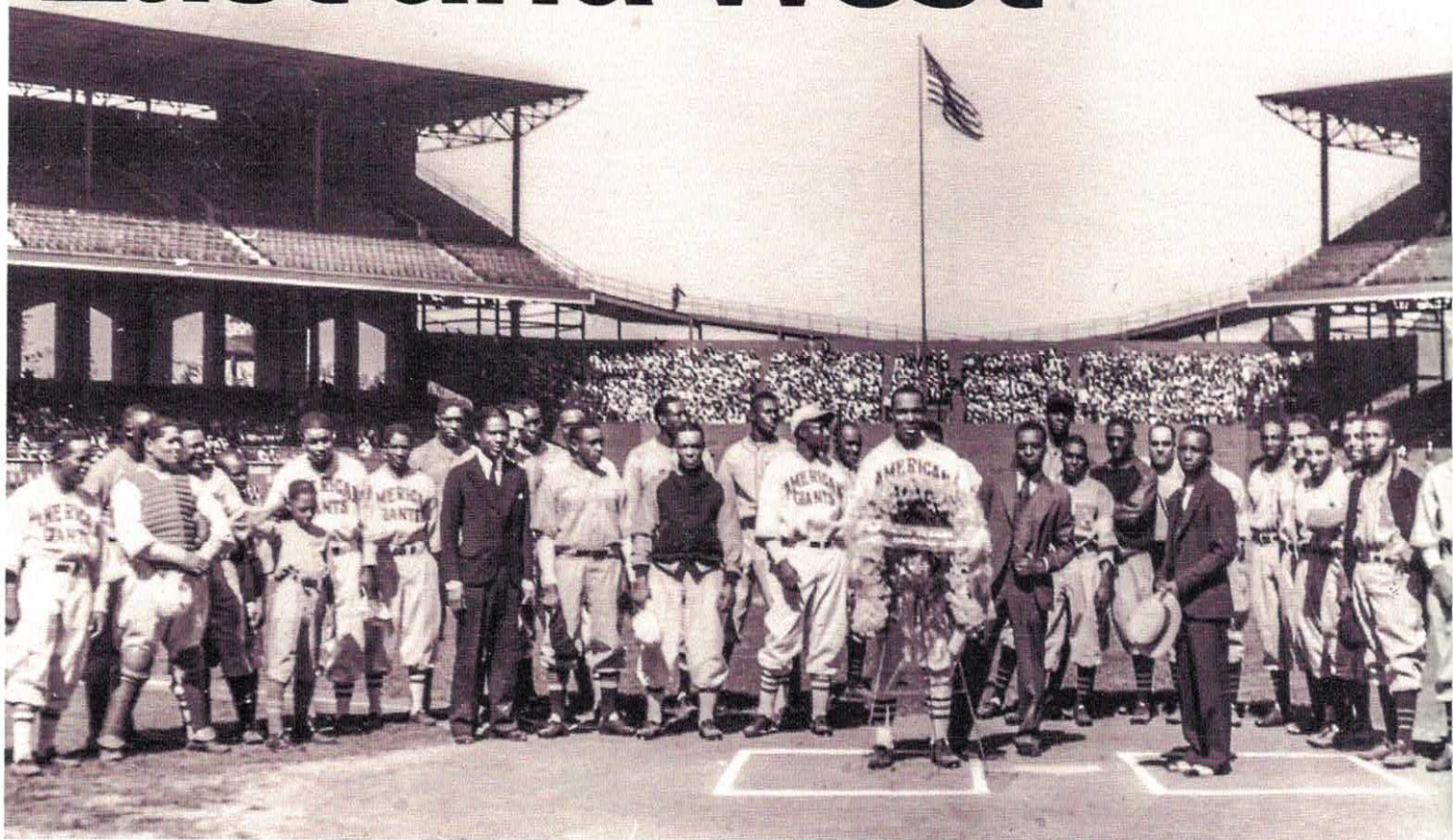


# Stars in the East and West



THE ANNUAL NEGRO LEAGUES EAST-WEST ALL-STAR CLASSIC BROUGHT TOGETHER THE GREATEST PLAYERS OF THE ERA.

