

Rube Foster and Negro League Baseball as a Social Institution within Black Society

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It is a widely known fact that Babe Ruth, number two on baseball's prestigious home run list and one of the most celebrated sports figures in history, played in an all white era. During Ruth's time, African Americans, unlike some other minority groups, were prohibited from participating in professional baseball. Although Ruth did participate in several interracial barnstorming tours, he never went to the plate in a professional game against the great Andrew "Rube" Foster and never pitched to the "Black Babe Ruth," Josh Gibson. Twenty-five years before Babe Ruth became a household name the color line was well entrenched as evident by an 1891 *Sporting Life* article stating: "probably in no other business in America is the color line so finely drawn as in baseball."¹ Sol White, a former player, manager, and one of black baseball's first historians, said in 1907 that blacks were not just prohibited from white teams, but games between black and white teams were often cancelled because of objections raised by a white Player². The fact that blacks were excluded from white professional baseball prior to 1947 led some baseball historians, including Neil J. Sullivan, to conclude that Ruth's accomplishments are "tainted because the competition was racially rigged."³

The result of segregation in baseball was the evolution of two distinct institutions: that of Major League Baseball with well-remembered names such as Ruth and Cobb, and black baseball, with unknown stars such as Charles Grant and Richard Whitworth. Although the accomplishments of black baseball's stars are not recognized in "official" record books and only a small percentage of the men who participated are represented in

¹ "Nowhere So Sharply Drawn As In Baseball," *Sporting Life*, April 11, 1891, Reproduced in *Sol White's History of Colored Baseball, With Other Documents On The Early Black Game 1886-1936*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 139.

² *Sol White's History of Colored Baseball, With Other Documents On The Early Black Game 1886-1936*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 77.

³ Neil J. Sullivan, "Baseball and Race: The Limits of Competition," *The Journal of Negro History* 83, no. 3(1998): 170.

the Hall of Fame, black baseball proved to be a viable institution that was looked upon by numerous African American communities as a source of respect and self worth.

Baseball provided a chance for a segregated section of society to feel American, inspiring a sense of pride that many other black institutions lacked at the time. As a result of black baseball, African American communities were able to unite, discuss current events, fix social ills, and participate in the uplift of their race. Black baseball was important not only for the chance it afforded players to show off their talents or the opportunity it provided black entrepreneurs to exhibit self-determination, but more importantly it meant that fans and members of the community could look to their local teams and local players for inspiration, pride, and respect in a heavily segregated America.

Formal baseball organization began in 1858 with the creation of the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP). At the onset, the NABBP consisted of only four teams but blossomed very quickly into an organization boasting over sixty teams by the start of the Civil War. Michael E. Lomax points out that the NABBP was important because it was baseball's "first centralized organization." In the wake of an 1867 decision by the Pennsylvania Association of Amateur Base Ball Players (PAABBP) barring a mulatto man named Octavious Valentine Catto and his Philadelphia Pythians from entering the league based upon their race, the NABBP formally banned all black clubs in their association. In the midst of the social turmoil dividing the country, this was a monumental setback as it was through sport that blacks saw a chance to "elevate the

race," portray "white middle class values," and "achieve the ultimate goal of integration into mainstream America."⁴

Fleet Walker achieved the goal of integration in 1872 when he played with a white professional team from New Castle, Pennsylvania, but the team disbanded after his first season and he went on to play in college. The integration of baseball would move at a snail's pace for the next seventy-five years and Fleet Walker became the only African American to play white professional baseball prior to Jackie Robinson.⁵ These institutional setbacks established a rough outline for baseball's color line, bringing to the forefront the need for African Americans to organize separately. The first interracial games between black and white teams were played in 1869 and the following year brought the first barnstorming tours. Lomax describes these events, coupled with the development of rivalries, as concerted efforts towards raising money for the proliferation of black baseball. He points to the shift away from festive social clubs and mutual aid societies containing members who paid monthly dues, to an atmosphere where daily gate admission prices were charged and commercialization developed. Lomax goes on to state that this represented a change in black baseball from a social uplift program to a moneymaking venture and "marked the start of their separation from black community development."⁶

Although the festive atmosphere all but disappeared and black baseball became a moneymaking venture, many of these teams were still able to provide a vital niche for the communities they represented. The social uplift that baseball provided black communities

⁴ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860-1901: Operating by Any Means Possible* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 21, 14, 13, 20, xiii.

⁵ Sol White, 74, 76.

⁶ Lomax, 28, 29, 14.

during the time of mutual aid societies may have weakened with commercialization, but it did not disappear nor did it prohibit baseball from enriching these communities. Men such as Andrew Foster and his team the American Giants were able to bring pride to their race and enrich the African American community through baseball.

Despite the exclusion of blacks from white professional leagues, the American Indian and the Afro-Caribbean were allowed to participate on a limited basis. Their light skin tone afforded them a shot alongside whites prior to that of their darker counterparts. During the first half of the twentieth century, Afro-Caribbean players played on both white and black teams depending on the racial makeup of the league and the region.⁷ Many American Indian players got their start at the Carlisle Indian Industrial School which taught basic skills to attendees and groomed many Major League players and professional athletes. Although American Indians were permitted in white baseball's inner circles, it did not come without enduring a certain prejudicial stance from white players and fans. Jeffrey P. Powers-Beck points out that a majority of the American Indians who played in the white Major Leagues were given stereotypical nicknames such as "Chief," and they regularly endured taunts from the sidelines and the field. Historian John P. Rossi explains these comments as "a perfect reflection of the naiveté and racism of the age."⁸

However, despite the fact that Powers-Beck described professional baseball as "a crucible of both racial and cultural prejudices for the first generation of native players," many of these players were permitted to play with whites and over 140 native or ancestral

⁷ Adrian Burgos Jr., "Playing Ball in a Black and White 'Field of Dreams': Afro-Caribbean Ballplayers in the Negro Leagues, 1910-1950," *The Journal of Negro History* 82, no. 1 (1997): 3.

