: Essays and Memories of Detroit's Historic Ballpark, 1912-2009". Betzold, also co-founder of the Tiger Stadium Fan Club, provided great insight into the efforts that went into trying to keep Tiger Stadium alive.

Lenny Green, Quiet Torchbearer

Detroit native, Pershing High School star, former Orioles/Twins/Red Sox/Tigers Outfielder.

By Gary Gillette

Eleven years ago, along with other members of our new SABR Detroit Chapter, I sponsored and underwrote a symposium called "Late in the Game: The Tigers and Red Sox Long Road to Integration." Our Tigers panel featured Willie Horton and Gates Brown, but not Lenny Green.

Lenny Green would have made an ideal panelist, as he grew up in Detroit, as his career began long before Willie's and Gates', and as he played for both the Tigers and Red Sox—the last two big-league teams to integrate. Yet when I spoke to Lenny about the symposium, he told me politely that he didn't want to have anything to do with criticizing either club. I told Lenny that we weren't looking to dump on anyone; we were looking to understand what it was like for black players of the day. I pointed out that Mickey Briggs, grandson of Tigers owner Walter O. Briggs, Sr., and son of Tigers owner Walter O., Jr., had agreed to participate. Mickey knew of his family's reputation in Detroit for refusing to integrate the Tigers in the 1950s, and he was worried about how he would be treated, but I reassured him that he would be greeted warmly and treated fairly—which he was. Despite my encouragement, Lenny refused. He told me, "I had a good career in baseball and was treated well by the Red Sox and the Tigers. I have nothing bad to say about anyone." Orlin Jones, a close lifelong friend of Green's, said that Lenny refused to tell his daughter and granddaughters about his professional career, letting them find out by happenstance that he had been a major-league athlete. Both of his granddaughters are now enrolled at the University of Michigan, and both are on the Cheer team.

That's the kind of man Lenny Green was. Confident but modest. Strong but soft-spoken. Accomplished but quiet about his own achievements.

Steve Jacobson, a sportswriter from Long Island, wrote a 2007 book with a truly great title called *Carrying Jackie's Torch*. The book tells the stories of 18 players and one umpire who, as the book's subtitle said, "integrated baseball—and America." Unfortunately, Green was not one of the stories that Jacobson told, as he focused mostly on stars like Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, and Elston Howard. Lenny, while not acknowledged, was part of the cohort of African American players of the 1950s and 1960s who also carried Jackie's torch. He was a good man—and I want to emphasize that—a good man. And he deserved better than what he received in his life—and he especially deserved better than what he received after his death, with pitifully small and superficial obits in the Detroit newspapers.

It's impossible to know now, a half-century later, what role discrimination played in Lenny Green's career. There is evidence, however, that he never got a fair shot, even though he carved out a 12-year career in the majors.

For example, who knows what was in the mind of Detroit general manager Jim Campbell in 1968, when he kept Wayne Comer on the Tigers' bench for most of the season while Lenny Green languished in Toledo before being given his release on July 6?

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Lenny Green, Quiet Torchbearer Continued

Lenny was a well-regarded veteran at that point and had made a significant contribution to the Tigers' near-miss in the 1967 AL pennant race, while Comer was a rookie with only 3 MLB games experience prior to '68. Called up in late May while hitting .275 with only 1 homer in 138 at-bats with the Mud Hens, Comer spent the rest of that glorious summer with Detroit. The question is why Comer stuck with the Tigers when he hit a miserable .125 with little power, no stolen bases, and almost no walks. Comer was essentially an emergency reserve outfielder, playing behind the fearsome foursome of Willie Horton, Al Kaline, Jim Northrup, and Mickey Stanley—plus pinch-hitter extraordinaire Gates Brown.

Was it the money? Comer was certainly getting paid \$10,000 or less in '68, while Green reportedly was earning a bit more at \$12,000. We might think it silly now, but a difference of two to four thousand dollars could have been the reason, especially with Campbell, who was known to squeeze his greenbacks so tightly that the eagles screamed.

When Comer was called up, the Tigers were only leading the league by a game or two, so it certainly wasn't obvious when he got his chance that the Bengals would run away from the pack that summer. It wasn't because Comer made a good initial impression in Detroit, either: when Green was cut loose from Triple A on July 6, Comer was batting an execrable .105 (2x19). Contrast that to Green's .278 in Detroit in '67, his .329 in '67 in Toledo, and his .257 in '68 with the Mud Hens.

