

# As It Celebrates the Centennial of the Negro Leagues, MLB May Undo a “Major” Mistake

Because of a prejudiced decision made more than 50 years ago, the segregation-era circuits that featured Black players have never been counted among the official major leagues. For the first time, MLB is considering righting that wrong.

By [Ben Lindbergh](#) Aug 14, 2020, 5:45am EDT

On Sunday, Major League Baseball will [celebrate](#) the centennial of the [founding](#) of the Negro National League, the first of the seven segregation-era circuits formed during the 1920s or 1930s that have collectively come to be labeled “the Negro Leagues.” All players, managers, coaches, and umpires will wear a Negro Leagues 100th anniversary logo, which will also appear on bases and lineup cards. MLB Network will air Negro Leagues–related programming throughout the weekend, and MLB will promote a new Negro Leagues [website](#) on its digital channels.

The leaguewide event, which was originally scheduled for June 27, is part of the yearlong “A Game-Changing Century” initiative [conceived](#) by Kansas City’s Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. Although the pandemic delayed the day of recognition, forced the museum to close for three months, and postponed other plans until 2021 (when the museum will spearhead a program dubbed “Negro Leagues 101”), 2020 has been a big year for honoring the Negro Leagues’ legacy. In February, MLB and the MLB Players Association made a \$1 million joint [donation](#) to the museum, and in June, the [Tipping Your Cap campaign](#) collected tributes to the Negro Leagues by former presidents, eminent athletes, and other cultural luminaries. Last month, CC Sabathia (who hosts *R2C2* on The Ringer Podcast Network), the MLBPA, the NLBM, and lifestyle brand Roots of Fight cocreated a [clothing line](#) dedicated to Negro Leagues players that features the phrase “They Played for Us.”

Those efforts have helped foster an enhanced appreciation for a fundamental period of baseball’s past and an important piece of Black

history. But they've also called attention to one way in which the Negro Leagues are still being slighted and segregated. According to Major League Baseball's current records and classifications, the players whom this year's major leaguers will be honoring on Sunday were not major leaguers themselves. Because of the prejudiced decision of a committee that met more than 50 years ago, the Negro Leagues are still excluded from the official list of major leagues, much as Black players before 1947—and, in many cases, long after—were excluded from the American and National Leagues. Like those players, the Negro Leagues have been denied an opportunity to prove that they were as deserving of major league status as their white contemporaries. But for the first time, MLB is considering righting that wrong.

An MLB spokesperson provided this statement to *The Ringer*: “We will continue to honor the Negro Leagues beyond this year's league-wide celebration of the centennial season. This process is well under way. We look forward to future efforts to commemorate this vital chapter in our game's history and to teach our next generation of fans about the significance of the Negro Leagues.” One of those efforts may involve elevating the Negro Leagues to the major league level. According to sources with knowledge of MLB discussions prompted by a recent *Ringer* inquiry, the league has at last begun to study the case for a major league designation and what that would entail.

A dictionary definition is typically a trite way to open an argument. But the matter of major league qualification is all about definitions, so in this case it's not a bad place to begin. The third edition of *The Dickson Baseball Dictionary* offers the following for its first definition of “major league”:

A league at the highest level of organized or professional baseball; specif., one of the two leagues (National League since 1876 and American League since 1901) that currently constitute the major leagues. Previous major leagues included the American Association (1882-1891), Union Association (1884), Players' League (1890), and Federal League (1914-1915).

Why only those four former leagues, and not the Negro Leagues? We can trace that snub back to MLB's Special Baseball Records Committee,

which was convened by commissioner William Eckart in 1968 as part of an arrangement with publisher Macmillan to produce *The Baseball Encyclopedia*. The “Big Mac,” as it eventually [came to be called](#), was to be the official, definitive statistical compendium of the major leagues. Which meant that someone had to answer a pesky question: Which *were* the major leagues? That was the task of the SBRC, an all-white, five-man body that consisted of officials from the American and National Leagues, the commissioner’s office, the Baseball Hall of Fame, and the Baseball Writers’ Association of America, all of whom are now deceased.