⁸ Jeffrey P. Powers-Beck, "'Chief': The American Indian Integration of Baseball, 1897-1945," *The American Indian Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (2001): 512, 510.

own teams and eventually their own leagues enabling them to cope with segregation and carve out their own distinct social and cultural niche.

Black baseball provided the African American race a sense of pride and self-respect that was perhaps lacking within the American Indian and Afro-Caribbean communities in the United States. This pride is evident by the reaction of black Chicago fans when Charles "Yokohama" Grant came to town in 1901. The fans showed up to honor Grant with just as much enthusiasm and joy in the fact he was black, as they had because he was a good ballplayer. Grant's talents transcended well-established boundaries within baseball and America and in doing so gave the African Americans of Chicago something of which to be proud. Despite the importance of this incident, it was just a foreshadowing of the pride emanating throughout the black community of Chicago by the end of the decade.

The man responsible for promoting this pride was Andrew "Rube" Foster, the most influential person in black baseball history. Much as when he was alive, Foster is still considered one of black baseball's greatest and most important figures and is often referred to as the "father of organized black baseball."¹¹ Shortly before his death in 1930, Frank A. Young, a prominent black sportswriter of Foster's time, wrote an article for *Abbott's Monthly* describing the prominence and stature Foster held within the black community. He stated "no other living human, unless perhaps it would be Babe Ruth, has been able to have devoted to him the amount of daily newspaper space that was once given Rube Foster."¹² Foster was a hero to many blacks and even one of his harshest

¹ Robert Charles Cottrell, *The Best Pitcher in Baseball: The Life of Rube Foster, Negro League Giant* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4.

² Frank A. Young, "Rube Foster - The Mastermind of Baseball," *Abbott's Monthly*, November 1930,42.

critics, Al Monroe, said Foster "was not disliked - rather he was envied."¹³ In an article written twenty-seven years after Foster died, "Doc" Young, another well-known sportswriter for the African American newspaper the *Defender*, said Foster still towered "over the field of past and present Negro baseball personalities as a giant Sequoia dwarfs a pine."¹⁴

Foster was born in Calvert, Texas on September 17, 1879 to Andrew Foster, a Methodist reverend. Rube's son Earl recalled that baseball was his father's "entire life."¹⁵ Foster made it clear very early that he wanted to make baseball his life and dropped out of school after the eighth grade "opting to play baseball instead."¹⁶ Rube got his start in baseball while pitching for the Yellowjackets of Fort Worth, Texas, but he quickly outgrew his competition and found himself in Chicago by 1901.¹⁷ By this time he gained quite a reputation as a pitcher and was sought after by some of the greatest black teams in the country.

In 1903 Foster went east and pitched for the Cuban X-Giants, helping them defeat the Philadelphia Giants with four of the five victories needed to determine the best black team around. The following season Foster pitched for Philadelphia and led his new team to victory over the X-Giants for the colored championship.¹⁸ Foster found even more success in 1905 by winning 51 of the 55 games he pitched for a team Sol White would herald as one of the best black baseball teams he ever saw.¹⁹ A 1906 box score recounting the stellar pitching performance by Foster during a game in Newark said, "his consistent

¹³ Al Monroe, "What Is the Matter With Baseball?," *Abbott's Monthly*, April 1932, 27.

¹⁴ A.S. "Doc" Young, "Rube Foster: Baseball's Negro Pioneer," *Hue*, August 1957, 56.

¹⁵ Earl Foster, Interviewer unknown, Date unknown, Rube Foster Player File, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, NY,

¹⁶ Cottrell, 9.

¹⁷ Frank A. Young, 43.

¹⁸ Sol White, 40, 44.

¹⁹ A.S. "Doc" Young, 57.

work of the past four seasons, has earned [Foster] the reputation of being one of the best colored pitchers the game has produced."²⁰ Foster's reputation was not limited to the black press and he regularly received praise from white baseball stars. When asked what he thought of Foster, Hall of Famer Honus Wagner said he believed Foster was "one of the greatest pitchers of all time" and "the smartest pitcher I have ever seen in all my years of baseball."²¹

Much like sports superstars of today, Foster's reputation translated into large attendance figures. This is evident by the record 10,000 people who came on Labor Day in 1906 to see Foster and the Philadelphia Giants play.²² After another successful season with the Philadelphia Giants in 1906, Foster began a long and heralded career in the baseball crazy city of Chicago where record crowds would become commonplace. It was a career that would see his legend extend from being a great player, to a great manager, administrator, and prominent leader in the black community. The respect that Foster garnered helped him lift baseball as an institution within the black community of Chicago and various other cities across the Midwest.

- During 1907 he played for Chicago's Leland Giants and led the team to a 110-10 record, winning the Chicago City League title. The Giants were a large draw within the City League, playing before "large excited, heavy-betting, partisan crowds" on their way to earning the title. With Foster on the mound the 1907 Giants played an interracial all-star game against the best white stars of the City League. The game took place before a sold out stadium of 6,500 fans who paid 50 cents for a box seat and 25 cents for a seat in

²⁰ Sol White, 89, 55.

² Wendell Smith, "No Need For Color Ban," *Pittsburg Courier*, September 2, 1939, Quoted in Cottrell, 181.