Why wouldn't a seasoned veteran, who offered both speed and defense as well as a better bat than Comer, have been more attractive to the Tigers? Possibly, the Tigers were concerned about balance, as when Jim Northrup was in the lineup, Detroit's bench consisted of only one right-handed hitter of consequence: either Al Kaline or Mickey Stanley, depending on who the third starting outfielder was.

The rest of the reserve corps was comprised of Dick Tracewski, Tom Matchick, and Jim Price—none of whom could hit a lick—and left-handed hitters Gates Brown and Eddie Mathews. Still, how does keeping a hitter who was so overmatched that he couldn't see the Mendoza line with binoculars make balancing the pinch-hitting corps worthwhile?

Moreover, if the Tigers were concerned about having a second righty hitter on the bench, why didn't they call up Ron Woods? Woods hit .292 with 40 extra-base hits in 137 games for in Toledo that summer, essentially replicating his stats at Double A in the Detroit farm system in 1967. He could also play center field: he started 286 games in the majors in his career, 205 in center. After Detroit traded him in midsummer 1969, Woods made his big-league debut with the Yankees. Woods was 25 in '68, a year older than Comer, but that hardly seems a big difference, as neither he nor Comer were young as prospects go, nor was either a blue-chipper. Is it a coincidence that Woods was African American?

Another possibility is that Detroit wanted to make Comer more visible so that he would be selected in the upcoming 1969 expansion draft in lieu of another player the Tigers valued more highly. While this theory makes sense, it seems that such motivation would expire if Comer was rarely playing in the majors and, when he was, was performing miserably. Sending Comer back to Triple A, where he could play every day and surely would have hit a lot better than a buck-25, would have increased his chances of being picked by the expansion Pilots or Royals. (In the December 1968 draft, Comer was indeed selected by Seattle, for whom he played regularly in '69. It was his only year as a regular in the big leagues.)

As we all know, the Tigers were the second-to-last team to integrate in Major League Baseball, shamefully waiting 11 years after Jack Robinson's debut to put a player of color on the field in 1958.

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Lenny Green, Quiet Torchbearer Continued

Moreover, in the decade of the 1960s, Detroit was the second-whitest team in the majors, partly due to a woeful paucity of Latino players. In the 1970s, Detroit continued that ignoble tradition, remaining one of the three least integrated MLB teams, in this case mostly due to a very low percentage of black players.

Why didn't Lenny Green get a chance to bask in the glow of the 1968 world champions, who were then and are now demi-gods in his hometown of Detroit and his home state of Michigan? We'll never know, unfortunately.

In his book, Jacobson memorably quotes Ed Charles, who played for the Athletics and Mets from 1962–69. "Jackie integrated the major leagues. We integrated baseball," Charles said, and he knew of what he spoke. Despite making his pro debut at age 19 by hitting .317 in a Class C league, he was forced to wait till he was 29 to get his first call to "The Show."

Lenny Green was one of those pioneers Charles alluded to. Lenny never asked for the credit he deserved for carrying Jackie's torch, and god knows he didn't get it. Those of us who are baseball fans—and, most importantly, those of us who believe in civil rights and the equality of all people—know that our society is better off because of the life that Lenny Green lived.

Godspeed, Lenny Green. We remember you. You carried Jackie's torch honorably, without complaint, even if you didn't get credit for it.

Lenny Green, Unsung On Base Ability

By Stu Shea

Lenny Green seemed to have a lot of things go wrong for him at critical times in his professional career, yet he managed to play more than 1,100 games in the majors.

Signed by baseball's worst team, the St. Louis Browns, after his graduation from Detroit's Pershing High School in 1952, Green was immediately drafted and lost his first three summers while in the US Army, even though he played a lot of ball in the service.

In his second pro season in 1956, Green led the Sally League in batting average and runs. The following year, he hit .311 at Vancouver in the PCL, earning a promotion to the big leagues in September.

