

In the Shadows: Cincinnati's Black Baseball Players

Lonnie Wheeler and
John Baskin

By sheer breadth of body, Dave Parker commands a baseball clubhouse, the biggest man in it, the noisiest, the wittiest, and most profane, the highest paid and, in the broad context of his controversial career, probably the best player. So formidably at ease and happily arrogant is Parker in the big arena that he cannot be imagined away from it, silent, anonymous, his great arm comparatively unknown, his great swing comparatively unseen, his great imagination wasted, his great salary spent on someone lesser and white. But for the timing, it might have happened that way. For others before him, it did.

Parker is the greatest black baseball player Cincinnati has produced for two reasons: because of his hitting, and because no other black player from Cincinnati played in the major leagues until Jim Wynn broke in with Houston in 1964. For the same reasons, Wynn is the second best black player to come out of the city. In fact, along with Pete Rose and Buddy Bell, Parker and Wynn are two of the four most prominent players Cincinnati has sent forth in the last forty years. That is, since the major leagues were integrated; which only makes one wonder how many uncommon athletes may have been buried in the bigotry of the otherwise grand old game. It stands to reason that in the seven decades of baseball segregation that preceded 1947, as many as a third of Cincinnati's outstanding players were not permitted to pursue their craft into the major leagues because of their pigmentation. Of the 236 Cincinnatians who have appeared in the majors, only nine are black. Yet six of those nine were active players in 1987, a season in which Cincinnati had seventeen major-leaguers. On that percentage, major league rosters of the game's first century-plus would have included more than eighty blacks from the Cincinnati area. Conservatively, we can presume that there were at least fifty to seventy-five from the city and its environs who had major league ability without major league opportunity. Some of them—at least four or five—would have been important big-league players, among the best to ever come out of the Queen City area. If not like Parker in style, these men must certainly have been comparable in the skills of ballplaying.

A dozen or so of them played in the Negro leagues, the most prominent being pitchers Porter Moss, Roy Partlow, and Jesse Houston, and an outfielder named Henry "Speed" Merchant. Many of the top players, however, performed only on local teams such as Excelsior, Chivo, Covington, or Madisonville. There were no organized professional Negro leagues until 1920. Those that flourished in the beginning became unstable in the Depression years and declined sharply after Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. And even in their heydays in the 1920's and late 1930's-early 1940's, the Negro franchises were not so prosperous that every promising ballplayer would entrust his livelihood to them. Partlow, an able lefthander, pitched for the Cincinnati Tigers only on weekends at the outset of his career, reluctant to surrender a blue-collar job at Armco Steel. Not until the Tigers moved to Memphis in 1938 did he cast his fate with them full-time, later becoming an all-star with the Homestead Grays.

The Tigers which played in Cincinnati from 1934 to 1937 were organized by Olympic track star DeHart Hubbard, who had previously presided over the city's pre-eminent black amateur team, Excelsior. Numerous Excelsior alums turned professional with the Tigers—Partlow, Moss, Sonny and Virgil Harris, Helburn Meadows, Louis Dula—and they were a distinguished group, especially the pitchers. "If I had to pick one fellow to pitch a game for me," said Sylvester Gordon, an Excelsior star who played with Partlow, Moss, Houston, and the others, and coached and umpired around the city for decades thereafter, "it'd be Louis Dula. Oh, he had a fastball that was something. He'd hook up with Satchel Paige, and the outcome wasn't that bad." Dula beat Paige once in Cincinnati and went on to pitch for Homestead, but developed a sore arm and was overshadowed by Houston and Partlow. Houston, meanwhile, came from Norwood, and former ballplayers there affirm that he was a considerably better pitcher than his Norwood neighbor, the white Eddie "Babe" Klieman, who had a successful eight year career in the major leagues. Houston once won twenty games for the Grays, whose legendary first baseman, Buck Leonard, testified that Houston was better than Dula but that Partlow was better than both of them. Partlow had the longest Negro league career of any of the Cincinnatians,