Sol White, 33.
Cottrell, 35.

the grandstand while numerous others crammed the outfield. Foster led the Giants to a 1 to 0 win over the all-stars, an outcome that suppressed any feelings of inferiority blacks may have felt that day.²⁴ After the game, Fredrick North Shorey, a sportswriter for the black newspaper the *Indianapolis Freeman* wrote of Foster, "if it were in the power of the colored people to honor him politically or to raise him to the station to which they believe he is entitled, Booker T. Washington would have to be content with second place."²⁵

In 1910, following three more successful seasons with the Leland Giants, Foster joined forces with a white saloon owner named John C. Schorling who was the son-in-law of Chicago White Sox owner Charles Comiskey and a well-known figure within Chicago's black baseball scene.²⁶ With Schorling's financial backing the two took over the Leland Giants, renamed them shortly thereafter the American Giants, and constructed a new park for the team to play in. The park held 9,000 people when built, but on one Sunday in 1911 the American Giants packed 11,000 in to see a game while down the street the White Sox drew 9,000 and across town the Cubs only drew 6,500.²⁹ With admission set at fifty cents and spectators treated to free ice water, the American Giants • were "unquestionably black baseball's most important squad" while Foster's own legacy grew to immeasurable levels.³⁰ In an article for *Abbott's Monthly* in 1932 that took a look back on Foster's legacy in black baseball, Al Monroe, one of Foster's most bitter enemies

²⁴ "The Story of Marvelous Rube Foster," *AFRO*, 5 September 1953, 6.

²⁵ "All Stars - Leland Giants Box Score," *Indianapolis Freeman*, September 14, 1907.

²⁶ Cottrell, 62.

²⁷ A.S. "Doc" Young, 58.

²⁸ Cottrell, 63.

²⁹ A.S. "Doc" Young, 59.

³⁰ Cottrell, 62.

and later most trusted friends, recalled Foster, "owned great teams, and with himself as a prime factor, packed parks wherever he played."

The compliments continued for Foster and his reputation grew throughout the African American community. In 1913 the *Chicago Defender* said Foster was "the greatest ball player and manager in the business and one of the greatest and headiest men in the business, white or black."³² Earlier that month at a banquet honoring Foster, the President of the Good Fellows Club compared Foster's accomplishments with that of Napoleon when he declared Foster to be "a baseball general who is outclassed by no one and who has humbled all opposing ball teams as Napoleon humbled the mighty powers of Europe."³³ It is clear from these statements that Foster more than secured his place within the black community by playing and managing the game at such an elevated level. The level of play Foster and the American Giants brought to the field is important to note when demonstrating what black baseball brought to the African American community of Chicago as well as numerous other cities across America. They were the epitome of excellence within Chicago and gave weight to black baseball as an institution.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914 many southern blacks migrated north to help in the production of war materials for Britain and France. Clayborne Carson states that blacks found employment plentiful since white factory owners "welcomed black workers who, because of their limited employment opportunities, would toil for lower wages than white people." Beginning with World War I and continuing throughout the twenties, almost one million African Americans migrated to northern cities such as

³¹ Monroe, 26, 28.

³² "Local Sports," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1913.

³³ "To the American Giants," *Indianapolis Freeman*, April 5, 1913.

Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington.³⁴ The black population in and around Chicago increased from 46,627 in 1910 to 115,238 in 1920 and near Detroit the black population increased from 6,085 to 43,720 over the same time.³⁵ Blacks did not just work in northern factories supporting the war effort but within months of American entry into the war in April of 1917, more than 400,000 black soldiers joined the army, a number representing twenty percent of America's fighting men.³⁶ The rising influx of blacks in northern cities such as Chicago coupled with black participation in the war effort cultured feelings of equality throughout black communities. Prominent African American figures such as Marcus Garvey took center stage advocating black unity and race pride. By 1919 the war was over, as were Andrew Foster's playing days, but in the years to come he would contribute immensely to the racial unity that was brought to the forefront by figures such as Garvey, Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois.

Despite the war, many baseball teams across the country continued to play; according to a Chicago sporting goods store in March of 1919 there were about 600 amateur teams playing in Chicago during the 1918 season and they expected to see at least 1,000 teams playing in 1919. One of the best amateur teams in Chicago was the Foster led American Giants. Foster went out of his way to spread his love for baseball and solidify the game as a positive social institution for blacks in Chicago and across the country. For example, in the April 5, 1919 edition of the *Chicago Defender*, Cary B. Lewis wrote, "fans wishing to journey to Detroit, Mich., to see the Detroit Stars' opening

³⁴ Clayborne Carson, Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner, and Gary B. Nash, *African American Lives: The Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2005), 353.

³⁵ Geospatial & Statistical Data Center [on-line database], "Historical Census Browser," University of Virginia, November 21, 2005, <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/collections/stats/histcensus/index.html>.

Carson, 350.

"Big Revival in Chicago Baseball," *Chicago Defender*, March 1, 1919.

game will be furnished railroad tickets by "Uncle," ... count us in on that, 'Daddy' Foster.³⁸ The following week's paper provides an example of what Foster and the American Giants meant to the black population of Chicago by declaring Foster's team the "pride of Chicago," and by pointing out that "up and down the Stroll, all one can hear is the opening game Sunday at the American Giants park."³⁹

Anticipation abounded every season Foster produced a new team because people knew he was a great leader. With a stern hand, he pushed the American Giants and black baseball towards respectability year after year and in the process earned a few powerful nicknames. In addition to "Daddy" and "Uncle," nicknames given to Foster throughout his career include: "old Roman," "Little Napoleon," "Chief," and "Mussolini," all of which represent innovation, leadership, success, and respect. Even the nickname "Rube," given to him by teammates after he defeated a white pitching star named Rube Waddell early in his career, was a mark of respect and represents the elevated stature of Andrew Foster.⁴⁰ Through the institution of black baseball Foster was able to alter common perceptions of what an African American could achieve. He gave the black community of Chicago a team they could talk about with joy and anticipation, with players they could idolize, a park where fans could associate, and most importantly, some direction for many African Americans who may have been questioning their true place alongside whites in America.