The SBRC [announced its decisions](#) on the league designations, along with its solutions to various other record-keeping conundrums, in the 1969 first edition of the Big Mac. The six leagues listed above were anointed as major, while the National Association, which preceded the National League, was recognized as the first professional league but not considered a major league “due to its erratic schedule and procedures.” The ruling said nothing about the Negro Leagues. Which was, in a sense, unsurprising, because the *committee itself* had said nothing about the Negro Leagues when it met.

“The one thing that I am absolutely certain about is that there never was any SBRC discussion about treating the Negro Leagues as major leagues,” says David Neft, who oversaw the assembly of the *Encyclopedia*. Although Neft was not an official member of the committee, he was familiar with its deliberations and present at its two meetings, from which no notes or minutes remain.

Joe Reichler, the PR director for the commissioner’s office, was one of the members of the SBRC and went on to edit later editions of *The Encyclopedia*. In a 1987 *Gannett News Service* [article](#), Reichler said that the Negro Leagues were not considered major because they lacked exhaustive statistics and because their clubs played games against local semipro teams. By that time, the SBRC had expanded to eight members but was still all white, which Reichler, who was then its chairman, defended by saying that when the committee was created, “The accent on blackness wasn’t as great as it is today.” (In 1971, Reichler [reportedly](#) told the first player inducted into the Hall of Fame as

a Negro Leaguer, Satchel Paige, to “sit down” when Paige started talking to the press about the many other Negro Leaguers who deserved induction, which made Paige so angry that he never returned to Cooperstown.)

“What you’re saying is ‘We would like to undo the discrimination and isn’t it a crying shame that they were discriminated against. But we can’t undo it because they were discriminated against and their records aren’t that good.’ And I think that’s a horseshit argument.” —Gary Gillette

Neft disputes Reichler’s after-the-fact rationale, recalling that the committee had decided that a lack of statistics wouldn’t be an obstacle to the National Association’s inclusion if it had deemed that league otherwise worthy. As Neft tells it, spotty stats had nothing to do with the Negro Leagues’ exclusion. The Negro Leagues simply “didn’t come up,” he says, adding, “The Negro Leagues, for the purpose of these meetings, was not on the radar.” The reason, he says, is solely that it was a “different time.” The SBRC met before the first Negro Leaguers were admitted to the Hall of Fame, before the publication of Robert Peterson’s seminal 1970 book [Only the Ball Was White](#) rekindled more mainstream interest in the Negro Leagues, and before historian [John Holway](#) began the first extensive effort to flesh out the Negro Leagues’ statistical record. (“In 1969,” Holway once [wrote](#), “the Hall of Fame’s Negro Leagues archive consisted of one thin manila folder, containing an Indianapolis Clowns scorecard and a *Washington Post* article on Josh Gibson.”) Yet the SBRC’s judgment has stood. “It’s ripe for revisiting, it seems to me,” Neft concludes. Or really, visiting for the first time: John Thorn, the official historian for Major League Baseball, says the league has never actually considered the Negro League’s candidacy in any official capacity before now.

“The Special Baseball Records Committee never considered the Negro Leagues as possible contenders for MLB status,” says Thorn. “The National Association of the 1870s, which had been viewed as a major league to that point, was demoted by the SBRC ruling that its schedule and procedures were erratic. Not so long ago, I mentioned at a SABR

conference that MLB would not view the Negro Leagues as majors for these very reasons. I no longer believe that to be so.”

That probably would have pleased the late Negro Leagues Hall of Famer James Thomas Bell, a.k.a. “Cool Papa,” who was quoted at the age of 84 in that 1987 article. “The Negro Leagues was a major league,” he said. “They wouldn’t let us play in the white leagues and we [were] great ballplayers in the Negro Leagues, so how can you say we [weren’t] major league?” Thorn expresses a similar sentiment. “If Negro Leaguers’ statistics were to be integrated into the MLB historical record, one might anticipate an objection that most players never competed against their MLB contemporaries,” he says. “But that was not their doing.”

