

A tip of the hat to the Negro Leagues

How Washington should honor those who paved the path for Jackie Robinson

By William R. Mattox Jr.

Major League Baseball is paying tribute this year to Jackie Robinson's heroic role in integrating our national pastime in 1947. While this momentous achievement ought to be celebrated, something should also be done to ensure that the Negro Leaguers who went before Robinson are never forgotten.

I may have just the answer.

Several years ago, when pro baseball returned to our nation's capital, MLB officials chose to name Washington's new team the Nationals. This name seemed to fit a National League team playing the national pastime in our national capital where the city's first team was called the Nationals.

But this name choice was curious for two reasons. First, the original Nationals were so bad for so long that they inspired the taunt "Washington: First in war, first in peace, and last in the American League."

Second, the original Nationals (who morphed into the Senators) represented only half of Washington's baseball tradition — the less-colorful half.

During the 1930s and '40s, a Negro League team called the Homestead Grays played many of its home games in Washington. The Grays were one of the most successful Negro League teams of all time, winning nine consecutive pennants from 1937 to 1945.

The Grays' roster featured the "Black Babe Ruth," Josh Gibson, who clubbed at least 75 homers in a single season and is believed to be the only player to ever hit a fair ball over the roof of Yankee Stadium. It also included James "Cool Papa" Bell, who was so fast legendary pitcher Satchel Paige said Cool Papa could flip the light switch by the door and jump under the bed covers before it got dark.

Finally, a worthy amendment

Given the Grays' storied history, Washington's baseball owners ought to do something Washington is known for — adopt an amendment. They ought to amend their name to the Washington National Grays.



By Web Bryant, USA TODAY

By adding "Grays," Washington would be honoring the memory of all those Negro Leaguers who were denied the opportunity to play in the Majors.

By keeping the "National" part of its name, Washington would be inviting Americans everywhere to see this team's story as part of our nation's larger story — of a people once divided by race coming together in no small part because of our common love of sports.

Recasting Washington's team as the National Grays would undoubtedly appeal to many blacks, and it just might help restore baseball to the prominent place it once occupied in African-American life.

Linking Washington's baseball heritage to the Negro Leagues is also apt to appeal to many whites (like me). In fact, whites account for 60% of the visits to the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City, Mo. Museum officials say visitors stop in to learn more about the Negro Leagues' great players, to lament the way segregation tarnished baseball's history, and to celebrate the triumph of the human spirit that gave the Negro Leagues so much verve and energy.

A new memorial

Next April, Washington, D.C., will open a new limestone-colored stadium for its baseball franchise. If this unveiling were to coincide with the adoption of the National Grays name, the ballpark could quickly become the baseball equivalent of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a hallowed shrine where people on all sides of a painful period in American history find common cause in honoring some forgotten heroes.

And in rooting for some new ones.

Indeed, amending Washington's team name would serve some practical benefits. It would enable the current players to replace their existing uniforms, which Washington sportscaster Tony Kornheiser has rightly called "so Old School that they appear to have been designed by Betsy Ross."

It also could spur the team to adopt some uniquely Washington mascots. (Personally, I'd like to see a Gray elephant wearing a red hat work the crowd down the right-field line while a Gray donkey wearing a blue hat leads cheers down the left-field line.)

More than anything, though, amending Washington's team name would honor the Negro Leaguers who never got their due. It would help fulfill the dream Martin Luther King Jr. described at Washington's Lincoln Memorial — that someday blacks and whites would live and work and play together.

And it would, with one word, capture this spirit of racial harmony and national reconciliation.

For when blacks and whites come together . . . you get Grays.

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