A good example of Foster and the American Giants giving back to their community and supporting their fellow race men can be found in the headlines of the

Gary B. Lewis, "Around the Diamond," *Chicago Defender*, April 5, 1919.

"American Giants Open Sunday - "Rube" Foster Will Present the Greatest Team of His Career," *Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1919.

⁴⁰ A.S. "Doc" Young, 56.

Defender on May 24, 1919. Fans were asked to contribute ten cents towards the "purchase of a worthy token of remembrance" for Capt. Jas. H. Smith who recently returned from fighting in the trenches of Europe.⁴¹ The following week the *Defender* reported "thousands of fans [were] delighted to contribute to the fund," and \$133.25 was collected by a handful of ladies at the park. In addition to simply collecting money for Smith, there was also a band that played and "enthusiasm ran high" the whole day.⁴² Capt. Smith later wrote a letter to the *Defender* thanking "Foster, the members of the American Giants for the season of 1919, the ladies who volunteered their services to collect the fund and the many fans and fannettes who contributed so enthusiastically to the fund."⁴³ The donations collected honoring Capt. Smith and his bravery overseas were only a prelude to the events of the following year.

8th Regiment Day at Schorling Park on July 25, 1920 marked a celebration by the black community that the *Defender* hyped as "the most elaborate blow-off ever given Race organizations in the history of this city." The game pitted the American Giants against the Joliet, a talented white semi-pro team from Chicago who brought a thousand fans "on the special" to cheer on their team.⁴⁴ However, these fans (presumably white) represented only a small percentage of the 18,000 who came out to participate in this momentous day.⁴⁵ Prior to the game, a "monster parade" of cars and floats, numerous business leaders and baseball fans, and various other social organizations, were led into the park by 400 of the 8th regiment's finest and their "famous band."⁴⁶ Baseball

⁴¹ "Public Urged To Contribute Sunday," *Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1919.

⁴² "Fans Contribute To Smith Fund," *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1919.

⁴³ "Capt. Smith Thanks Public," *Chicago Defender*, January 3, 1920.

⁴⁴ "8th Regiment Day at Schorling Pk. - Col. Duncan and Staff, 400 Men, Business Men's League and Joliet of the Chicago Baseball Assn. the Joint Attractions," *Chicago Defender*, July 24, 1920.

⁴⁵ Mister Fan, "American Giants Trounce Joliet, 6 to 0," *Chicago Defender*, July 31, 1920.

⁴⁶ "S* Regiment Day at Schorling Pk."

represented one of the few institutions in post WWI America where black veterans were given the grand recognition and respect they deserved. Fans packed the parade route and then Schorling Park to pay homage and witness their American Giants defeat the team from Joliet 6 to 0.⁴⁷

It was not uncommon for Foster's team to beat white teams, nor was it uncommon for Foster to schedule these interracial games on important dates such as the first game of the season or 8th Regiment Day. Prior to the opening game of the 1919 season the *Defender* predicted that weather permitting, there would be "5,000 fans to see the Giants in their first combat" against Rogers Park, another successful white team from Chicago.⁴⁸ That estimate proved low when the following day 8,000 fans showed up, and "in many quarters there were hundreds of white fans who came to boost the Rogers Park," only to see the American Giants pull out the victory 3 to 0.⁴⁹ The fact that white fans were scattered "in many quarters" throughout the park and not given prominent seats ahead of black fans is important to note because had they been watching two white teams play, such as the White Sox or the Cubs, or an interracial game at a white park, black fans would have been relegated to the bleachers and kept out of white areas.

Therefore, interracial games played at Schorling Park not only gave black players a chance to feel equal on the field, but black fans a chance to taste equality. Events like opening day or 8th Regiment Day allowed players and fans to show their fellow men and women, black and white, their race was not inferior to the white race in any matter, whether it be fighting in wars, throwing parades, or playing baseball. By playing white

⁴⁷ "American Giants Trounce Joliet."

⁴⁸ "Around the Diamond," *Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1919.

⁴⁹ "American Giants Win Opener - 8,000 Fans See Foster's Team Win

⁴⁹ "American *Git*
Defender, April 19, 1919.

teams at a competitive level, Foster and the American Giants provided first-hand evidence for white fans what blacks could accomplish. Foster, the American Giants, and Schorling Park represented strength within the black community; when whites attended they found themselves living by the rules of a black institution.

The *Defender* offers evidence of the excitement surrounding this opening game against Rogers Park with its account of the large crowd who arrived early to get a good seat. The account reads, "long before 3 o'clock the grandstand began to fill and the bleachers were crowded by 3:30," when turned away from the bleachers fans traveled elsewhere and "by the time Goekle [the umpire] called the game, 3,000 people had to occupy seats in the field."⁵⁰ With overflow crowds attending in early April, coupled with Foster and Schorling's belief that "as many as 15,000 to 20,000 fans" would attend during the summer months, it became clear something needed to be done.⁵¹ The rental of chairs not only proved to be expensive, but there was such an intense desire from the black community to witness their team that temporary seating would no longer be a viable option.⁵²

Through the pages of the *Defender*, Foster called "upon the fans of Chicago to be patient with him for awhile" before he could "have seats built in the park to accommodate 15,000 people."⁵³ Despite these calls, Foster and Schorling could only hold off for a month and a half before they were forced "to hurry carpenters to the park immediately to enlarge the seating capacity of the park." On June 7th the *Defender* reported the American Giants were adding 2,000 more benches in the field to

⁵⁰ "American Giants Win Opener."

⁵¹ "Foster asks Patience," *Chicago Defender*, April 19, 1919.

⁵² Monroe, 60.

