

2014 Jack Kavanagh Memorial Youth Baseball Research Award: High School Division

Rube Foster and the Negro Leagues

By Abraham Griesbauer

Although many will remember Jackie Robinson as the pivotal figure in black baseball history, what he did would not have been possible without the work of Rube Foster. A great black baseball hero of the previous generation, he not only founded Negro National League, for the first ten years he was the league. Before him Negro Baseball had been a community activity, a pastime, and talent had been varied and competition rare. He constructed a format for a league that was as good as or better than the two white baseball leagues at the time. His development of a framework for black baseball in 1920 was the foundation that enabled stars like Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby to break the color barrier in 1947.

The son of a Mississippi preacher, Andrew Foster, and his wife Evaline, Andrew “Rube” Foster was born in 1879. He was a strong healthy boy, although three of his siblings were victims of tuberculosis. His passion for baseball, which kept him active, most likely kept him alive. As he said in later years, “if it hadn't been for playing ball and living outdoors, I don't suppose I'd (be) here today.”¹ He grew up to be a large man, although sources disagree as to whether he was closer to six foot and 200 pounds, or six foot four and 230.² His talent must have shown early, for in eighth grade he dropped out of school to play for the Waco Yellow Jackets. He had an uncertain start, and then went to play for an Otsego, Michigan biracial semi-pro team for a year or two. His performance was good enough to enable him to join the Cuban X Giants, one of the best teams in Negro Baseball. Here his incredible baseball talent was on full display. He put together a spectacular season, and led his team to the Negro League World Series. In fact, he was such an important part of their team that when he left and went to play for their rivals, the Philadelphia Giants; his new team defeated his old team to win the

next championship.³ In 1905, he was reported to have won 51 of 55 games from major league and minor league teams, and he led the Philadelphia Giants to two more championships in 1905-1906 as they became the dominant team of the era.⁴

In 1907, he relocated to Frank Leyland's Leyland Giants, where he played and managed. He led them to several 120-win seasons, in both of which he is believed to have personally won over 50 games. After the 1910 season, he took over the Leyland Giants and raided several other successful teams to assemble the Chicago American Giants, widely regarded as "the greatest baseball talent ever assembled." With the leadership of Foster and several of his old teammates, the American Giants had a 128-6 record, and won the western black championship. They continued to dominate black baseball for the next ten years. Foster taught what was called a "racehorse" style of play.⁵ His team ran, bunted, used the hit and run, and generally tried to intimidate the other team by their hustle. As previously noted, it was very successful, earning the American Giants all but one recorded championship from 1910 to 1922.⁶ His was also a very good mentor, as evidenced by the fact that many of his best players went on to manage other teams using his style of play.

However, he is best remembered for his organization of the first black baseball league, the Negro National League. Although black and white baseball players had competed together in the early years of baseball, the termination of reconstruction in 1877 ended integrated baseball. Both white leagues had been formed by 1900, but as of 1920, no black leagues had been formed. However that was about to change. Partly to schedule competition for his team, and improve the quality of black baseball as a whole, he and the owners of seven other top black teams met at a Kansas City YMCA to hammer out a contract. Eventually they agreed to a deal. Foster became League president, while remaining owner and manager of the American Giants. As president, he would collect 5% of all gate fees, and do whatever he wanted with it. There were occasional complaints about his management, that

he used his authority to help his own team, but these were rare. It is known that he made Jimmie Lyons, the Detroit Stars' best player in 1920, and his own brother Bill, in 1926 join the American Giants.⁷ However, it is also known that he did most of the work to keep the league going, and even paid the less lucrative teams' salaries if they lost money. There were a few controversies, but apparently, even the complainers knew how valuable he was to the league, because when he offered to resign, he was unanimously requested to stay by the owners.

It didn't take long for others to see what a great idea organization was. After only a few years in the Negro National league, the two eastern teams, the Bacharach Giants and the Hilldale Club broke away to form the Eastern Colored league, which was made in large part by hiring away stars of the older league. At first it led to a large amount of quarreling and predatory hiring by both leagues, but after a few years they agreed to honor each other's contracts and to play a world series.

In 1925, Foster was exposed to a gas leak in his home and nearly asphyxiated. He became mentally unbalanced, partly from the chemical exposure and partly from the effort and energy he had exerted in all his work. Eventually he was committed to an asylum, where he died in 1930. Mourners lined up for three days to see his coffin, and 3000 people attended his funeral. Without him, and also due to the Great Depression, the Negro National closed in 1931. But the work he had begun did not die with him. After a few false starts, the Negro American League was formed in 1933, and then a second Negro National League in 1937. The second generation of great black ballplayers included future major league players such as Satchel Paige, Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Larry Doby, and later Willie Mays and Henry "Hank" Aaron. They were very successful. However their success was almost counter-productive. As the talent of black ballplayers and the respect whites began to show for those who had fought beside them against tyranny in World War II started to work, baseball was integrated. All the best players went to the major leagues and the Negro Leagues became feeder teams, and finally disappeared completely.

But Rube Foster, and his many imitators, had done their work well. He set out to make a black league that was just as good as the major leagues, and the end result was that blacks were drafted into the major leagues and made them better than either white or black had been on their own. While Foster did not live to see the triumph, it was his work that made it possible. He took the crucial first step of organizing black baseball into something comparable to white baseball. As John Locke famously said, “And therefore he that incloses land, and has a greater plenty of the conveniencies of life from ten acres, than he could have from an hundred left to nature, may truly be said to give ninety acres to mankind.”⁸ Although Rube Foster might have had his own interests in mind, the tremendous work he did will benefit baseball for years to come.

Endnotes

¹ www.biography.com/people/rube-foster-9299621

² <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/fcf322f7>, <http://coe.k-state.edu/annex/nlbemuseum/history/players/fostera.html>

³ <http://coe.k-state.edu/annex/nlbemuseum/history/players/fostera.html>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rube_Foster

⁸ <http://www.constitution.org/jl/2ndtr05.htm>