

PIONEERS: Larry Lester



by John Thorn

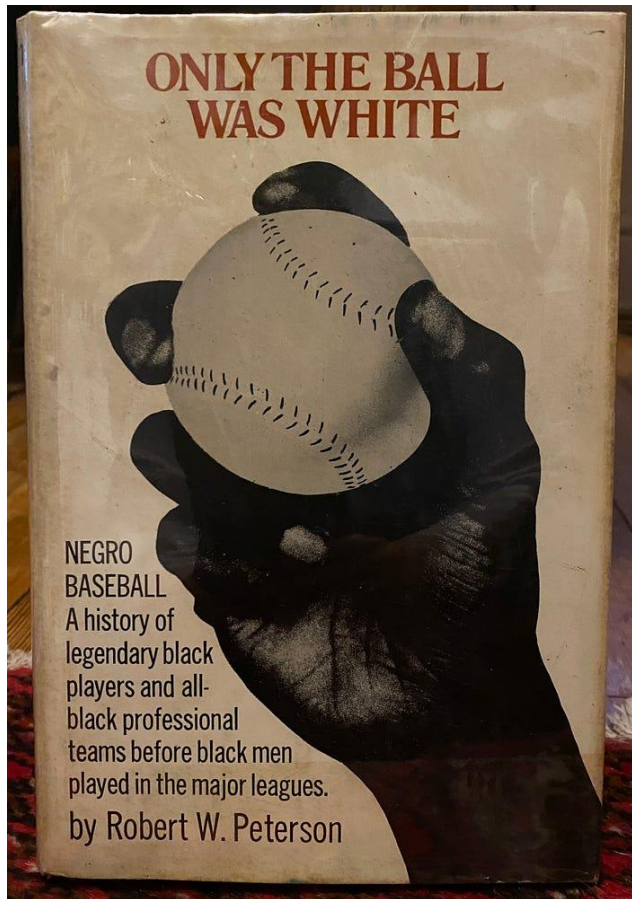
Fourth in a new series

In 1970 Robert W. Peterson

wrote a pioneering book, *Only the Ball Was White*, that brought attention to Black Baseball in the years before Jackie Robinson broke the color line in 1947. That book was followed by *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* by John Holway, whose research had preceded Peterson's.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame (HOF) welcomed the legendary heroes of Black Baseball, men who had been denied their place in MLB; their plaques were placed not in a separate wing, as had originally been proposed, but alongside their distinguished peers. "I was just as good as the white boys," said Satchel Paige, the first Cooperstown honoree. "I ain't going in the back door to the Hall of Fame."





Only the Ball Was White, 1970

In 1997 Major League Baseball instituted April 15 as Jackie Robinson Day, for which all players wear his No. 42. In 2020 MLB recognized seven Negro leagues from 1920–1948 as majors, equivalent to the National and American leagues, embracing the addition of their statistics into the historical database.

Fact had finally begun to catch up with fame, as scholars dug up the real story of Black Ball as it had existed, invisibly to the mainstream press, from the very dawn of our national if divided game. And all along, Larry Lester has been there as the guiding light of this difficult excavation.

Born in 1949 and raised in Kansas City, he had grown up too late to see the Monarchs in their heyday — but he did see an ancient Paige pitch three innings for the Athletics against the Boston Red Sox in 1965. With Satchel’s son and daughters, he went to a high school without a single white student in the graduating class. “I grew up in an American League city,” he said, “but I followed the Dodgers because it had players that looked like me.”