By the late 1950s, the franchise was now located in Baltimore. The Orioles were not a good team, though, and they preferred to employ mediocre white veterans in the outfield. They dealt Green to the Senators early in 1959 for Albie Pearson, the 1958 AL Rookie of the Year. Pearson, however, had slumped badly in his sophomore season, and the Orioles apparently didn't see much value in him: they left him exposed in the expansion draft after another terrible season in 1960.

Going to Washington was Green's first big break, and he made the most of it. After being written into the starting lineup just once in his first seven weeks with the Senators, Green went 5-for-8 in a July 19 doubleheader and spent most of the rest of the summer in the lineup.

At age 27, in 1960, Green was platooned, sitting against most lefties. But when he saw regular playing time in the second half of the year, Green batted .329 with a .414 on-base percentage in 66 games.

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Lenny Green, Unsung On Base Ability Continued

Interestingly, he evened out his platoon splits as his career progressed and finished with a .371 lifetime OBP against southpaws.

When the Senators moved to Minnesota in 1961, Green was manager Cookie Lavagetto's choice in center field, as his speed made him a natural in the pasture between sluggers Jim Lemon and Bob Allison. He started the season hitting in the two slot but ended at leadoff. Green batted .285 with a .374 OBP, showing superb leadoff skills even though he was not a great base stealer.

After another solid year in 1962 (.271, 88 walks, 33 doubles, 14 homers—the last three career highs), he slumped in 1963 and was on the bench by mid-June. At age 30, he was suddenly a part-time player, pushed out of the picture by surprise rookie sensation Jimmie Hall.

So Green became a nomad, playing for the Angels, Orioles, Red Sox, and finally his hometown Tigers before retiring during the '68 season.

Green was unlucky in that his key skill—on-base ability—was not highly valued back then. His quiet on-field and off-field leadership and positive influence in the clubhouse were also important—and not just to African American players. Red Sox slugger George Scott, whom Green mentored, thought Green was a bit too early as a black player to get into the coaching pipeline.

Still, Green had a solid career. In his prime, he was a damn good player, and he was one of Detroit's own.

Stuart Shea is a writer and editor, still living in his native Chicago.

Lenny Green Remembered as a Twin

By Thom Heninger

A gifted athlete, Green was an excellent defensive center fielder who ran like a deer and collected many more walks than strikeouts in a 12-year career in the majors. Batting second behind Zoilo Versalles on Opening Day 1961, Green was the second batter in Minnesota Twins history, and he quickly established himself as a terrific table-setter for young stars Harmon Killebrew and Bob Allison. Green drew 81 walks and scored 92 runs that year. As Minnesota's leadoff hitter in 1962, he drew 88 walks and tallied 97 runs, career highs that ranked in the league's top 10.

The left-handed hitter's talent was apparent; however, it was more difficult for fans to get a read on Green the person. We saw only 50 Twins games on television in those days, and Green was seldom quoted by clubhouse reporters. On baseball cards, his boyish good looks often seemed to feature an apprehensive expression. But he was known to be upbeat in the clubhouse, quick to smile, and he looked even younger when he flashed his warm grin.

In the Twins' early days, African American players still faced Florida's institutionalized segregation during spring training. They couldn't stay in the same hotels as their white teammates, which was an affront to Green, Vic Power, Earl Battey, and Mudcat Grant. Orlando, where the Twins then trained, fiercely resisted change.

The Cherry Plaza Hotel, where the Twins stayed, refused to revoke its segregation policy. Owner Calvin Griffith insisted that there were only two first-class hotels in Orlando, and both were segregated.

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Lenny Green Remembered as a Twin Continued

Green and Battey were among four Twins players named to study plans for racially integrated housing arrangements in Orlando, but the Twins were the last major-league club to house black and white players together in the same Florida hotel.

On June 11, 1964, I was saddened when the Twins dealt two of my favorite players—Green and the flashy first baseman Power—in a three-team trade with Cleveland and the Angels. I wished both could have been part of the 1965 Twins' club that won the AL pennant and faced the Los Angeles Dodgers in the World Series. Green, sadly, never played October baseball, though in his final two big-league seasons, he played 58 games for the '67 Tigers and made five trips to the plate for the World Series championship club in '68.

I was seven when the Twins started play in Minnesota. At that age I did little in the summer but play two or three ballgames a day at the local playground, giving me the best tans of my life. When I would come into the house in the evening, my mother would say, "You play so much baseball, you're looking more like Lenny Green every day." Apparently, I beamed with pride at this, and my mother would occasionally repeat the compliment over the course of the summer.