By Larry Lester

*Larry Lester*

**T**he pinnacle of any Negro Leagues season was the East-West All-Star Classic. It was Black America's answer to Augusta's Masters Tournament, Louisville's Kentucky Derby, the Indianapolis 500, the Super Bowl, the Stanley Cup, the Olympics and March Madness all wrapped into one spectacle.

Starting in 1933, the game was played annually at Chicago's Comiskey Park, with additional appearances in other venues in later years. It brought thousands of fans to

the Grand Hotel, on the city's South Side at 51st and South Parkway, and became the most engaging sporting event in Black America — with the possible exception of a radio broadcast of a Joe Louis fight.

Much like attending a world heavyweight championship bout, fans dressed to the "nines." Ladies modeled midi-length, bias-cut dresses featuring puffy sleeves and padded shoulders, along with large yokes or collars accessorized with wide belts. High stepping in their wingtip oxfords with the block heel, they fashioned short pageboy or

Marcel Wave hairstyles beneath feathered slouch hats or knitted berets.

Not without their own runway, men sported Great Gatsby fedoras or Panamá straw hats with their tailored, double-breasted or three-piece suits and spit-shined Stacy Adams or Florsheim shoes. Occasionally, some hepcats strutted to the affair in zoot suits: high-waisted, baggy-legged, tight-cuffed trousers with knee-length jackets with wide lapels and padded shoulders, topped with porkpie hats. Negro American League president J.B. Martin appeared at the classics robed in his all-white suit and white straw hat with white button-down spatted shoes. There was pageantry on and off the field.

The horrendous, depressed economic conditions of the 1930s and disagreement among Negro Leagues officials on a World

Players gather for a group photograph at the East-West All-Star Game on Aug. 26, 1934, at Chicago's Comiskey Park.



## SEE HISTORY IN COOPERSTOWN

This coming Memorial Day weekend, the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum will honor four decades of play at the East-West games with the *Hall of Fame East-West Classic: A Tribute to the Negro Leagues All-Star Game* at Cooperstown's historic Doubleday Field. To reserve tickets to the May 25 Hall of Fame East-West Classic, visit [baseballhall.org/east-west](http://baseballhall.org/east-west).



Afro-American, promoted the East-West Classics, giving fans across the country an opportunity to discover many ebony stars. The abundance of talent raised optimism that Black players were ready for the white majors. With Black league competition often ignored by the white press, the East-West attraction offered an opportunity for white Americans to eyewitness Black talent under one tent.

John "Buck" O'Neil offered this viewpoint on the game and voting:

*Let me tell you a little bit about the East-West game, because for a Black ballplayer and Black baseball fans, that was something special. Gus Greenlee began the game in 1933, the same year that the white major leagues began their All-Star game, and in the same ballpark, Comiskey Park in Chicago. That was the greatest idea Gus ever had because it made Black people feel involved in baseball like they'd never been before. While the big leagues left the choice of players up to the sportswriters, Gus left it up to the fans. After reading about great players in the Defender and Courier for so many years, they could cut out that ballot in the Black papers, send it in, and have a say. That was a pretty important thing for Black people to do in those days, to be able to vote, even if it was just for ballplayers, and they sent in thousands and thousands of ballots. It was like an avalanche!*

There was a quirk in 1936 when the barnstorming Kansas City Monarchs, not a member of either the Negro American League or the Negro National League, had 11 players voted in by fans. O'Neil continues:

*Right away, it was clear that our game meant a lot more than a big-league game. Theirs was, and is, more or less an exhibition. But for Black folks, the East-West game was a matter of racial pride. Black people came from all over to Chicago every year — that's why we outdrew the big league game some years, because we always had 50,000 at ours, and almost all of them were Black*

*people; not until after Jackie Robinson [played] did any whites come out.*

*In fact, we kept the game in Chicago because it was in the middle of the country, and people could get there from all over. The Illinois Central Railroad would put on a special coach from New Orleans to Chicago. They would pick up people all through Mississippi, Tennessee and western Kentucky right on into Chicago. The Santa Fe Chief would be picking up people in Wichita, Kansas City and St. Louis (before heading north). The New York Central, out of Penn Station, would come in from the East.*