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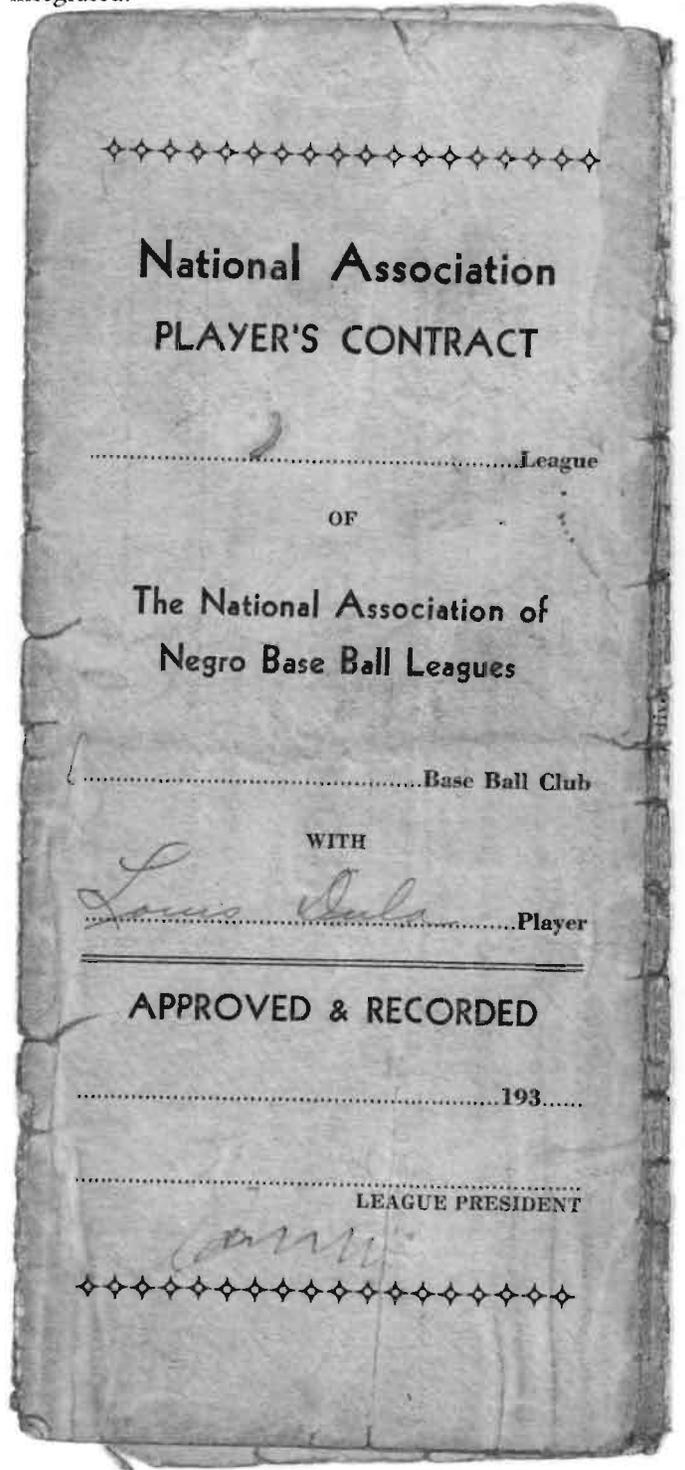


tured future Globetrotter Goose Tatum and, among other "schticks," originated the invisible-ball routine the Trotters later borrowed. In the Clowns' case, they would execute infield practice in head-spinning pantomime. Another Clowns headliner was Pepper Bassett, the Rocking Chair Catcher, who handled a few innings of every game comfortably seated. When the Clowns moved to Cincinnati in 1943, they replaced the franchise that had operated for one year as the Cincinnati Buckeyes. The Buckeyes moved to Cleveland, where they became a solid entry in the Negro American League. In 1946 the Clowns repaired to Indianapolis (they had split their home games between Indianapolis and Cincinnati in 1944), where they achieved enduring popularity, outlasting other Negro teams long after the major leagues integrated.

lasting sixteen years and winning often. However, Josh Johnson, who caught all of the Cincinnati pitchers while with the Tigers, rates the submarining Moss as the best of the lot. Moss had a ten-year professional career, "and he seemed to get better as he went along," said Johnson. Whoever was actually foremost among them, it's likely that together they formed the best company of pitchers the city proper has ever produced.

Another who played briefly with the Tigers was slugging outfielder Miller Rice. Rice, however, made his considerable reputation by playing wherever he could collect a ready dollar. He was said to be such a powerful batter, and so likely to strike out if he didn't hit a home run, that the infielders would sit down when he came to the plate. Two more Negro leaguers came later from the city—William Hudson, a pitcher and first baseman for the Chicago American Giants whose abilities were much admired by Reds manager Bill McKechnie and whose brother, Charles Hudson, was Dave Parker's knothole coach and guru; and Merchant, a swift outfielder who started as a batboy for the Tigers and played with Chicago and with the famous Clowns when they were in Cincinnati from 1943 to 1945.

The Clowns had been created in Miami in 1930 and, much in the style of basketball's Harlem Globetrotters, became renowned for artful athleticism and hilarious slapstick. They toured in two old Cadillacs, fea-



Louis Dula, who possessed a great fast ball, developed a sore arm which shortened his promising pitching career.

In 1937, the Homestead Grays signed Dula for \$ 1125.00



Though Negro league baseball, obscured by the presence of the Reds, had little impact upon Cincinnati, the city provided a jumping-off point for no fewer than four franchises that later enjoyed prominence—and one that did not. The forgettable team was an outfit called the Cincinnati Browns, which in 1887 became a charter member of the first Negro professional league, the League of Colored Base Ball Clubs. Although success of this league—recognized by the national agreement under which baseball operated—might have precipitated big-league integration several decades before it occurred, the league lasted but one week. There was not another significant black professional league for more than thirty years. And although Cincinnati did not produce its own team for more than a decade after that, in 1921 the well-known Cuban Stars, previously itinerant, leased Redland Field for a season in the Negro National League. The Cubans were not big winners in the league—their downfall was a short staff of pitchers—still they brought to Cincinnati some of the best baseball talent in the world, both on their roster (the Cubans' outfield might have been the equal of the Reds') and those of visiting teams. (One opposition batter, a nineteen-year-old strongboy from Chicago named John Beckwith, was the first to hit a ball over the wall of Redland Field.) The Cubans moved to New York after the 1921 season and continued to import first-rate players into the United States.

But the local team most closely connected to Cincinnati was the Tigers, begun in 1934 as a farm team for the Homestead Grays and a higher forum for Hubbard's old Excelsiors. The Tigers, largely local at first, were not recognized members of the Negro American League (NAL) until 1937, when they played at Crosley Field and were managed by the illustrious Double Duty Radcliffe (whose nickname was provided by Damon Runyon after the famous writer saw Radcliffe catch the first game of a doubleheader in New York and then pitch a shutout in the second). They were a low-budget team that traveled in a Studebaker bus handed down from a musical group called McKinney's Cotton Pickers, but the Tigers drew as many as 15,000 fans—mostly black—to Crosley Field. Led by the cagey underhanded pitching of Moss, they finished a surprising third in the NAL in their only official season. The team was sold and incorporated into the existing Memphis Red Sox, who, bolstered by the Cincinnatians, swept triumphantly through the NAL in 1938 and continued on successfully.

As crack as the Tigers were, except for their greater numbers and their affiliation there was little to distinguish them from their amateur predecessors, Excelsior. Coached for many years by Boss Parker and playing out of the Gest Street and Deer Creek parks, Excelsior competed in the fast local league that included outstanding teams such as Comello's and Siebler clothing stores and future major-

Not much is known about the Avon-Oaks, pictured here in a 1911 photo; they were probably a church-sponsored team.

leaguers like Ethan Allen and Jim Beckman. “They finally broke up the league because we were so good,” said Gordon, who, as a grounder-gobbling third baseman, might have had major-league ability himself. “The other teams complained that we had the whole city to draw from. When we played Siebler or Comello’s, you couldn’t find standing room down at Deer Creek number six. Once, the Reds asked the amateur commission to let us play in their park at one o’clock so they could draw some of our crowd. And when we played, there was sometimes \$15,000 to \$20,000 lost on the game in betting. Once we won twenty-three straight games, but we always managed to lose the last game that would keep us from moving on in the tournament. We never complained much, except one time when the Evanston team used slippery elm against us.”

