Black Baseball’s National Showcase: The East-West All-Star Game, 1933-1953.

By Larry Lester with Foreword by Joe Black. Published 2001 by The University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska. (498 pp.)

Reviewed by Joel Nathan Rosen, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Savannah State University, Savannah, GA USA

In his account of a slight perpetrated on him by a classmate while he attended a boy-girl mixer during his grade school days in Massachusetts, W.E.B. Du Bois observed:

…it dawned upon me with a certain sadness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. That sky was bluest when I could beat my mates at examination-time, or beat them at a foot race, or even beat their stringy heads. Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the words I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine. But they should keep these prizes, I said; some, all, I would wrest from them. (44)

To be sure, America’s burgeoning ethnic and racial minorities would come to discover similar such ideals and would likewise be spurred on by the challenges of such obstacles in their quest to carve a place within a notably contemptuous social order. And among those institutions that would eventually seep into the fabric of American culture from along the periphery, few would be able to boast of the accomplishments and sheer vitality of Negro League baseball.

Many authors have attempted to explain the social, cultural, and economic significance of the so-deemed black game, but Larry Lester’s Black Baseball’s National Showcase: The East-West All-Star Game, 1933-1953 is something of a departure from standard interpretations of the Negro League circuits and is marked by a motivated attempt to position the institution as a whole and its crown jewel, the annual gala celebration of both rising stars and outright celebrities, as an American (as opposed to an African American) spectacle in its own right. This copiously researched volume places this alternative African American version of Major League Baseball’s mid-summer classic squarely against the backdrop of its own unique historical and cultural circumstances while demonstrating that in spite of pervasive and unwieldy impediments, it would grow to
challenge the more heralded version of the game in terms of its popularity, athletic grace, and the resulting revenue streams it would generate. By culling together a mass of previously overlooked data from official and unofficial scoring accounts, newspapers, and primarily from the black press that would become one of the circuit’s most important allies, and the reminiscences of the individuals who participated either on the field or outside the lines, Lester, co-founder and former director of research at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Missouri, offers the reader a wealth of statistical and anecdotal accounts of the twenty-one All-Star match-ups within their own historical context. As Lester confirms, these once fêted contests had the capacity to attract remarkably dynamic crowds and a resulting fanfare that often served to galvanize disparate elements of the African American community, much in the way that Joe Louis’ presence once could, while engaging the attention of Major League Baseball’s administrators, many of whom secretly lusted after black talent (and their resulting fan base) long before Brooklyn’s Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson helped paved the way toward the desegregation of Major League Baseball, a move that would ultimately sound the death knell of the Negro Leagues themselves. As Lester demonstrates, it would be through these match-ups and through the often unendorsed barnstorming contests between the competing black and white leagues that the groundwork would be in place that would ultimately expose the hackneyed Darwinian clichés regarding the black ballplayer while serving to lead American sport as a whole into the next frontier. Beyond the stated focus of game accounts and the personalities that predictably dominate this work, Lester also manages to take enough liberties with the subject to afford the reader equally as interesting ventures farther into this milieu. One particular thread of note was Lester’s more subtle accounting of the various paradoxes inherent to the institutional racism of the time. On example is Lester’s depiction of the career of Eddie Klep, whom Lester identifies as “the first openly white American to play in the Negro Leagues.” (263) Though Lester notes that a handful of other white ballplayers dating back to the 1920’s would successfully traverse the highly competitive professional sport landscape by passing as Negro ballplayers, Klep’s ascension into the sport was indeed unusual in that there was no attempt to deny his ancestry. At a time when more lighter-skinned athletes were looking for ways to pass their way into the Major Leagues, Klep, an otherwise undistinguished ballplayer, was working the system (or perhaps it was he who was being worked) in a decidedly opposite direction, becoming something of a Robinson-esque figure in his own right, though he would certainly lack the socio-cultural import. Nevertheless, as Lester observes, Klep’s signing on to play with the then Negro World Champion Cleveland Buckeyes in March of 1946 was looked upon with a measured degree of skepticism and more than a smattering of angst from both sides of the segregated baseball circles:

Unlike the historic signing of Jackie Robinson, there was no press conference to announce this barrier breaker. The news broke in the March 14 issue of the Erie [Pennsylvania] Herald-Dispatch with the headline “Eddie Klep, Erie Sandlot Hurler, Joins Negro Nine.” The article read: “Branch Rickey, who signed the first Negro player to
a contract in organized baseball, has nothing on Ernie Wright, Erie man who owns the Cleveland Buckeyes of the Negro American League. Wright is taking Eddie Klep, white boy, to the Buckeye training camp for a tryout this spring.” (262)

Laws and customs preventing racially-mixed environments, and especially in the American South, would make it difficult for Klep to fully assimilate into the Negro Leagues—a conviction for burglary and possession of stolen goods would ultimately bring his career to a premature conclusion—but his brief incursion into the Negro Leagues would, nevertheless, make him an extraordinary footnote to what would be the waning days of the African American circuits.

As a whole, the potency behind Lester’s work is apparent. He presents an impressive mélange of statistical renderings and commentary backed by an equally impressive collection of photographs (many of which could have used captions for identification), and he accomplishes this by keeping his focus on the game and the personalities without resorting to overtly political and sociological motifs, which is in and of itself a departure from most other works in this field. On the other hand, through the dizzying array of numbers and accompanying commentary, one also finds it puzzling to ascertain his, and perhaps the University of Nebraska Press’, targeted audience, which seems to be the most problematic aspect of the project. To be blunt, this effort, while exceedingly impressive on so many levels, seems to leave his efforts wedged between the academic community always in search of the elusive ready-made one-stop source for everything related to a particular subject and the more popular audience who looks upon baseball’s past with a sort of reverence and respect, true, but without a need for the miscellany of numbers proffered throughout. In other words, unlike other such ambitious projects, this would seem to have little by way of “coffee table” value, though its academic potential is apparent.

Nonetheless, and irrespective of potential audience, I find this to be an first-rate example of historical scholarship and a valuable resource that deftly and skillfully underscores the incongruity of American racism through a most substantive and perceptive examination of its subject.

References


Something new, something good, something fast, Something exciting
Looking for something
Something warm, something real, something strong, Something exciting
I want to cherish something
I want to feel something warm, something real, Something exciting.