*This was THE weekend. It was near the last weekend before school started, so a lot of kids would save up their nickels and dimes. In Chicago, all the Black stores would sell tickets to the game. I remember in 1942, box seats went for \$1.65, grandstand seats for \$1.10, and it was 50 cents for a bleacher seat. And those stores on the South Side, from 40th to 50th Streets, like the Ben Franklin Drug Store, Monarch Tailors, Harry's Men Shop, they'd all have a big sign out: "East-West Tickets Sold Here." Because that would get people into the stores. A guy would come in and buy a ticket, and while he was there, he might buy a hat or a pair of shoes.*

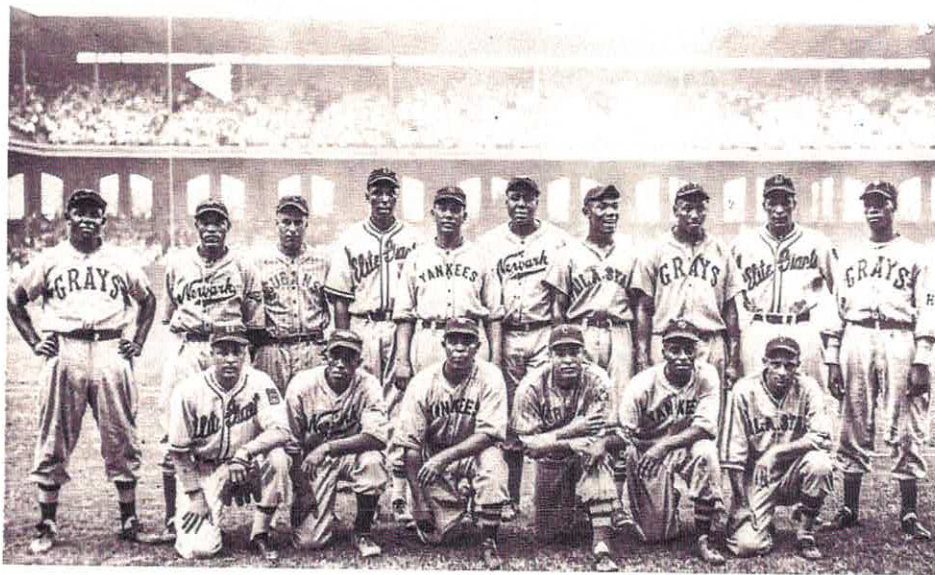
Sam Lacy, a writer for the *Baltimore Afro-American*, fondly remembered his days at Black baseball's biggest event. At age 94, when he received the 1997 BBWAA Career Excellence Award for outstanding baseball writing, Lacy recalled the majesty of the East-West All-Star Game:

*It was a HOLIDAY for at least 48 hours. People would just about come from everywhere, mainly because it was such a spectacle. Train. Bus. Automobile. Very little flying. Somehow fans managed to get there. I would go on my vacation during All-Star week so that I could be there the entire week. I didn't want to miss anything!*

*In those days, we played ball to win. It was not an exhibition game like it is today.*

Series format from 1928 to 1941 precluded any annual championship series, resulting in the East-West All-Star Game becoming Black baseball's grandest attraction. Eventually, All-Star Game attendance grew to more than 50,000 patrons (in 1941 and 1943), often outdrawing its white major league counterpart during the early to mid-1940s. Historians, players and fans argued that the overall success of the Chicago All-Star Games was one of the most important factors in the integration of the white leagues.

The fans chose the players on the teams by voting through the nation's two largest Black newspapers: the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Both papers were weeklies that owed much of their success to exceptional political, editorial and sports coverage. These papers and smaller Black presses, such as the *Kansas City Call* and the



*It wasn't just a case of showing up. Guys would vie for positions on the team. And the audience participation was much more rabid than it is now. Much more rabid! Nowadays, attention is so divided among so many people.*

*At the East-West game, we just raised hell from the first pitch, right on through to the end of the game. It was a case where it was much more enjoyable. More like a picnic.*

This All-Star spectacle emerged from Black baseball's East-West League. The new league in 1932 consisted of the Baltimore Black Sox, the Cuban Stars of New York, the Washington (DC) Pilots, the Hilldale Club from Darby (Pennsylvania), the Cleveland Stars, the Newark Browns and the Detroit Wolves (who merged later that year with the Homestead Grays, shortly before the league folded). Incomplete standings show that the Black Sox were leading the league with a 20-9 won-lost record. Greenlee's Crawfords were third, behind the Detroit Wolves/Homestead Grays, at 32-26.