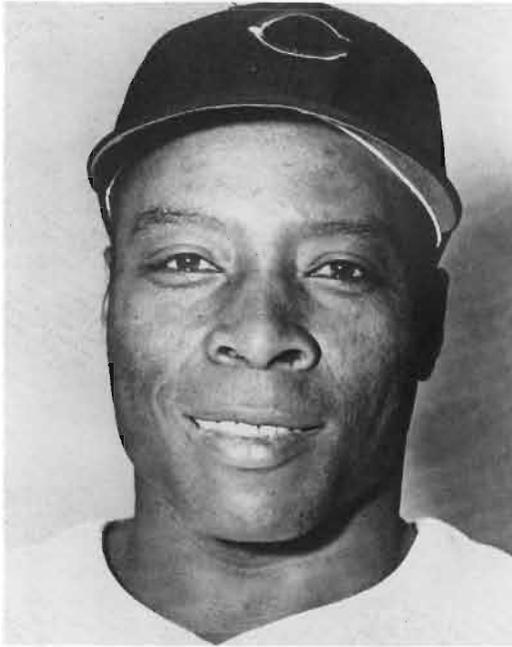
In addition to Gordon and the several future Negro leaguers, Excelsior produced any number of players who might have been the equals, at least, of such later black Cincinnati big-leaguers as Tony Scott or Leon Durham. Willie Cockrell was an early-Excelsior outfielder who, like his contemporary, pitcher Barber Wallace, had unmistakable major league talent. There was none so blatantly big-time, however, as mighty Harry “Wufang” Ward, who might well have been another Parker. “I believe that Wufang was better than Parker or Jim Wynn, either one,” said Gordon. “We’re talking about when baseball was baseball.” Ward, nicknamed because of his Chinese-looking eyes, became a four-sport superstar at Wilberforce University—an inside-outside half-back, center in basketball, shotputter, discus thrower, and first baseman—but Gordon remembers him as the best hitter he ever saw. “He’d tear your fences down.” Ward ended up driving a taxi in Cincinnati.

Ironically, Cincinnati has never had a black pitcher in the major leagues, even though many of the best black players in the city’s history have been pitchers: Wallace, Bum Carter, Ernest Payne, Sam Odom, Freddie Bicks—all from the Excelsior era. The best black infielder from that period was probably Gordon (“I don’t want to brag on myself, but when the chips were down, the pitchers would say, ‘Make ’em hit it to third.’”), and as an outfielder, there was none more swift nor sure than Harry Robinson. “He would catch the ball running with his back to home plate, his arm just stretched out for it,” said Gordon. “He just knew where the ball was. I saw him make the kind of catches that Willie Mays made later.”

Even before Excelsior was organized, Cincinnati had fine—perhaps they were great, how can we know?—black players such as Houston Turner and Golden Renfro

and the unforgettable Charlie Grant, son of a horse trainer from Cincinnati. Grant played second base for the black Chicago Giants and in the winters worked as a bellhop at the Eastland Hotel in Hot Springs, Arkansas. In 1901 John McGraw brought his Baltimore Orioles to Hot Springs for spring training, whereupon he noticed Grant carrying himself expertly for a team of hotel employees. McGraw, knowing immediately that Grant was of major league mettle, was gazing at a wall map in the hotel lobby one day when he was seized with inspiration and summoned for Grant. He told the light-skinned Cincinnati that he had just discovered a creek called Tokohoma and henceforth Grant would be Tokohoma, a Cherokee Indian and the new second baseman of the Orioles. Grant went along happily with the scheme, even placing feathers in his hair, and was ready to begin the season with Baltimore until the White Sox’ Charlie Comiskey learned the truth of the matter and declared that, if McGraw persisted in this farce, he would place a Chinaman of his acquaintance at third base. Grant returned to Cincinnati, played some Negro ball and managed a few white teams. He was killed in 1932 when hit by a car while sitting in front of the Reading Road apartment building for which he was janitor. His grave, ironically, was placed unmarked in Spring Grove Cemetery, the same resting place that accommodates Miller Huggins, a Cincinnati second baseman of perhaps lesser ability who died three years prior as a famous figure of the game. Grant’s private legacy is that for more than forty years he remained the only black American to get even a whiff of the major leagues.