Thom Henninger is a Chicago writer and editor who grew up in the Twin Cities. He is of Irish and German ancestry.

Lenny and Billy

By Rod Nelson

I'm not a native Detroiter, so I didn't grow up following the Tigers as close as most everyone in our chapter did. I first learned about Lenny Green when I was researching something else altogether. I don't really know anything about his prep career in Detroit—but I learned that Lenny was drafted into the Army right after his graduation from Pershing HS in '52 but not before signing a contract with the St. Louis Browns (Joe Kritch, from Northfield was the scout). He went into the service before ever playing his first game in military ball, he was stationed in Colorado Springs at what was then Camp Carson. That's where he would meet Billy Martin in spring of '54, who was the subject of my research. I spent a couple days in the Fort Carson library in Colorado going through the microfilm and bound volumes of the camp newspaper and later got help from the daughter of wealthy car dealer from Goodland, Kansas (180 miles east of Colorado Springs) who had long sponsored the semi-pro town team there.

There were all kinds of stories about Billy and the boys tooling around the Rockies and the Midwest in his baby blue Cadillac that he'd received as for winning the first-ever Babe Ruth Award (World Series MVP) after setting a Series record with 12 hits (in six games) in '53 vs the Dodgers. Turns out that Billy had driven his Caddie cross-country back home to the Bay Area finding out that his mother had received notification from the draft board that his request for a hardship deferment was denied and he was to report immediately to Fort Ord. When the Commanding Officer wouldn't allow Billy to try out for the camp's baseball team, he was instead forced to serve KP duty since "he was to be treated like any other dogface soldier", citing Kefauver's accusations that the Army was "coddling" athletes. Billy then wrote a letter to Washington, demanding a transfer to Fort Carson and they accommodated him.

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Lenny and Billy Continued

Billy was known to spend a lot of time honky tonkin' in Denver, where years later he would get his first shot at managing—for the '68 Denver Bears—then the AAA affiliate of the Minnesota Twins their last season in the PCL. I read that Billy scrimmaged against the Sky Sox (Class A Western League) on occasion and had once taken his Army club down to Canon City to play the inmates at the Colorado State Penitentiary in what was described as an intense, openly hostile environment. But in every game account that I read, Lenny was described as a gifted athlete—a can't-miss prospect with incredible speed—a game changer that was fearless on the bases.

Billy and Lenny also played that summer on an Army All-Star team in an all services tournament in San Antonio that summer which I believe they won. The Fort Carson club had a rival in the team from Fort Leonard Wood Missouri which was the beginning of a lifelong rivalry that Billy had with Whitey Herzog. Incidentally, Billy managed that team, played SS and pitched and hit clean-up. I don't know if there were other black players on the team and that was always something that I wanted to ask Lenny about. Gary Gillette and I met him at a touring Negro Leagues exhibit organized by the Hall of Fame with a stop at the Harper Woods Library about ten years ago. Unfortunately, Lenny was a shy guy and didn't seem too interested in reminiscing, although the subject of Fort Carson baseball did bring a big smile to his face.

For what it's worth, Lenny hit his last major league home run at Tiger Stadium, in the nightcap of a double-header on September 6, 1967, in support of Don Wilson who also homered. He had hit two others at Tiger Stadium, against Frank Lary in 1960 for the Senators and against Paul Foytak for the Twins in '62.

Check out the link to Green's program from his funeral which can be found on the SABR Detroit website:

www.sabr-detroit.org/wordpress/

Trivia Highlights from the 2/2 Meeting

1. What four baseball teams qualified for post-season play in 1969?
2. This famous outfielder hit his 600 th home run on September 22, 1969, becoming the first major leaguer to hit 600 home runs since Babe Ruth.
3. Name the team that won Super Bowl III and the MVP of that game.
4. Who was the 1969 American League Rookie of the Year? Although he was a member of two expansion teams in 1969, he is remembered primarily as a New York Yankee?
5. Who was the 1969 National League MVP? Sadly, he died in 2018?
6. Tigers' general manager Jim Campbell fired this coach in mid-season because of his unauthorized and imprudent comments to the press.

Answers below: