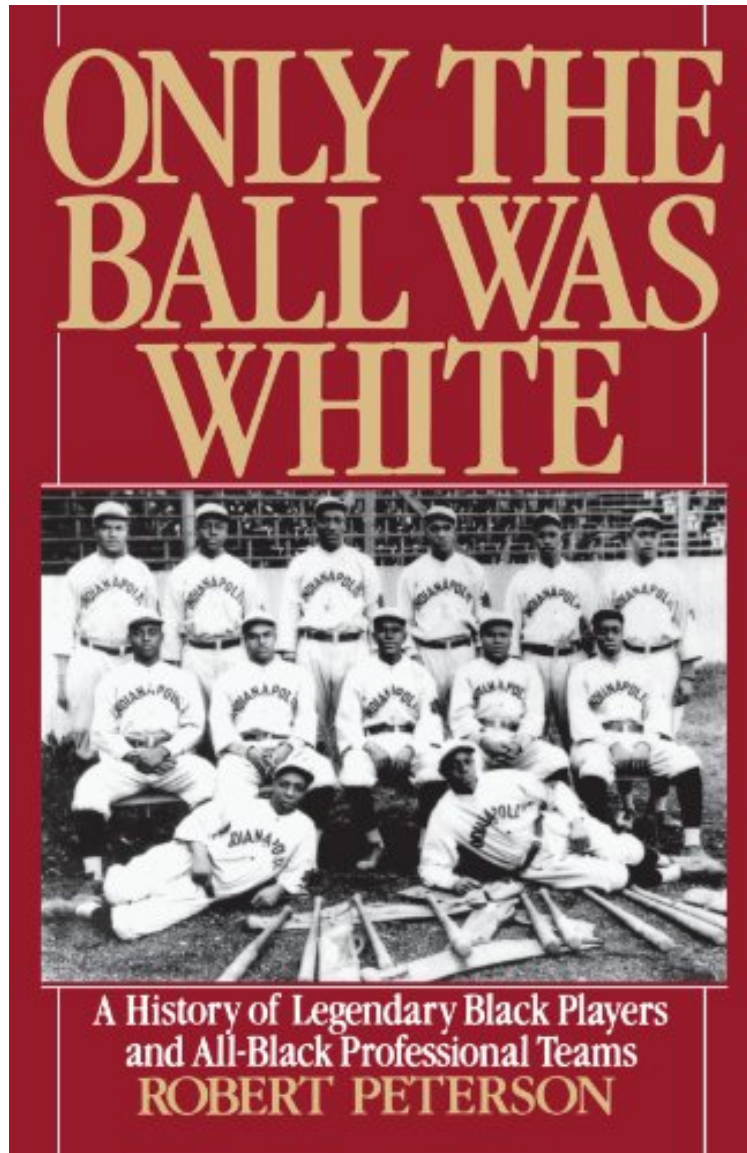


Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams

Robert Peterson

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Robert Peterson : Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. **IllustriousBy HH**"Only the Ball Was White" is an extremely well-researched book. Its greatest asset is laying bare the basic facts of the African-American experience in professional baseball up to 1947. Peterson relies on interviews with former players and on years of newspaper accounts from the African-American press and from publications like the Sporting News to establish that several African-Americans -- notably Bud Fowler, Frank Grant, and Moses Fleetwood Walker -- played in organized baseball before the turn of the century; that the Cuban Giants, formed in Long Island in 1885, were probably not the first black professional team, "but dominated black baseball in its infancy"; and that the eight-team League of Colored Base Ball Clubs actually was recognized by organized baseball as a legitimate minor league in 1887, but fell apart in its first season. Peterson takes the reader through the formation of hundreds of all-black teams in the early 20th century and documents the history of the various Negro Leagues that operated from the 1920s to the 1950s: the Negro National League, the Eastern Colored League and the Negro American League foremost among them. All these leagues suffered from financial difficulties, scheduling irregularities, high club turnover, and rampant player contract jumping. Often, the leagues did not finish out their seasons or failed to have postseason games to determine a championship. The Leagues staged a Negro World Series only 11 times (1924-1927, 1941-1946) and those series usually did not generate much interest among fans. In the book's appendix, Peterson publishes box scores from all the East-West Games, which brought together the greatest stars in Negro baseball and were productions worthy of the major leagues. The box scores are very interesting, as they include the names not just of Negro League legends like Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige but also of future Major Leaguers like Roy Campanella, Larry Doby, and Luke Easter. Peterson devotes chapters to four important figures from the history of the Negro Leagues: Rube Foster, John Henry Lloyd, Paige and Gibson. In another chapter, through the use of player interviews, he paints an interesting picture of what life was like for the barnstorming teams of the era. More than a third of a book is the appendix, which features such things as league standings from 1920 to 1950, World Series line scores, East-West Game box scores, and an all-time register of players and officials from 1884-1950. The book also includes brief profiles of about 60 of the greatest players in Negro League history. The book's epilogue is interesting from an historical perspective. It is a plea from Peterson for the Baseball Hall of Fame to admit some of the great Negro Leaguers as full members. Just a year after the book was published, Satchel Paige was elected to the Hall, and others soon followed such as Smokey Joe Williams. The current numbers exceed even Peterson's most optimistic projections; he suggested that eight should be inducted. To his credit, Peterson is more interested in facts than in perpetuating legends. For instance, he disputes the claim that an African-American player invented shin guards and he casts doubt on the notion that the legendary Cap Anson was by himself responsible for enacting the color barrier. "Anson's animus toward Negroes was strong and obvious," Peterson writes. "But that he had the power and popularity to force Negroes out of organized baseball almost single-handedly is to credit him with more influence than he had, or for that matter, than he needed. For it seems clear that a majority of professional baseball players in 1887, both Northerners and Southerners, opposed integration in the game" (p. 30). The biggest weakness of the book is Peterson's writing. The author sometimes indulges in clichés (e.g., "[T]hey were saints and sinners") and the book comes off at times as a dry recitation of facts rather than as a dramatic and fascinating story. This approach is probably somewhat intentional -- after all, Peterson is the first serious researcher of a subject that at the time was not taken seriously -- but it nonetheless can be irritating for the reader. Another problem is that Peterson doesn't spend enough time discussing the kind of baseball these men played. One gets the impression that the Negro Leagues featured dead-ball era style playing with lots of bunting, stolen bases and aggressive base running. But the point is never made quite explicit, and the reader comes away not quite sure.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. **More than I bargained forBy Nathan Blunck**I was expecting articles on all the great black ballplayers of the past. Instead, I got a true history of the negro teams that used to exist in the US as well as a list of the legendary players at the end. If you love baseball history, you need to read this book.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. **The Big ThrowdownBy KayDee DaytimeStar!**Full of good stories, stats, and stuff! There are also great photographs. Whatchu know bout dem Detroit Stars?!!!

Early in the 1920s, the New York Giants sent a scout to watch a young Cuban play for Foster's American Giants, a baseball club in the Negro Leagues. During one at-bat this talented slugger lined a ball so hard that the rightfielder was able to play it off the top of the fence and throw Christobel Torrienti out at first base. The scout liked what he saw, but was disappointed in the player's appearance. "He was a light brown," recalled one of Torrienti's teammates, "and would have gone up to the major leagues, but he had real rough hair." Such was life behind the color line, the unofficial boundary that prevented hundreds of star-quality athletes from playing big-league baseball. When *Only the Ball Was White* was first published in 1970, Satchel Paige had not yet been inducted into the Hall of Fame and there was a general ignorance even among sports enthusiasts of the rich tradition of the Negro Leagues. Few knew that during the 1930s and '40s outstanding black teams were playing regularly in Yankee Stadium and Brooklyn's Ebbets Field. And names like Cool Papa Bell, Rube Foster, Judy Johnson, Biz Mackey, and Buck Leonard would bring no flash of smiling recognition to the fan's face, even though many of these men could easily have played alongside Ty Cobb, Walter Johnson, Hack Wilson, Lou Gehrig--and shattered their records in the process. Many baseball pundits

now believe, for example, that had Josh Gibson played in the major leagues, he would have surpassed Babe Ruth's 714 home runs before Hank Aaron had even hit his first. And the great Dizzy Dean acknowledged that the best pitcher he had ever seen was not Lefty Grove or Carl Hubbell, but rather "old Satchel Paige, that big lanky colored boy." In *Only the Ball Was White*, Robert Peterson tells the forgotten story of these excluded ballplayers, and gives them the recognition they were so long denied. Reconstructing the old Negro Leagues from contemporary sports publications, accounts of games in the black press, and through interviews with the men who actually played the game, Peterson brings to life the fascinating period that stretched from shortly after the Civil War to the signing of Jackie Robinson in 1947. We watch as the New York Black Yankees and the Philadelphia Crawfords take the field, look on as the East-West All-Star lineups are announced, and listen as the players themselves tell of the struggle and glory that was black baseball. In addition to these vivid accounts, Peterson includes yearly Negro League standings and an all-time register of players and officials, making the book a treasure trove of baseball information and lore. A monumental and poignant book, *Only the Ball Was White* reminds us that what was often considered the "Golden Age" of baseball was also the era of Jim Crow. It is a book that must be read by anyone hoping not only to understand the story of baseball, but the story of America.

"[A] thorough, well-documented book....A worthy and fascinating addition to anyone's baseball library."--The New York Times Book "Peterson...[is] to be congratulated not only for an original subject but an excellent book for anyone who enjoys reading baseball history."--The Sporting News "Filled with the fascination that comes from discovering an unknown, complex, forgotten continent."--Newsweek "Fascinating....One of the truly important sociological contributions to the growing literature of baseball."--The Washington Post Book World "Highly recommended."--Library Journal About the Author Robert W. Peterson is the author of *Cages to Jump Shots* (Oxford, 1990) and *The Boy Scouts: An American Adventure*. He has written for *Sports Illustrated*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Sport*, *Boys' Life*, and many other magazines.