Even after Jackie Robinson broke the color line in 1947, opportunity for black players was mostly a tease. With teams like Duffy’s Tavern, Adams Cab, Ferguson Cab, Chivo, the Madisonville Eagles, and the Valley Tigers, as well as those across the river, there was available talent for any big-league team progressive enough to tap it—players like Sonny Coleman, Claude West, Bernie Warren, Henry Boston, and Cecil “Red” McLean. “More than a couple of us would have gone right along through the minor leagues and into the major leagues,” said McLean, a superlative infielder who was reluctant to leave his family and finally got a couple of tryouts after his knee had been injured. The Valley Tigers, who traveled the Midwest in an old school bus—the players carrying along chewing gum to plug the radiator—once challenged the Reds, but the offer was not accepted. Neither were the Reds interested in them individually. “Several of us tried out for the Reds, and we tore the camp up,” said Boston. “We never heard a word from them. The Reds didn’t want any black ballplayers. But the way I look at it, it



just wasn't my time. I'm just happy my son (White Sox outfielder Daryl Boston) is able to make it."

The Reds, in fact, were one of the last teams to integrate. The barrier was finally broken in 1954 by a University of Toledo basketball player and Indiana native Chuck Harmon. Some consider a pair of Cubans the Reds signed in 1911, Armando Marsans and Rafael Almeida, to be the first blacks in the major leagues, but both were possessed of distinctly light skin or would not have been rendered Cincinnati uniforms. Reds manager Clark Griffith, upon hearing of president Garry Herrmann's plan to contract the Cubans, expressed a common concern when he said, "Many persons will think they are Negroes. We will not pay any Hans Wagner prices for a couple of dark-skinned islanders." When Herrmann went to the train station to meet Marsans and Almeida upon their arrival in Cincinnati, he was in fact taken aback when two Pullman porters happened by first. "Great Scott, we can't have those smokers on our club," he huffed, mistaking them for the Cubans. He was most relieved when the gentrified Marsans and Almeida turned out to be, in the words of the *Enquirer*, "two of the purest bars of Castilian soap to ever wash upon our shores."

It remained therefore for Harmon to break the Reds' color line forty-three years later. Harmon, much like Jackie Robinson, had gained experience playing with and against white men in college, but away from the university he still met with the prevailing athletic bigotry. While at Toledo, he played under an assumed name with the India-

napolis Clowns for a few days in 1947. Later, he was on an all black baseball team at the Great Lakes Naval Station during World War II (Mickey Cochrane and Schoolboy Rowe were on the white team) with Larry Doby, who became the first black player in the American League. "You had to be a little better than the other players to make it in the big leagues," said Harmon, who was a member of the Reds for two years before he was allowed to stay with his white teammates at the Chase Hotel in St. Louis. Harmon never played regularly for the Reds, but remained with them until 1957. By that time the team had engaged several blacks, including Frank Robinson. The next year Vada Pinson came up, and as the decade turned, Cincinnati's best players were these two extraordinary black outfielders. Dave Parker had his role models.



Parker lived on Poplar Street, a block from Crosley Field, and he used to stand in the players' parking lot to watch in awe as Robinson and Pinson pulled up back-to-back in identical white Thunderbirds with porthole windows and red interiors. Once Robinson gave Parker an extra glove that was in the trunk of the fabulous Thunderbird. "That clinched him as my idol," said Parker, who took a job at Crosley as a teenager, selling lemonade on hot days and hot dogs at night games but really more interested in watching the games. He was a catcher then.

Charles Hudson, a strong player himself at one time and later a neighborhood grocer in Camp Washington, remembered when Parker first reported to him, a

Bob Thurman, an outfielder for the Reds from 1955 to 1959, was known as "Mr. Swish."

Prior to the 1950's, the closest black youngsters could get to a career in the major leagues was carrying the news of the games.



scrawny nine-year-old kid of whom Hudson was immediately suspicious. "Boy, you can't play no ball," he said. "Yes I can, Mr. Hudson," said Parker. Theirs was one of the first fully integrated teams in the city, and it was a good one. "We would win our district championship and then something would always happen to make it so we didn't get to the city championship," said Hudson. "They would find one kid too old, or not eligible, or one thing or another. Once, when we were playing up in Monroe, they threw pop all over a woman who was with us and said, 'You ain't gonna win no game up here? They gave us a hard time in other places, too, called us all kinds of names.'"