If the Negro Leagues *had* been brought up by the SBRC, they would have had to satisfy several of the committee’s criteria. Neft says that in addition to scheduling irregularities such as varying lengths, frequent unofficial games, uncompleted campaigns, and inconsistent playoff formats (sound [familiar?](#)) “the factors that were used in discussing the other leagues included the populations of their cities, the media coverage of their teams relative to the NL, AL, and the 1880s American Association, the capacity of the stadiums, the level of play, and the number of proven major league players who ‘jumped’ to these leagues.”

In most of those categories, of course, the Negro Leagues are at a disadvantage relative to white leagues precisely because of the racism and segregation that forced Black ballplayers to create a separate (and in some respects, unequal) place to play. Negro Leagues clubs were owned by Black businesspeople who were cut off from capital and didn’t own their home parks. Their financial circumstances were precarious, and they were forced to barnstorm and play local exhibitions to survive. It would be harsh to hold that against them. Gary Gillette, coeditor of the *The ESPN Baseball Encyclopedia* and many other sports reference books, says that if you denigrate the Negro League’s credentials on the grounds of erratic conditions and schedules, “What you’re saying is ‘We would like to undo the discrimination and isn’t it a crying shame that they were discriminated against. But we can’t undo it because they were

discriminated against and their records aren't that good.' And I think that's a horseshit argument."

It's especially sketchy to exclude the Negro Leagues on the basis of schedules, contemporary coverage, or other conditions beyond their control because the game on the field and the players' skill level were so similar to MLB's. "They wore the same uniforms, used the same baseballs, ordered their bats from Louisville Slugger, played under the same rules," says [preeminent](#) Negro Leagues historian (and chairman of SABR's Negro Leagues Committee) Larry Lester, who also notes that Negro Leaguers often played in the same stadiums as MLB teams. "The only difference was the color of their skin." Lester believes that there's no need to be bound by a biased decision from 50-plus years ago. "I just don't see where there is an issue. I don't see where there should be a debate. ... We have to keep evolving and learning, and this is a good time to recognize the great contributions of these Black ballplayers during apartheid baseball."

On a pure performance level, those contributions were roughly equivalent to those of their AL and NL counterparts. Last year, McFarland Books published a [collection of essays](#) called *The Negro Leagues Were Major Leagues: Historians Reappraise Black Baseball*, which the book's editor, Todd Peterson, says was inspired by the Pittsburgh Pirates' [2015 decision](#) to remove statues of Negro Leagues players from PNC Park's Legacy Square. In his chapter of the book, Peterson observes that every one of the 16 MLB teams in operation between 1901 and 1960 played a Black club at some point in its history, and the non-major leaguers more than held their own.

According to Peterson's tally, from 1900 through 1948—the last year of the second Negro National League, and scholars' consensus cutoff for the Negro Leagues' potential period of major league status—Black teams went 315-282-20 against MLB teams, including games against intact MLB teams and "all-star" aggregations (although some of those white rosters weren't composed entirely of major leaguers). From 1900 to 1950, MLB teams went 1690-677 against minor league teams, a far greater level of success that illustrates the gulf between the minors and



the Negro Leagues. (From 1900 to 1948, Black clubs also went 324-246 against Triple-A teams.)

Black players performed even better against white competition after the Negro Leagues era began in 1920, although NL and AL owners and officials increasingly restricted interracial contests, partly out of fear of being embarrassed by better players. In October 1917, Peterson recounted, Dodgers owner Charles Ebbets fined pitcher Rube Marquard for pitching against the Black Lincoln Giants without permission. A team source stated that the club was opposed to permitting its players to participate in games with Black players because, Ebbets believed, when they lost it tended to “lower the caliber of ball played in the big leagues in the eyes of the public.” It should have: A lot of the best baseball talent wasn’t playing in MLB games. It was starring in the Negro Leagues. “Overall, statistically, they were the equal of any major league entity,” Lester says.