⁵³ "Foster asks Patience."

accommodate larger crowds but were willing to add more if needed. This came in the aftermath of a Sunday game where 20,000 fans showed up, forcing Foster to place "thousands of extra chairs" on the field and still have to deny thousands the chance to watch their heroes.⁵⁴ One month after adding extra seating at Schorling Park Foster wrote a letter to W.T. Smith in Indianapolis and told him the American Giants were so popular within the black community that "even adding 2300 Boxes, cannot accommodate the people."⁵⁵ Although the *Defender* stated the situation was a "pitable sight," they also said it "proved to the world that it [Chicago] is the best baseball city in the world."⁵⁶

The American Giants' earned their second victory of the 1919 season on Easter Sunday in front of "fully 9,000 people."⁵⁷ Behind the arm of Richard Whitworth, the "idol of the American Giants fans," the American Giants defeated the Magnets (white) of the Chicago City League.⁵⁸ The fact that Whitworth was coined the "idol" of the fans is important for the black community and holds extra weight when compared with the front page of the *Defender* for the week of May 3, 1919. One of the most prominent features is a story about one of white baseball's best players, Ty Cobb, being accused of beating an African American woman while on a recent trip to Chicago. The story stated that Cobb kicked Ada Morris down the stairs after he "plunged into the woman, showering blows upon her head and body." In the aftermath of this incident, the bailiff said "it was "impossible" for Cobb to commit such an act," and according to the *Defender*, not one

⁵⁴ "Giants' Seating Capacity Enlarged," *Chicago Defender*, June 7, 1919.

⁵⁵ Andrew "Rube" Foster to W.T. Smith, July 2, 1919, Rube Foster Player File, National Baseball Hall of Fame, Cooperstown, NY.

⁵⁶ "Giants' Seating Capacity Enlarged."

⁵⁷ "Foster Wins Second Victory - American Giants Whitewash the Magnets; Whitworth's Arm Is in Great Shape," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1919.

⁵⁸ Caption under the picture of Richard Whitworth that read "The man who Rube Foster says is the greatest pitcher today in the world is the idol of American Giants fans," *Chicago Defender*, April 26, 1919.

"white daily newspaper [had] carried the story."⁵⁹ Although no one would dare say that Ty Cobb was the quintessential role model of his day, his talents and style of play on the ball field were still respected by blacks. One of black baseball's best players, Oscar Charleston, was nicknamed the "Black Ty Cobb"⁶⁰ and Dave Malarcher, a long time player for Foster who eventually followed him as the manager of the American Giants, said Cobb "was the only white ballplayer that we observed who played somewhat like we did on the American Giants."⁶¹ However, Cobb's actions off the ball field were not respected or idolized, further enhancing the need for African American baseball fans to "idolize" black players such as Richard Whitworth.

Whitworth was not the only player on the American Giants who was idolized by Chicago's African American community. The May 24, 1919 edition of the *Defender* reported that C.B. Travis "gave a smoker Friday evening, May 16, in honor of Rube Foster's baseball team," and the "whole club was out" with speeches "made by each member of the team."⁶² Events such as this smoker [a social gathering for men] were by no means isolated, nor did the small gathering adequately represent the vast fan base of the American Giants. As stated in the *Defender*, "one thing is sure - they will have thousands of fans rooting for them, as the players are idolized here."⁶³

The fans often showed that they were willing to watch their idols even in the worst of weather. In the May 10, 1919 edition of the *Defender* it was reported the American Giants won their third straight game in front of a large crowd despite the fact

⁵⁹ "Ty Cobb Brutally Assaults Woman - Ball Player Kicks Chambermaid Down Flight of Steps," *Chicago Defender*, May 3, 1919.

⁶⁰ "A.B.C.'S Win," *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1920.

⁶¹ Rob Peterson, "Rube Foster, Best of The Black Managers," *Sport Magazine*, May 1975, 40.

⁶² "Giants Given Smoker," *Chicago Defender*, May 24, 1919.

⁶³ "American Giants Book Attractions," *Chicago Defender*, May 31, 1919.

"it rained from the start," thus "proving conclusively the drawing power of the Giants."⁶⁴ This drawing power extended well beyond Chicago into cities such as Detroit where the Giants played "before one of the largest crowds of the season, estimated at 15,000" during June of 1919.⁶⁵ Despite the drawing power of Rube Foster and the American Giants or the fact that black baseball provided a viable social institution for the black community of Chicago, there were still racial tensions and blacks were still faced with life in a society where they were not wholeheartedly accepted.

The events of late July 1919 brought this reality to the forefront once again. On August 2, 1919 the headline of the *Defender* read "Riot Sweeps Chicago - Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar - 4,000 Troops in Armory Ready to Patrol City; Scores Killed."⁶⁶ Racial tensions in Chicago finally came to a head and thirteen days of intense race riots claimed the lives of fifteen whites and twenty-three blacks, injuring more than 500 people and forcing Foster to take his team east for the month of August. Although Robert A. Gibson described the scene in Chicago as "the worst of the post -War race riots," violence erupted in twenty-five other cities during 1919 as whites and blacks struggled to adapt to rising urban populations and rising demands from blacks to be treated with respect and equality.⁶⁷ These riots were large-scale reflections of the tensions encompassing all of America during this time. While blacks desired equality, many whites responded to the thought of racial equality with a different type of violence. In towns and cities all across America there were ten WWI

⁶⁴ "American Giants Win Third Straight Game," *Chicago Defender*, May 10, 1919.

⁶⁵ Gapt, James H. Smith, "American Giants Blank The Detroit Stars - Whitworth's Arm Wins First of Series," *Chicago Defender*, June 21, 1919.

⁶⁶ "Riot Sweeps Chicago - Gun Battles and Fighting in Streets Keep the City in an Uproar - 4,000 Troops in Armory Ready to Patrol City; Scores Killed," *Chicago Defender*, August 2, 1919.

