

STATISTICAL RENAISSANCE: Ebony and Ivory

by Larry Lester

A refrain often expressed is “They [black players] didn’t play against the best.” Whose fault is that?

Let’s join hands and sing “Take Me Out to the Ballgame.” I will buy you some peanuts and cracker jacks. Try playing this song on the stadium’s organ without hitting the black keys. Try clapping with one hand or doing the wave with one arm.

While we are in this moment, we CAN play the song “Ebony and Ivory” by Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder tapping only the black keys. Ditto for “Amazing Grace,” a song about the universal notion of redemption. In all fairness we can play “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” or “Mary Had a Little Lamb” gracefully with just the white piano keys. But I digress.

In the Negro Leagues, rosters comprised of 14 to 16 spots, unlike white major league teams that had 25-men rosters. Unlike the white majors, there were no third stringers on Black teams. In essence, the Black teams were more proficient from top to bottom than their white counterparts.

Let’s go a step further. Keep in mind that Negro League teams were comprised of the best non-White players in North America. Besides African Americans, the colorful teams employed Cubans, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Mexicans, plus a few White guys passing. Yep, the color spectrum ranged from chalk to charcoal.

Currently 28 percent of major leaguers represent 19 countries, with Black Americans comprising roughly six percent. Today’s rainbow coalition of talent is why the game is better than ever. Diversity creates competition and competition eliminates mediocrity. Marginal players fear the threat of superior talent joining the team.

You know it, and I know it.

Let’s remember the most talented and best athletes during segregation played money ball, not soccer, football or basketball. Baseball was the premier sport for prime time athletes.

“They [black players] didn’t play against the best.” Well, neither did the White guys.

The claim that IF Josh Gibson had faced Walter “Big Train” Johnson or Cy Young, his stats would be less than awesome. Well if “Ifs and Buts Were Candy and Nuts We’d All Have a Merry Christmas.” And jolly Babe Ruth would make the perfect Santa Claus.

The truth about Ruth is in 1920 the Yankee hit an unfathomable 54 home runs. With fame attached to his name, Babe embarked on a barnstorming tour under the banner of the “Babe Ruth All-Stars.”



The historical record shows that Babe faced a pitcher named Pud Flourney [pictured on the left] of the Hilldale Club, at Shibe Park, Philadelphia, on 7 October 1920, and struck out twice on six pitches. Ruth was hitless in four at bats. Two years later in the postseason Ruth struck out three times on nine pitches from Cannonball Dick Redding, hurling for the New York Bacharach Giants.

Soon after the Babe Ruth All-Stars traveled to Kansas City and lost a doubleheader to the second-place Kansas City Monarchs on October 22. Oh my, what a shame! MLB Commissioner Judge Landis suspended Yankees Ruth & Bob Meusel, et al, for the start of the season (39 days) for playing against a non-American League team. And fined each player \$3,362.26 which was equal to their 1921 World Series share.

“BUT the black teams played fewer games.” Whose fault is that?

The Babe Ruth All-Stars, the Dizzy Dean All-Stars and the Bob Feller All-Stars, just to name a few teams, lost their fair share of contests to Black teams. Eminent historian John Holway found in 158 games between Black and White teams, the Black major leaguers won 89 games or 56%.

Let's add what the Sultan of Swat declared in a *Pittsburgh Courier* interview (19 August 1933): “The colorfulness of Negroes in baseball and their sparkling brilliancy on the field would have a tendency to increase attendance at games. The game in Chicago [East-West Classic] should bring out a lot of white people who are anxious to see the kind of ball that colored performers play.” Ruth added praise for pitcher Cannonball Dick Redding (pictured) and slugger John Beckwith in the article.



As the ebony stars go from worst to first on the leader boards, we should welcome this awakening -- and the renaissance of shaded analytics with curiosity, not animosity. Don't regret the past, learn from it. Don't hate, appreciate! Appreciate the contributions to our game by all the melanin-rich brothers.

Let's use stats to start conversations. Stats can ignite discussions. Stats are the foundation for this cross-examination of greatness. Stats just scratch the surface of this dark chapter in American baseball. Black stats will raise your consciousness, stir your soul and sometimes put a tear in your eye.

Just remember “There is no crying in baseball.”