After the failure of the short-lived East-West League, Greenlee took club secretary Roy Sparrow's suggestion of an East-West All-Star Game showcasing the best players around the league to reboot the Black brand.

The brand had singular vitality and originality, featuring personalities like Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, stars such as Turkey Stearnes and Mule Suttles, along with talents ranging from Bullet Rogan to Buck O'Neil, from Pop Lloyd to James "Cool Papa" Bell.

The game was as colorful as the players' names. In the inaugural game in 1933, Rube Foster's younger brother Willie Foster pitched a

complete game, the only instance of a pitcher going the distance in the Comiskey classic.

Another unique moment occurred in 1956, when Pedro Sierra and Manuel Quevedo, both pitchers for the Detroit Stars, competed against each other. Sierra pitched the final three innings for the East squad, while Quevedo pitched 3.2 innings for the West team. Ace Robinson of the Memphis Red Sox picked up the victory for the East, 11-5.

Perhaps the most feared hitter in the East-West Classic was Suttles — not Gibson, as many might expect. Suttles slammed home runs in the 1933 and 1935 All-Star Games. He injected so much fear in pitchers that he was walked four times in the '35 Classic before belting the game-winning homer off pitcher Martín Dihigo with two outs in the 11th inning. Adding to his legend, Suttles has the highest slugging percentage (.941) and highest on-base-plus-slugging percentage (1.506) in the games.

That 1935 contest featured 14 future members of the National Baseball Hall of Fame, while the 1948 game showcased 14 future major leaguers.

Memphis Red Sox outfielder Neal Robinson compiled the highest batting average in East-West All-Star history, hitting .500 in 24 at-bats. The versatile Robinson, along with Turkey Stearnes, were the only players to bat in the cleanup and leadoff positions. Despite Robinson's nine All-Star Game appearances, media underrated him as a player throughout his career.

The game's most legendary leadoff hitter was Cool Papa Bell. A testament to his speed, Bell batted leadoff in a record seven East-West contests.

**Twenty years before the American League and National League began playing two All-Star Games per season, the Negro Leagues debuted the concept. The first East-West All-Star Game of 1939 was played at Comiskey Park on Aug. 6.**

Another underrated star was hot corner gloveman Alex Radcliffe, the younger brother of Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe. Alex Radcliffe holds the record for the most consecutive games with a hit (9). With an East-West high of 50 at-bats, Alex had a slash line of .340/.420/.760, along with nine RBI.

In the 1937 Classic, the Radcliffe brothers became the first siblings to play — with Alex representing the Chicago American Giants and Ted representing the Cincinnati Tigers at catcher. Living up to his nickname "Double Duty," Theodore Roosevelt Radcliffe appeared in three games as a catcher and three games as a pitcher. In 1943, the Radcliffes had a reunion and represented the same team, the Chicago American Giants.

The most productive pitcher in East-West All-Star history was Leon Day. Representing the Brooklyn Eagles and the Newark Eagles in nine appearances, the most of any pitcher, Day became the all-time leader in strikeouts (23) and innings pitched (21.1). In the first of two All-Star Games in 1942, Day faced seven batters and struck out five (three in the ninth), allowing no walks and no hits.

Buck Leonard, a seasoned Homestead Grays' first baseman, appeared in a record 13 Classics, and scored the most runs (9), hit the most homers (3) and had the most RBI (14). It's worth noting that Leonard batted in the cleanup slot nine times, compared to six times by slugger Josh Gibson.

Twenty years before the white major leagues featured two All-Star Games (from 1959-62), the popular East-West Classic had two showcases in 1939: at Comiskey Park (an estimated 40,000 fans) and Yankee Stadium (20,000). World War II prevented the white major leagues from hosting an all-star game in 1945. In contrast, 31,174 patrons marched into Comiskey to see their Black all-stars.

From its start in 1933 to the final game in Kansas City in 1962, the East-West All-Star Game remained a magnet for fans, celebrities and players to come together. ●

*Larry Lester is a curatorial consultant for the Hall of Fame's ongoing Black Baseball Initiative.*