⁶⁷ Robert A. Gibson, "The Negro Holocaust: Lynching and Race Riots in the United States, 1880-1950," *Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute*, <http://www.yale.edu/ynhti/curriculum/units/1979/2/79.02.04.x.html#c>.

veterans and seventy total African Americans who were lynched during 1919. Despite the turbulent social atmosphere, the baseball diamond provided the African American race with an opportunity to be equal and the Chicago race riots provided the American Giants a chance to prove the institution of baseball was rooted in African American culture across America.

While in the East the American Giants competed against "all the leading teams of that section, and, like true warriors, "brought home the bacon." ⁹ They played before large crowds in New York and Pennsylvania and some players, including Foster, found they were "so well known in the East that every other person on the street, white or black, was calling them and shaking their hands."⁷⁰ These players were idolized miles away from Chicago and the attendance figures support this. Towards the tail end of their trip east, the American Giants played a Sunday doubleheader against ex-Sergt. Guy Empey's Treat 'Em Roughts in New York. The festivities were kicked off by Harlem's jazz band and 25,000 people jammed the park to witness the American Giants come away with both games.⁷¹

* Foster's team also played against a powerful team from Darby, Pennsylvania named Hilldale. Hilldale was one of the elite black teams in America at the time and were accustomed to playing before large crowds. Over ten thousand fans came out to witness the game forcing Hilldale officials to close the gates a half an hour before the game even

⁶⁸ "The Jazz Age: The American 1920s - The Great Migration," *Digital History*, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/database/article_display.cfm?HHID=443.

⁷⁰ "All Chicago To Welcome American Giants Sunday," *Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1919.

⁷¹ Wm. White, "Eastern Sporting World," *Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1919.

⁷¹ Wm. White, "25,000 See Am. Giants Cop Double-Header - Treat 'Em Roughts Suffer Defeat in Twin bill; Sam Crawford Hero of Both Victories," *Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1919.

began. Those who arrived late sat in the bleachers or the outfield and watched the American Giants win in extra innings.

Despite their popularity in the East, as the month of August came to a close it became evident the return of the American Giants was important for the black community of Chicago. There were "telegrams and letters all day long for Rube" and the rest of the team while they were in New York,⁷³ and preparations were being made by "all Chicago" to celebrate the return of Foster's team. The day before the American Giants' first game in Chicago following the riots, the *Defender* reassured their readers "all the automobiles on the south side have been secured to carry admiring fans to the game."⁷⁴ The return of the American Giants was an important event in the African American community and 15,000 fans came out to Schorling Park to watch their team split a doubleheader against the Cubans. Fans packed every available seat in the stands and the field to give "Mr. Foster and the Giants a rousing welcome" home. Foster returned the favor by shaking the hands of so many people that his "hands were sore" by the end of the day.⁷⁵ After having left for a month, the American Giants' return provided a vital boost for the African American community of Chicago by exemplifying black pride, respect, admiration and self-determination only a month removed from deadly race riots.

The American Giants and Foster represented the best the African American community had to offer in Chicago, a city where baseball was "the forth meal of the day"

⁷² "American Giants, in 10th Drop Hilldale - Chicago Club Evens Up Series by Scoring Four Runs in First Extra Inning," *Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1919.

⁷³ White, "Eastern Sporting World."

⁷⁴ "All Chicago To Welcome American Giants Sunday," *Chicago Defender*, August 30, 1919.

⁷⁵ Cary B. Lewis, "American Giants Drop One Game; Win One - 15,000 Fans Greet Return of Chicago's Diamond Favorites," *Chicago Defender*, September 6, 1919.

and was well entrenched as a social institution for blacks and whites.⁷⁶ The success of the American Giants inspired the black community and Foster did everything he could to continue this tradition. Prior to the season of 1919, Foster welcomed "over 500 fans" to Schorling Park to watch tryouts and then reassured everyone his men were looking good and would make "all Chicago proud" of them.⁷⁷ Foster believed that it was important for the city's black population to be proud of the American Giants and look at baseball as a positive institution. However, in a series of letters during the winter of 1919, Foster stated that he believed it was becoming clear that more organization was needed to "merit the wonderful attendance and pride our followers have in us."⁷⁸

The end of the 1919 season marked the beginning of a new phase for black baseball in America, a phase Sol White would refer to as the "big colored leagues."⁷⁹ Formal organization was lacking within black baseball and the result was an inconsistent and unpredictable institution; because of expenses, many teams could only afford to play one day a week and owners rarely made money.⁸⁰ Foster believed black baseball needed to organize because it was of "vital interest" to baseball fans, but also because it was a change to elevate the black race. He felt many blacks "would rally around any progressive move" that baseball put forth and a professional league would "warrant the continuance of the patronage that they have enjoyed, based solely on their loyalty to the

⁷⁶ Ira F. Lewis, "National Baseball League Formed," *Competitor*, March 1920, Quoted in Cottrell, 152.

⁷⁷ "American Giants Open Sunday - "Rube" Foster Will Present the Greatest Team of His Career," *Chicago Defender*, April 12, 1919.

⁷⁸ Andrew Foster, "Pitfalls of Baseball - Written Exclusively for the *Chicago Defender* by Andrew ("Rube") Foster, Manager of the Famous American Giants Baseball Team," *Chicago Defender*, December 20, 1919.

⁷⁹ Sol White, "The Grand Old Game," *Amsterdam News* December 18, 1930, Reproduced in *Sol White's History of Colored Baseball, With Other Documents On The Early Black Game 1886-1936*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 152.

⁸⁰ Foster, "Pitfalls of Baseball," November 29, 1919.

⁸ Foster, "Pitfalls of Baseball," November 29, 1919.