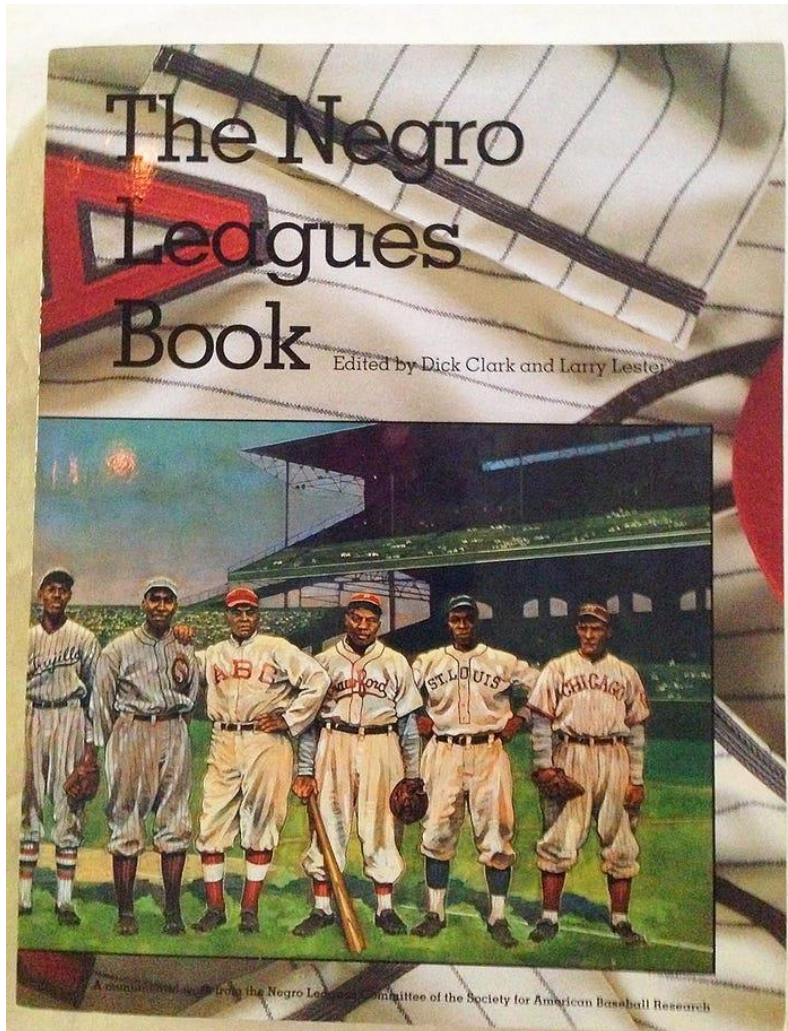


Satchel Paige in his last appearance in MLB, 1965

Peterson's book changed the college student's perspective on the stories then heard in the neighborhood. "All these stories that I thought were just lore and myth and fable are actually true," Lester says. "It jump-started my research career."

Lester personally scoured Black newspapers on microfilm, before any were

digitized. For decades he led SABR's Negro Leagues Research Committee, encouraging the members' production of dozens of articles and books. This included the 1994 *Negro League Book*, co-edited by Lester and Dick Clark.



The Negro Leagues Book, Lester & Clark, 1994

With Buck O'Neil, Slick Suratt, and Phil Dixon, among others, Lester had co-founded the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City. In 1995, before its opening to the public, he left the NLBM and founded NoirTech Research, Inc., to track the African American experience in sports and entertainment, turning an avocation into a vocation.

As editor of *Total Baseball* at that time, I was delighted to include Lester & Clark's Negro Leagues rosters, a mammoth and at that time

unparalleled effort. From 2001 through 2004, Lester co-chaired the HOF's Negro Leagues Researchers & Authors Group (NLRAG), which unearthed huge amounts of new data about Negro Leagues baseball for the "Out of the Shadows" research project. That pioneering stats project has since been augmented by the efforts of others, notably the Seamheads group, with which MLB will soon launch its first iteration of the integrated historical database, including more than 2,300 players from the Negro Leagues.

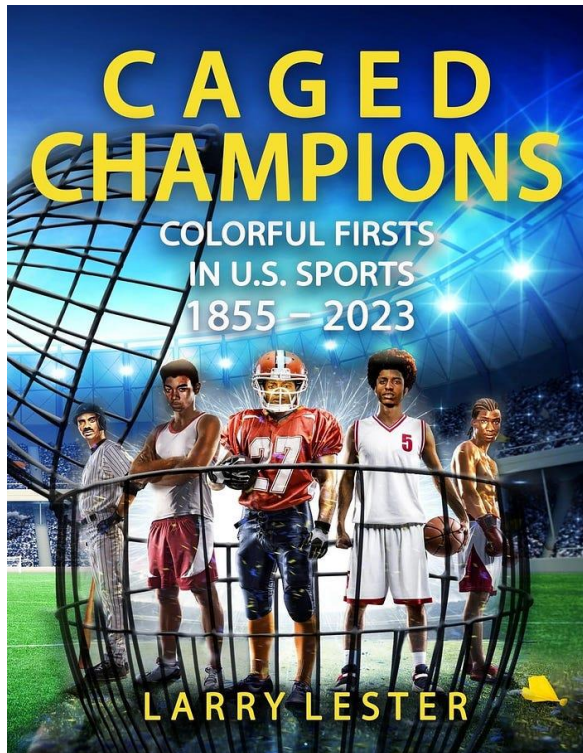


Birmingham Black Barons with 17-year-old Willie Mays winning the 1948 NAL flag

MLB can only offer data for games in which box scores exist, so as to preserve its unique double accounting of

offense and defense. So for the moment Willie Mays' home run in a game with the Birmingham Black Barons on August 11, 1948 — attested to in game accounts but as yet not in a full box score — will go unaccounted. Likewise for Josh Gibson's four home-run game on July 28, 1938, in a game between his Homestead Grays and the Memphis Red Sox. These mysteries may yet be solved, but that is not the point of

the larger endeavor, which has been to honor the experience of Negro Leagues players, their families, and their descendants.



Lester has authored several books (the latest is *Caged Champions: Colorful Firsts in U.S. Sports, 1855–2023*) and many articles ... but my purpose with this Pioneers series is not to provide a bibliography and curriculum vitae but to assess the profiled individual’s place in baseball history. And Larry is a great figure, one whose lifelong passion has transformed the game and the nation whose pastime it is.

“What were the Negro Leagues?” I asked him. He replied:

The Negro leagues were a product of segregated America, created to give opportunity where opportunity did not exist. As Bart Giamatti, former baseball commissioner once said, “We must never lose sight of our history, insofar as it is ugly, never to repeat it, and insofar as it is glorious, to cherish it.” Lester later added, “Baseball touches upon race relations, immigration and assimilation, ethnicity, language, math, statistics, labor and management, money and all these things, as well as being a social barometer of where American has been.”

For Lester, the adventure has been one of advocacy and history. To the decidedly wrong question, “Are you a Black scholar or a scholar who is Black?” he would answer: *Yes*.

John Thorn is the Official Historian for Major League Baseball. His most recent book is *Baseball in the Garden of Eden*, published by Simon & Schuster.