“Oh, absolutely,” says sabermetric trailblazer Bill James when asked whether he supports the Negro Leagues’ case for inclusion. In his 2001 book *The New Bill James Historical Baseball Abstract*, James studied the quality of play in the Union Association, which the SBRC endorsed, and [concluded](#) that it was “vastly weaker” than the Negro National League’s. James cites the long list of “Hall of Famers’ Hall of Famers” who began their careers in the Negro Leagues and excelled in MLB shortly after integration as evidence of the Negro Leagues’ strength. “My argument has always been that it is impossible for a league to produce that many players of that quality in that period of time, unless the quality of play in that league was not only equal to the white leagues, but probably superior to it. You just can’t *reach* that level of excellence while playing against minor league competition. So ... designate it as major league.” Research compiled by Peterson confirmed that former Negro Leaguers easily outhit and outpitched the league averages in Triple-A and MLB over the few decades beginning with Jackie Robinson’s debuts in Triple-A and MLB, respectively.

Leslie Heaphy, a history professor at Kent State who serves as vice president of the board of directors of SABR and has authored multiple

books about Black baseball, says undoing the SBRC's error is "long overdue." The most common reasons for excluding the Negro Leagues, she points out, have historically been a paucity of stats and doubts about the leagues' organization, but both concerns have been mitigated by research of the kind that produced the head-to-head numbers Peterson and others have collated. "We also have found many contracts, schedules, etc., along with winter meetings, to show the organizational structure of the leagues, so I believe that question can be addressed easily as well," she says.

Lester, who has handled the bulk of the [box-score archaeology](#) along with Holway, [Gary Ashwill](#), and other statistical sleuths, says the 1920-48 Negro Leagues records in the [Seamheads Negro Leagues Database](#) are at least 80 to 85 percent complete. "The Seamheads stats for the Negro Leagues from '20 to '48, taken as a whole, are as good or better than some of the 19th-century data which has gotten the official imprimatur of Major League Baseball," Gillette says.

That's not to say that there won't be complications. If MLB opts to make the major league classification official, it will likely create a new committee composed of historians, stakeholders, and statisticians who would determine over the offseason which leagues and years to include and how to display them alongside MLB stats. Baseball-Reference founder Sean Forman notes that there are still disputes between data sources for leagues with long-established "major" status, and he cautions that the differences may be more dramatic for the Negro Leagues. "It's going to be difficult to have consensus around what the numbers would be," he says. And while Lester says the Negro Leagues' offensive environments were comparable to MLB's, their seasons usually ran for roughly 60 to 80 games, which would lead to a lot of leaderboard extremes.

"Consolidating (er, integrating) the records might be an issue," Thorn acknowledges. "But if we can accept as official Ross Barnes's [.429](#) in 1876 (70-game schedule), why not Oscar Charleston's [.433](#) over 77 games in 1921, or Josh Gibson's [.466](#) over 69 games in 1943?"



Or, for that matter, some similar statistical outlier from MLB's current small-sample season, which will be treated the same as any other season's despite the many compromises that the pandemic has imposed. "The last remaining plausible objections to not including the Negro Leagues as major leagues have been eliminated with the 60-game season," says Gillette, who adds, "If there ever was a season more erratic than 2020, I'd like to see it. ... There's no moral justification for excluding the Negro Leagues, and the last rational arguments you could even advance have been destroyed."

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The difference that "major" would make might seem semantic, but there would be tangible benefits to the new designation. At Baseball-Reference, the Negro Leagues are grouped with minor leagues and foreign leagues. Forman says that if MLB were to reclassify the Negro Leagues, they would likely join the SBRC-approved leagues on the [Leagues page](#) and be included in the site's major league historical totals. In addition, pages for players who spent time in both the Negro Leagues and the integrated majors would display all of their stats in the same place, without cordoning off the Negro Leagues numbers on a separate tab. The site's subscription-based [Stathead](#) service might also add the option to slice and dice data from Black baseball. Forman says his company would attempt to acquire more comprehensive Negro Leagues records, and perhaps help fund further research.