Race." He believed organization would elevate the institution and make people "appreciate their children entering a profession that would equal the earning capacity of any other profession." It was evident he believed baseball was important for the black community and could be relied upon to bring economic and cultural gains to the people. The 1920 season was the culmination of a dream for Foster and numerous other black sports figures. The Negro National League was established to provide blacks with the highest competition possible and to allow them to reap even more benefits from the institution of baseball. What set this league apart from its predecessors was it was to be "owned and controlled by race men." The *Defender* backed the new league with the belief it would provide blacks with numerous benefits such as "the development of more baseball writers," and the filtration of "a lot of money to the pockets of men of the Race that is now going daily into the pockets of the other fellows."⁸³ After visiting Detroit, the *Defender* reported Foster left behind "an impression that baseball is more than a mere recreation and pastime institution" and he reassured business leaders the Detroit Stars would be "one of their most valuable assets judged from every standpoint and measured by every standard by which values are fixed."⁸⁴ C.I. Taylor from the Indianapolis A.B.C.'s believed baseball was an important institution for all Americans. Taylor commented to the *Competitor* in February of 1920 that baseball was "above all things an AMERICAN game" and "it abides deep in the sport loving natures of all Americans

⁸² Foster, "Pitfalls of Baseball," January 10, 1920.

⁸³ Gary B. Lewis, "Baseball Circuit For Next Season - Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Cleveland, Dayton, St. Louis and Kansas City in Lineup - Cuban Stars Will Be Road Team," *Chicago Defender*, October 4, 1919.

⁸⁴ "Managers of Baseball Circuit Get Busy - Clubs Swing Together for Best Season in History," *Chicago Defender*, March 27, 1920.

regardless of their creed or color."⁸⁵ This shows that black baseball, even though less organized, less profitable, and arguably less competitive than Major League baseball, was still an extremely important institution for blacks.

Foster was elected the first president of the league during a meeting held on February 13, 1920 at the YMCA in Kansas City.⁸⁶ The meeting involved black sportswriters and baseball leaders from Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Indianapolis, Kansas City, St Louis, Topeka, Cleveland and Dayton. Foster came to the meeting prepared and he "dumbfounded" many in attendance by providing a charter for the National Negro Baseball League.⁸⁸ With the help of his friend Dave Wright, Foster prepared a constitution and a set of rules for the new league stipulating that as president, he would have the power to control almost every aspect of the League. Foster determined where clubs got their uniforms and equipment, who and when they would play, and even who was to pitch in certain games. For each game played in the league, Foster received ten percent of the gate proceeds and demanded that star players were well-rested for Sunday games because crowds were typically larger on this day.⁹⁰ Despite Foster's centralized powers, or perhaps because of them, the Negro National League elevated the game of baseball as a social institution within black communities. The league improved black baseball through organization, which translated into an increased sense of pride and respect in black communities across the Midwest and America. However, the organization of a league did not suddenly re-establish baseball as an

⁸⁵ C.I. Taylor, "The Future of Colored Baseball," *Competitor*, February 1920, Quoted in Cottrell, 148.

⁸⁶ "Baseball Magnates Hold Conference - Sporting Editor of Defender Elected Secretary," *Chicago Defender*, February 14, 1920.

⁸⁷ Lewis, "Baseball Circuit For Next Season."

⁸⁸ "Baseball Magnates Hold Conference."

⁸⁹ A.S. "Doc" Young, 59.

⁹⁰ Monroe, 28, 29.

institution for social uplift; it simply brought the positive aspects of black baseball to a broader audience. Prior to the start of the 1920 season, the *Defender* reported that newspapers from New York to Hawaii were hailing the black league as "the first progressive move in sport we [blacks] have launched," proving that many blacks across the country began to take notice of the new league and what it might contribute to the race.⁹¹

Although the *Chicago Defender* provides an excellent look at the power black baseball wielded within Chicago, the creation of a league brought the power of the institution to the forefront in numerous other communities. Attendance figures and happenings from the inaugural season of 1920 show baseball was also a valuable asset for black communities in Detroit, Kansas City, St Louis and Indianapolis. The first games of the new circuit took place in Indianapolis before "one of the largest and most enthused gathering of baseball devotees who ever assembled to do homage to the grand old national game."⁹² With over ten thousand in attendance to see the A.B.C.'s defeat the Cuban All Stars in the second game of the season, the Indianapolis community established a new attendance record for their team. The fans also showed how much they appreciated star centerfielder Oscar Charleston after he made a leaping over-the-shoulder catch to save the game. After the catch numerous admirers ran on the field to greet "him with hands full of money."⁹³ Instances of a player receiving gifts from the crowd were rare in black baseball, but they do show the extent to which players were admired and respected. The outlet baseball provided black Americans was important because it

⁹¹ A Ball Fan, "Giants in Readiness For Season of 1920," *Chicago Defender*, March 13, 1920.

⁹² Dave Wyatt, "A.B.C. Triumph in First Home Games - A Throng Estimated at More than Eight Thousand See First Games of the New Circuit," *Chicago Defender*, May 8, 1920. ⁹³

⁹³"A.B.C.'S Win."

allowed players to show off their talents and fans to pay their respects, resulting in a cycle of increased pride and unity throughout the black community.

In mid April, the St. Louis Giants reported that reservations for box seats were filling up fast even though they increased their seating capacity by over a thousand in preparation for the season.⁹⁴ This additional seating was not enough to hold the throngs of people who would attend a few weeks later on opening day, forcing the team to turn away at least two thousand people. Most of these disappointed fans were able to witness the parade and festivities prior to the game, even if they did so from "hillsides, housetops adjacent to the inclosure, trees and motor truck tops." The parade stretched for several city blocks and contained "two or three highly spirited bands" that enhanced the festive atmosphere. Dave Wyatt, a sportswriter for the *Defender* was one of the people who made it inside the park and he said the stands were so "choked and clogged," people sat on the field, leaving "no more than ten feet of space for the outfield to romp over." Some fans got a dangerous spot along the first and third base lines where they watched the "humiliation" of their local team at the hands of the Kansas City Monarchs.⁹⁵ Perhaps this "humiliation" was partly due to the pomp and circumstance leading up to the game.