Parker was twelve when Wynn came up with the Astros as Cincinnati's first black major leaguer. Known as the Toy Cannon, Wynn was a small, powerfully built man whose vast abilities and sustained stardom underscored all the wasted talent that had gone before him. By the time Parker was sixteen, it was apparent that he too had the stuff to make it big. He was the best catching prospect around. Hudson advised Parker's father, Richard, a machinist at Lunkenheimer, to forbid his growing son from playing foot-

ball. But Parker was a major college prospect, a stampeding fullback who rushed for 1,300 yards as a junior at Courter Tech High School and was high on the recruiting lists of places like Ohio State and Southern California. Then, in the first game of his senior year, he injured his knee. The cards and letters stopped coming. The Pittsburgh Pirates signed him for \$6,500.

Parker had become an outfielder. He made the switch when he played on the Wilson Freight team where he teamed with another future major leaguer, Leo Foster. The Wilson Freight team made it to the Connie Mack World Series in New Mexico. Had it not been for his showing in New Mexico, Parker might not have been drafted at all. A decade later, he was a two-time batting champion and the MVP of the National League. When the Pirates won the World Series in 1979, Parker—surprisingly, only the third black man from Cincinnati to make the major leagues, behind Wynn and Foster—was the highest paid player in the game and generally considered the best.

Then his knee began to give him problems and his hitting fell off a little bit. After the 1980 season he

Frank Robinson, the league's most valuable player, and Vada Pinson were starters on the 1961 pennant winning Reds. (Photo courtesy of The Cincinnati Reds)

had surgery and got fat sitting around. He also became involved with cocaine. Some of the Pittsburgh fans could not abide an overweight, declining black outfielder who was making \$1.6 million a year. One threw a tightly wrapped bag of nuts and bolts at Parker in right field. His home was vandalized, his car scratched, his mailbox blown up. "I got the feeling that somebody out there didn't like me," he said. "When I received that contract (\$8.1 million for five years), there was no way I could do enough. Looking back, I think my problems all started with that contract. . . . It was salary, being outspoken, and you can't ignore the fact that being black didn't help a heckuva lot. My last three years there were total torment." They were also insufficient in performance, in terms of his standard and stipend.

Given his and their history, it was astonishing, actually, that the Reds signed Parker to a free-agent contract for 1984. But he reported firm, drug-free, and delighted. "Coming back to Cincinnati, my hometown, was like the start of my second life in baseball," he said. In each of his first three seasons, Parker was the Reds' Most Valuable Player, and he was even more valuable than it seemed, a bawdy but affirmative clubhouse presence, a man who assumed leadership by the force of his bat and humor. He was a hotdog, snapping at fly balls one-handed and swagging circuitously around the bases after his frequent home runs, but thoroughly relished. He was troubled, fined \$120,000 for his previous cocaine involvement, but clean. And he was emphatically productive, driving in 125 runs in 1985 and finishing

second in the National League MVP voting. ("Four of the writers actually picked me fourth," he huffed. "Either they were drinking too many cocktails or they were watching baseball in Tokyo.")

Until he was controversially traded to Oakland after the 1987 season for a pair of young pitchers, Jose Rijo and Tim Lincecum, Parker was also appreciated in Cincinnati, something he hadn't been in Pittsburgh. He appreciated being appreciated; in his boldly charming way, Parker met his warm Cincinnati reception with courtesy and showmanship. And in his deliciously defiant way, it seemed also that he was intent upon creating enough commotion and achieving enough celebrity in his noisy career to score one for Wufang Ward and Charlie Grant and Speed Merchant and Louis Dula and Daryl Boston's dad, and for all the forgotten black players who never got a chance.



The Cincy Manggrums were sponsored by William L. Manggrum, a pharmacist who was proprietor of the first black-owned drugstore in Cincinnati. Manggrum's drugstore was at Chapel and Park streets in Walnut Hills.