

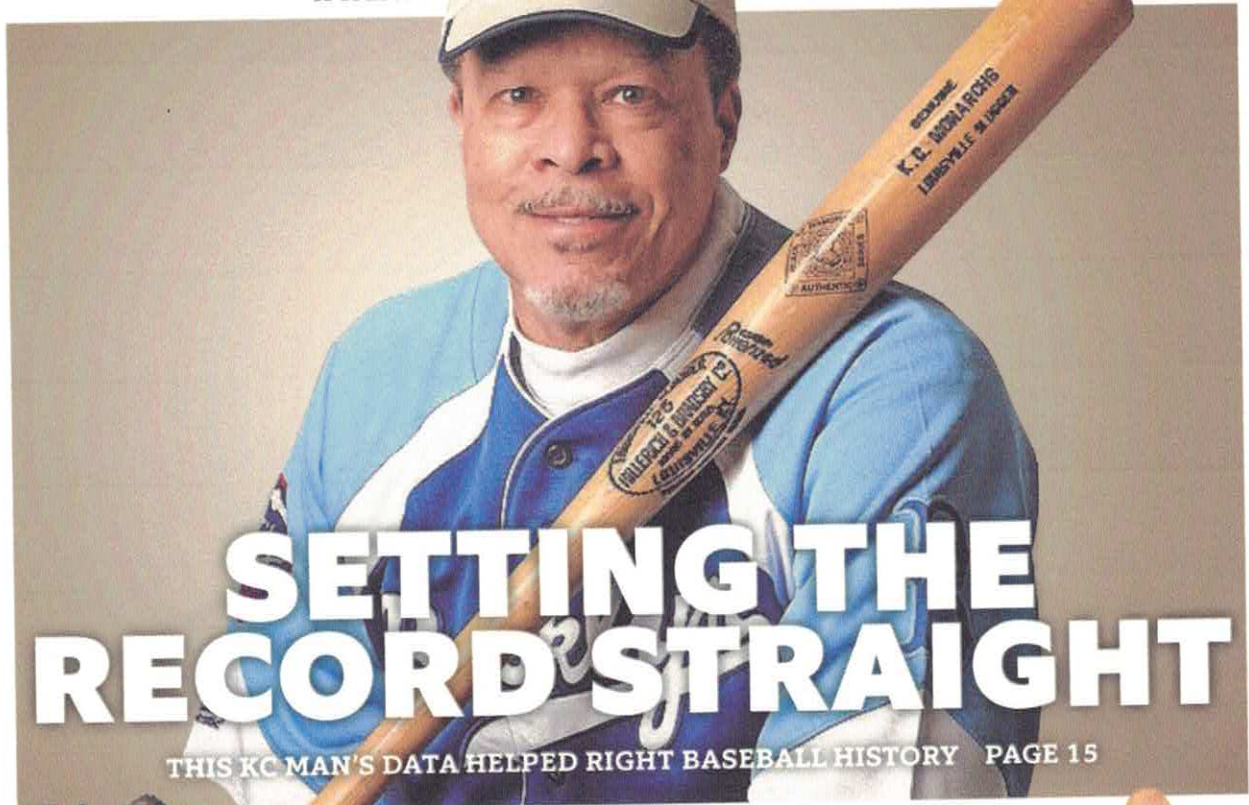
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■ **Kansas City News**

How Larry Lester Helped Bring the Negro Leagues into MLB Record Books

 by **Thomas White**
June 22, 2024



Author, historian, and co-founder of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum Larry Lester helped compile stats on Negro Leagues players that are now part of official MLB records.

Key Points:

- Negro League statistics are now included in the official MLB record books.
- Black players now make up half of the top 10 all-time leaders in batting average.
- Larry Lester's decades of research and compilation of statistics helped validate the greatness of Negro Leagues players.

For decades, the achievements of Negro Leagues baseball players like Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and Satchel Paige existed in a fuzzy realm of legend and lore, their names celebrated but their numbers uncounted in official record books.

That has **finally changed**, thanks in part to the dogged determination and work of Kansas City-based historian and researcher Larry Lester.