The excitement, enthusiasm, and anticipation displayed by the black communities of Indianapolis and St. Louis were not isolated events and each circuit league city found themselves attempting to out do the other with opening day ceremonies. In Detroit, social organizations such as the Elks of Detroit and the Royal Rooters' Club, coupled with influential businessmen and everyday citizens, planned "a gala affair" that was hyped as

⁹⁴ "Round The Base Lines," *Chicago Defender*, April 17, 1920.

⁹⁵ Dave Wyatt, "K.C. Monarchs Trim the St. Louis Giants - Six Thousand Witness Humiliation of Local Team, While Two Thousand are Turned Away," *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1920.

perhaps "the biggest blow-off ever given in behalf of an inaugural go."⁹⁶ Simply reading the headline the following week, "Big Crowd See Stars Battle - Mack Park Barely Escapes Destruction as 15,000 Push, Jostle and Rage to Gain Entrance; Situation Relieved by 2,000 Free Admissions," proves the event surpassed the hype. The black community was proud of their team and came out in droves to show their support. In an effort to appease the fans, the team admitted 2,000 more people but this simply made for a tumultuous situation inside the park. Dave Wyatt from the *Defender* described the situation inside:

Every hole, corner and crack was filled and hundreds perched upon the top of the fence that encircles the arena very much like rows of sparrows. The crowd swarmed and invaded all parts within the players' lines and it was thought for a while that the game would have to be called off, as there was no place to play. When the umpire finally called "Play ball!" there were fully as many people on the outside as were within.

On the morning of the game, "countless thousands of excited and enthusiastic fans lined up on Mack avenue for blocks, surrounded the entrances to the park and nearly stampeded the officials and guards of the inclosure in their eagerness to gain admittance." Unfortunately, in doing so the game sold out and people responded by doing "everything except riot in their quest for an entrance," proving that baseball was just as popular and meaningful outside of Chicago.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ "Circuit Opens At Detroit," *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1920.

⁹⁷ Dave Wyatt, "Big Crowd See Stars Battle - Mack Park Barely Escapes Destruction as 15,000 Push, Jostle and Rage to Gain Entrance; Situation Relieved by 2,000 Free Admissions," *Chicago Defender*, May 22, 1920.

Kansas City was not to be outdone by the festive events in Indianapolis, St. Louis and Detroit, and they planned a celebration of their own to kick off the inaugural season. Much like other inaugural events around the league, this celebration was hyped as a "big blow-off," but Kansas City added a touch of pride and confidence in the abilities of their black community by planning the "biggest blow-off of any city on the circuit." With the help of the local Elks, the black community of Kansas City planned to use this event to show whites and blacks they were not second-class citizens. They did not disappoint, producing such a grand event the *Defender* believed it would "stand for many a moon as a high water mark for the debut day tooter to shoot at." The game followed a parade that left at one o'clock en route to American Association Park, "right in the heart of the black belt."¹⁰⁰ This was a prime location for blacks to display their self-determination and portray "black" middle class values. The parade was led by "one of the very best bands ever heard in an event of this kind," followed by around two hundred "gas, electric, and otherwise propelled carts in the line, every one owned by a Race man."¹⁰¹

These inaugural games provided blacks an opportunity to show their unity, strength, pride and support for black baseball and the black race. Much like the festivities surrounding games in the mid-nineteenth century, these "blow-offs" provided the community a chance to associate with each other, portray middle class values, and contribute in the uplift of their race. Around 600,000 fans witnessed games during the inaugural year of the Negro National League proving that baseball was an important

⁹⁸ Dave Wyatt, "American Giants Win in 11th - Plucky Fight of Visiting Pitcher Goes for Naught When Teammates Falter," *Chicago Defender*, May 29, 1920.

⁹⁹ Dave Wyatt, "Kansas City Opening Reaches The Crest," *Chicago Defender*, June 5, 1920.

¹⁰⁰ "Kansas City Notes," *Chicago Defender*, June 5, 1920.

¹⁰¹ Wyatt, "Kansas City Opening Reaches The Crest."

recreation event for many urban blacks across America. Throughout segregation, baseball allowed people to exchange information, meet fellow citizens, associate with others facing similar problems, and celebrate the successes of their race, all which while watching America's pastime, The coverage Foster and the American Giants received in the pages of the *Defender* provide an excellent example of what black baseball was capable of bringing to a community. Although Foster and the American Giants may have been the ultimate example, baseball served the same function in numerous other cities across America, including Birmingham, Alabama and Asheville, North Carolina, thus proving that black baseball was not strictly a commercial enterprise, but a community building institution that benefited local and regional black communities across America. Although blacks were excluded from playing in the Major Leagues for decades, they still managed to institutionalize their game into a socially if not economically profitable venture benefiting urban black communities in Chicago and across the country. Black entrepreneurs such as Foster sought to bring their race and communities together through sport although they consistently played with two strikes against them. Blacks endured racism and paternalistic control by whites and were still able to carve out a segregated social niche that Sol White described as "one of the greatest institutions of the race."¹⁰³ The institution of black baseball was believed to be a means to assimilate with white society and to show everyone that African Americans were not inferior to whites. This eventually came to fruition when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, but the contributions Foster made to black baseball went largely unnoticed until he was selected for the baseball Hall of Fame in 1981. However, the contributions Foster and

¹⁰²Cottrell, 156.

¹⁰³ Sol White, "

¹⁰³ The Grand Old Game," Reproduced in *Sol White's History of Colored Baseball*, 153.

black baseball made to the race and the community during a time when blacks were in dire need of success stories must not be forgotten or underestimated.

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