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Josh Gibson

by Guy Belleranti

Born in Georgia in 1911, Josh Gibson was often called the "black Babe Ruth". When he was 12, his family moved to Pittsburgh where his father found work in a steel mill. By the time Gibson was 16 he'd made quite a name for himself playing sandlot baseball for amateur teams in the city. A few years later, in 1930, the Homestead Grays of the Negro National League signed him up as a catcher.



Two years later, Gibson left the Homestead Grays for the Pittsburgh Crawfords. Over the next few years, the team dominated the Negro Leagues. Among his teammates was the great pitcher Satchel Page.

Gibson then rejoined the Homestead Grays. He was instrumental in the team's long run of Negro League championships. Cumberland Posey, co-owner and manager of the team called Gibson "the best ball player, white or colored, that we have seen in all our years of following baseball".

Josh Gibson consistently hit for a high batting average, winning several Negro League batting titles. He also had a powerful compact swing that produced tape-measure home runs (many over 500 feet) at an unbelievable rate. Gibson would often roll up his sleeves and make his biceps bulge to goad an opposing pitcher.

Records weren't the most carefully kept by the Negro League, but all place Gibson's career batting average in the high .300's. Everyone also agrees that he hit over .400 several times. As for his power hitting, Negro League history books credit him with

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smashing 800 plus career home runs.

However, Gibson wasn't just a great hitter. He ran the bases with speed and was one of the top Negro League catchers. He rifled throws with great accuracy and blocked the plate with the best of them. Fans flocked to see him play. It wasn't uncommon to see 30,000 to 40,000 people at a game.

Tragically, baseball had a color line during Josh Gibson's playing days. This discrimination prevented him from playing in the Major Leagues. However, he did often play Negro League games in Major League parks. Newspaper reports of the time say he hit the longest home runs ever in Cleveland Stadium, Pittsburgh's Forbes Field and Washington's old Griffith Stadium. He also played a number of games in the old New York Polo grounds and in Yankee Stadium against the New York Black Yankees. Some insist that in one Yankee Stadium game he hit a ball entirely out of the whole park.

While Gibson wasn't allowed to play in the Major Leagues, he did play against Major League stars in off-season series between the Negro and Major Leagues. Sources say he hit over .400 against the major leaguers. Hall of Fame pitcher Walter Johnson was reported to have said, "he hits the ball a mile. And he catches so easy he might as well be in a rocking chair. Too bad this Josh Gibson is a colored fellow."

Monte Irvin, who played first in the Negro Leagues and then later for the New York Giants in the Major Leagues said, "I played with Willie Mays and against Hank Aaron. They were tremendous players, but they were no Josh Gibson. You saw him hit, and you took your hat off.... You tell people how great he was, they think you're exaggerating." Roy Campanella, Leo Durocher and others had similar things to say about Gibson's prowess.

Indeed, baseball's color line denied many great black ball players recognition alongside their Major League peers. It might have prevented Josh Gibson from being

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recognized as the greatest player of all time.

As the 1930's turned into the 1940's Gibson began suffering from frequent headaches, his catcher's knees ached more and more and he started drinking heavily. In 1943, he was diagnosed with a brain tumor. Yet he played on, still winning batting and home run titles.

In January of 1947, Josh Gibson died of a stroke. It was probably brought on by the tumor, but some also believe his health problems were worsened by drinking, painkillers and drugs. Many believe he was heartbroken he had never been allowed in the Major Leagues. Ironically, it was only a few months after Gibson's death that the color barrier was finally broken when Jackie Robinson was allowed to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

In 1972, Josh Gibson followed Satchel Paige as the second Negro League player inducted into the Major League Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. And in 1996, during black history month, Josh Gibson became one of several black athletes General Mills put on its Wheaties boxes.

-Originally purchased by EdGate Total Reader in 2006 for use in a Lexile-based reading assessment program.

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- 1) Apart from making the reader well-aware of how consummate a baseball player Josh was, the author is also trying to shed some light on.
 - a) How the color line cast a shadow over the careers of many great black players
 - b) True champions don't bother about the opportunities they are denied, but just focus on the ones that they have
 - c) If you have a will, you'll find a way, no matter how adverse the world around you is
 - d) The more illustrious your career becomes, the more problematic it is to deal with its challenges

- 2) Point out the irony in Gibson's life.

- 3) Josh Gibson was an extraordinarily prolific baseball player. Substantiate this using evidence from the text.

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- 4) What in your opinion could be the most probable cause (of the causes mentioned) for Gibson's demise ? Why do you think so?

- 5) Write a few lines about your favorite baseball (or any other sport) player and explain for what qualities you admire him. Do you see any similarities between your favorite player and Josh Gibson? State reasons for your answer.
