

A review of Larry Lester's, *Rube Foster In His Time*

Despite being the cynosure of black baseball for over twenty-five years, Andrew “Rube” Foster has to this point has mostly escaped the direct gaze of essayists, with Charles Whitehead’s, *A Man And His Diamonds* (1980); and Robert Charles Cottrell’s, *The Best Pitcher In Baseball* (2001), being the exceptions rather than rule.

While not being a straight biography, esteemed black-ball historian Larry Lester’s *Rube Foster In His Time* (McFarland and Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, 2012) effectively tackles the complex and expansive story of the legendary pitcher/manager/organizer from Winchester, Texas. Subtitled, “On The Field And In The Papers With Baseball’s Greatest Visionary,” Lester has centered his book on Foster’s own writings, originally published in the pages of African-American newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender* and *Indianapolis Freeman*. As well as being a great player and team leader, Foster was an inveterate letter writer and astute commenter on the black baseball scene – Although as one rival succinctly noted, Foster’s words were sometimes colored by his propensity for “self-aggrandizement,” and an oft-repeated tendency to shape the facts to fit his narrative.

Lester assembled a treasure trove of documents for his project, including census reports; draft cards; court transcripts of Foster’s legal battle with Frank Leland for control of the Leland Giants; as well as speeches from Foster’s funeral and posthumous Hall-of-Fame induction. Lester doesn’t pull any punches in his selections – Big Rube’s often vindictive nature reveals itself during the accounts of his newspaper feuds with Hilldale owner Ed Bolden, and Detroit Stars chief J.T. “Tenny” Blount, whom he once threatened to “break,” noting, “Well, anything I say I’ll do, I come pretty darned close to doing.”

Perhaps most fascinating are the exchanges between Foster and Indianapolis ABCs manager C.I. Taylor, that highlight their often acrimonious relationship – After a contentious four game sweep of his Chicago American Giants in 1915, Foster, a notorious poor loser, called Taylor an “ingrate...of the lowest kind,” in the pages of the *Defender*, and noted that the Naptown skipper was so cheap that his own brothers, Jim and Johnny, refused to play for him. Taylor responded by accusing his rival of libel and intimated that it was the Windy City magnate’s petty behavior that was the biggest obstacle to any proposed black ball league: “it seems to be the purpose of Mr. Foster to destroy, by false accusations, and misrepresentations, a life’s effort.”

Lester uses his own inimitable style to delicately interweave the story of Foster's life, career, and the history of early black-ball in between the various documents. Along to help are some of the most eloquent scribes of the day – Frank “Fay” Young; Ira Lewis and Foster's running mate and erstwhile infielder Dave Wyatt are all excerpted within - Wyatt's account of the duo's tenure in Otsego, Michigan in 1902 provides an intriguing glimpse into the turn-of-the-century black ball player and their attitudes towards race relations and prejudice.

For the hardcore-researcher, Lester has assembled a series of informative appendices that document Foster's seven no-hitters; team depth charts for most of the clubs he played on; and most incredibly, the Texas fire-baller's daily pitching and batting records from 1899 to 1917. Also included are several beautiful illustrations and adverts from the pages of *Freeman* and *Defender* as well as a few fairly racist cartoons from the daily newspapers of the day. In addition, the book contains many rare and never before seen player and team photos (Full disclosure: This reviewer provided one of the grainier images).

Lester doesn't tarry very long with Foster's early career in Texas or the details of his 1902 arrival in Chicago - More of the mainstream media's reaction to Foster in the pages of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Chicago Tribune* to name but two would also been welcome (we do however, get a few snippets of Ring Lardner's coverage of the famous 1909 Chicago Cubs/ Leland Giants series); but these are really very minor quibbles – The author crams the book with a wealth of details concerning the honors bestowed upon Foster; historical markers; personal tributes from players; associates; and historians; and the primer on pitching that the ace hurler penned for Sol White's *History Of Colored Baseball* - Pretty much everything there is to know about Andrew Foster can be found within these pages.

Those readers looking for a more traditional biography might be disappointed, but Lester's stated purpose was to “provide a one-stop resource for those with a strong interest in Rube Foster, his teams and time,” and his informative and useful post-modern history achieves this goal. Exhaustively researched and extensively foot-noted, Larry Lester's *Rube Foster In His Time* is a fitting tribute and a fascinating insight into the great man.

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