While occasions like this Sunday's are worthy of praise, presenting more stats in high-profile places would help put Negro Leaguers' accomplishments in front of fans' faces year-round. Peterson invokes a line from David Goldblatt's history of soccer, *The Ball is Round*: "Statistics are the currency of glory." As Peterson says, "If you do bring the numbers in, I think in 50 years, people will still know about segregation, but they'll be able to see the great players for what they were."

Beyond Baseball-Reference, he continues, "that designation would open up some doors." Negro Leaguers might be better integrated into exhibits

at the Hall of Fame, and excluded stars such as [John Donaldson](#), [Rap Dixon](#), and [Nip Winters](#) would have better odds of induction. No new Negro Leaguers have entered the Hall since 2006—the longest such stretch since a special committee put Paige in (under [pressure](#) from Ted Williams)—and early Black ballplayers remain [underrepresented](#). It took a public outcry to make MLB recant its initial plan to put Paige's plaque in a separate section of the Hall, and for years after his enshrinement, quotas kept Negro Leagues inductions to one or two players per year. In 2003, then MLB vice president Rob Manfred resisted an expansion of the hard-won Negro Leaguer pension program, [suggesting](#) that the existing policy was already “extraordinary” because, “No other employer has created a pension program for people who did not even work for them.” What Manfred omitted was *why* those players hadn't been big leaguers. “Over and over again you see discrimination against the Negro Leagues without a second thought,” Gillette says. “It's just part of the system.”

Peterson says that since 1994, 23 MLB clubs have played games in Negro Leagues throwback uniforms, which is especially [ethically questionable](#) if the teams that wore those jerseys first aren't accorded an equivalent classification. “They recognize the Negro Leagues and they wear the uniforms once a year, but it's still kind of an ‘other,’” Peterson says. As public historian [Josh Howard](#) wrote in *The Negro Leagues Were Major Leagues*, “By shaping a celebratory public memory of the Negro Leagues, modern professional baseball forwards the idea that MLB is the pinnacle of baseball achievement, an idea that is certainly true today but was not strictly true for the first half of the 20th century. In forwarding MLB supremacy, modern professional baseball reduces the Negro Leagues to a lower status as a ‘lesser’ or ‘minor’ league in terms of importance, legacy, and player ability.”

Officially changing Negro Leaguers' status to make them major leaguers—or, really, *recognize* them as the major leaguers they were—would help head off that mixed messaging, however unintentional. Those considerations are particularly pressing today. Ted Knorr, a longtime Negro Leagues researcher and advocate for major league classification, says that even when *The Negro Leagues Were Major Leagues* came out last November, he “really hadn't considered it as something that was on

the horizon.” But the centennial celebrations, the league’s vocal ([if fleeting](#)) support for the Black Lives Matter movement, and the strangeness of this small-sample season have quickly combined to make a more compelling case to the league. “I think they understand in this year, it’s not the kind of question that can be ducked,” Knorr says.

Perhaps most importantly, the overdue designation would be a belated reparation to surviving Negro Leaguers, their descendants, and the historians who’ve devoted decades to lifting the leagues up. Holway, who’s now 90, has been waiting a long time. He remembers going to a game in 1945 between Buck Leonard’s Homestead Grays and Paige’s Kansas City Monarchs. Huddled at the third-base railing near the dugout, he saw Satchel warming up. Across the field, Josh Gibson was warming up his own pitcher (possibly Ray Brown). The game was a sellout, although the crowd was disappointed when Gibson didn’t go deep. The heroes Holway saw that day are Hall of Famers, but save for Paige, they still aren’t major leaguers.

In his 2001 [tome](#) *The Complete Book of Baseball’s Negro Leagues: The Other Half of Baseball History*, Holway wrote, “Black baseball history still remains a separate ghetto outside the mainstream history of white baseball. Actually, the two are parts of the same common heritage and eventually will be recognized as one intertwined whole.” The coupling he predicted may be about to begin.

*Thanks to [Effectively Wild](#) listener Philip Hahn for asking the question that prompted this piece.*