



FASTFACTS



Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Mb • 309-323 Portage Ave. • Winnipeg, MB • Canada R3B 2C1
 ph: (204) 927-3200 • fax: (204) 927-3201 • ccpamb@policyalternatives.ca • www.policyalternatives.ca/mb

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FROM JACKIE ROBINSON TO THE MANITOBA BASEBALL HALL OF FAME

Sixty years ago, on April 18, 1946, Jackie Robinson became the first professional ball player in North America to cross over from black to white baseball, when he joined the Montreal Royals, a farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers. A year later Robinson was moved into the Dodger lineup at second base, a position he would play with great skill and dignity for 10 years. Robinson's entry into white baseball would transform professional sports, and have a profound impact on race relations in North America.

On June 3, we will witness yet another manifestation of Robinson's legacy in Morden, Manitoba, when the Brandon Greys teams from 1948-52 and two star players from those teams, Dirk "Bubblegum" Gibbons and Armando Vasquez, are inducted into the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame. The story of how this came about is worth telling because it reminds us of an important part of our sports and social history.

The Demise of the American Negro Leagues and its Impact on Baseball in Manitoba

Once Jackie Robinson had cracked the Dodgers line up, there was an expectation that teams in the American and National leagues would immediately plunder the Negro Leagues of its best players. This didn't happen, at least not quickly, but the Negro Leagues disbanded anyway and many of the older players were left with nowhere to play. They were joined by younger players looking for alternative places to play ball.

Many found a refuge with teams in the Manitoba Senior Baseball League. Cuban-born Armando Vasquez, who had played with Las Palomas of Havana in 1947 and the

New York Cubans in 1948, came to the Brandon Greys in 1948. A year later Dirk Gibbons, born in Tampa, Florida in 1928, and who had played for the Indianapolis Clowns, joined the Greys in 1949.

Combining outstanding local players (many already in the Hall of Fame) and recruits from the defunct Negro leagues, the Greys were a powerhouse in Manitoba. In 1948, they had a record of 25 wins and 8 losses against rival teams from Winnipeg (the Vets, the Reos and the Elmwood Giants), and won the league championship. In 1949, they won 87 of a total of 108 games in league and tournament play, and repeated as league champions.

In 1950, the Mandak league was formed from teams in Manitoba – Brandon Greys, Carman Cardinals, Elmwood Giants and Winnipeg Buffaloes – and North Dakota – initially the Minot Mallards, and later the Williston Oilers and Bismark Barons. The Greys finished second in the league in 1950 and won it in 1951.

The Greys of the late 1940s and early 1950s provided probably the best baseball ever played in Brandon. Games at Kinsmen Stadium drew people from a 50 mile radius and crowds at crucial games reached 5,000. Many players became household names – local players like Gerry MacKay, Ian Lowe and Steve Clark, and players from the Negro Leagues like Gibbons and Vasquez.

Players from the Negro Leagues not only found a place to play ball, but also a place where they were accepted into the community. There were few overt manifestations of intolerance and racism. Some of the players boarded with local families such as the Bentley family. Sid Bentley



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was a great fan who believed in integrated baseball. In 1951 he wrote a letter to Jackie Robinson, congratulating him on his role in advancing the interests of black players and telling him about the Greys. In his reply, Robinson thanked Bentley and sent him an autographed picture. Once the players realized that Manitoba was not like the southern USA, they went to dances and other social events, frequented local restaurants and other establishments, and dated local women. They made many friendships that have endured to this day.

Gibbons and Vasquez return to Brandon

In recent years there has been a revival of interest in 1940s-1950s era baseball and in the role of players from the defunct Negro Leagues on teams in the prairie provinces.

This spring Barry Swanton, a former Winnipegger, published a book titled: *The Mandak League: Haven For Former Negro League Ballplayers, 1950-1957*. Robert Huculak, also from Manitoba and now living in Toronto, is working on a documentary film on Negro League ballplayers in Manitoba. In August 2005 Huculak brought Gibbons and Vasquez to Manitoba to shoot footage in Winnipeg and Brandon. They threw out the first ball at a Goldeyes game on August 27th, 2005, followed by a trip to Brandon to shoot footage at Kinsmen Stadium.

On August 29, 2005, Huculak, Vasquez and Gibbons arrived late to attend a regularly scheduled Brandon City Council meeting. On a point of privilege, I requested permission to introduce the three guests and allow them to address Council. The Mayor ruled the request out of order but my challenge to the ruling was carried and Vasquez from New York City, age 85; Gibbons from Tampa Florida, age 77; and Huculak from Toronto addressed council. The Minutes note that "City Council applauded the visitors and presented them with pins from the City of Brandon to recognize their contributions to our community".

Acceptance to the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame

The nominations to the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame were submitted in August 2005. Lois Bentley nominated Dirk Gibbons and the 1948-49 Greys teams; Lil Lowe—whose late husband Ian was player-manager for the Greys in 1948-49, and a player in 1950-51—and her family nominated the 1948-51 Greys teams; and Bob Huculak nominated Armando Vasquez. All the nominations were approved by the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame for induction June 3, 2006.

Despite some initial opposition, Brandon City Council was persuaded of the importance of this era to the history of

Brandon and they approved payment of \$1,000 toward the costs of bringing Vasquez and Gibbons to Morden, and purchasing a table at the Hall of Fame induction dinner.

Brandon's Progressive Legacy

In recent years, Brandon has acquired a well deserved reputation as a progressive city because of initiatives such as a strong smoking by-law, now applied on a province-wide basis; free bus tickets for social assistance recipients and more recently Grade 7 and 8 students who travel between schools for shops and home economics classes; a pesticide by-law; and the advocacy of green measures with the Association of Manitoba Municipalities and the Manitoba government. The City of Brandon's support for the induction of the Brandon Greys, and for Vasquez and Gibbons, adds to this legacy by honouring an important part of our history and the people who contributed to it.

The teams and players will be inducted into the Manitoba Baseball Hall of Fame on June 3, 2006. The next day they will be in Brandon for a City of Brandon event organized by City Heritage staff to commemorate the Mandak league and the Brandon Greys. It is fitting that these events are taking place in the year of the 60th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's courageous achievement in breaking the colour bar in white baseball.

- Errol Black

Errol Black is a retired Economics Professor. He is currently a Brandon City Councillor, and a board member of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba. This piece first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press on June 1, 2006.

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