The big news late last month was Major League Baseball incorporated statistics from the **Negro Leagues** into the official MLB record books. The move recognized the Negro Leagues collectively as a "major league" and validated the greatness of the players.

Thanks to that recognition, half of the top 10 all-time leaders in batting average are now Black players. This includes the new all-time batting average leader, Josh Gibson, who surpassed Ty Cobb, whose record stood for almost 100 years.

"Over the past several years, a dream team of Negro Leagues researchers have gone to work pulling together this qualitative data," says Negro Leagues Baseball Museum (**NLBM**) President Bob Kendrick.

Among that dream team is **Larry Lester**, a Kansas City native and co-founder of the NLBM. Lester and his team of researchers compiled a substantial chunk of the statistics that have now been recorded in the MLB record books.

"**Larry Lester** might know more about the Negro Leagues and their players than anyone else," said author and historian John B Holway. "He's certainly among the top five scholars."

Larry Lester's Labor of Love

Larry Lester grew up loving baseball. Starting when he was 10, he sold newspapers and collected empty bottles to scrape together enough coins to go to Kansas City Athletics games held at the stadium around the corner from where he grew up.

Tickets then cost \$1.50, and for another 15 cents, he could get a scorecard and pencil to take down the box score as he watched the game. Lester went to just about every game he could and never missed the Yankees double-header.

He says keeping the box score taught him math and basic statistics.

Lester went to school with baseball legend Satchel Paige's kids and heard the tales of KC's great Black team and other great Black baseball players. The Monarchs. His interest was piqued, and he started going to the library to look at box scores of old Negro Leagues games.

"It started as a curiosity. I heard about all these great Black ball players but when I checked the baseball encyclopedia, they were missing," says Lester. "I wanted to know if all the stories were true about these legendary players, so I started compiling statistics and box scores from more than 400 Black newspapers."

Lester started taking the bus to the downtown library and making copies of box scores from microfilm archives. Soon, he had every box score from the Kansas City Call from 1900 to 1955. Then, he began ordering microfilm from Black newspapers around the country.

"This is before the internet, so I'd get a call saying the microfilm came in, and I had six days to go through it before it'd be returned," says Lester. "I'd be in the library until close every day making as many copies of boxscores as I could."

Over decades, he compiled 16,000 hard copies of box scores. His collection filled about 25 file cabinets in his house. His research led him to become a tireless advocate for recognizing the Negro Leagues' significance and helping found the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in 1990.

Then, in the early 2000s, he partnered with the National Baseball Hall of Fame, which examined Black baseball history from the Civil War through the 1950s.

"I didn't do this for recognition," says Lester. "There were no Benjamins involved. I did it because curiosity is my philosophy: I just wanted to know."

The Challenge With Stats

As part of teaming up with MLB to bring the Negro Leagues players "out of the shadows," Lester had a team of 30 researchers going through his collection of hard copy box scores. The group also went through more Black newspapers that kept player biographies, box scores, and commentary from games. All the data was reviewed by hand to make certain the statistics were right.

“Every line had to be put in manually into a database: every hit, every strikeout, every run,” says Lester. “There’s no app or software that can scan boxscores and accurately populate a spreadsheet or database.”

Box scores don’t have first names, which complicated the task of ensuring statistical accuracy. Plus, many Negro Leagues players went by nicknames — no one calls Satchel Paige “LeRoy,” for example — which further complicated the work.

Lester says that is where the anecdotal evidence, commentary, and oral history helped verify some player stats. But he says the surest way to check the accuracy of box scores was to be certain that the hitting statistics matched the pitching statistics for any given name or season.

Compiling these statistics required the painstaking review of nearly 3,400 Negro Leagues players from 1920 to 1948, the main active years of the seven Black baseball leagues recognized by MLB as being professional.

Adding His Stats to MLB

Lester says he never formally advocated for his statistics to be put in the official MLB record book, but he was happy to see it. He hopes that the inclusion of the statistics will spark the curiosity of more baseball fans to learn the stories of the Negro Leagues players.

“It brings a lot of joy in my heart,” he said. “I wanted to know the answer, and now we know that the legends were true.”
