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Baseball Hall of Fame candidate once played in Langdon

Researcher uncovers the legend of great black pitcher John Donaldson

By MARLO MILLER
Republican Editor

July 11, 1916, one of the best pitchers in black baseball history visited a ball field in Langdon to play the local team.

Feb. 27, 2006, John Wesley Donaldson is being considered for induction into baseball's Hall of Fame. He is one of 39 candidates for a special Negro Leagues and Pre-Negro Leagues election.

If the vote swings Donaldson's way, it will be a sweet victory for Peter Gorton of Minneapolis. Gorton has been doggedly researching the life and career of this elusive athlete for about five years.

Gorton's quest began when he was asked by his former social studies teacher, Steve Hoffbeck, to research Donaldson. Hoffbeck was writing a book on the baseball history of Minnesota, "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota."

Research led Gorton to the historical society in Bertha, Minn., about 15 miles from Gorton's own hometown of Staples.

There was a poster of Donaldson, who played in Bertha in the 1920s. Below that poster, Gorton saw a picture of himself with a group of boys playing basketball 20 years ago.

Gorton completed plenty of research for the book but decided to keep going.

Opportunities

Gorton feels Donaldson's story

holds an important message for every one of us.

"We all have had opportunities and John Donaldson's story is about opportunities," Gorton said.

He saw his research as an opportunity, as well. "I was sitting on

some- one's career with the possibility to be immortalized forever in one of the greatest institutions in sports history," Gorton said.

Color line

Donaldson was born in 1892 and his prime seasons of pitching were 1911-1918.

The left-hander was a very talented athlete, known as a power pitcher with a devastating curve ball. But in the early 1900s, slavery was still a vivid memory and segregation was a matter of national policy.

The color line in baseball meant that despite Donaldson's overwhelming talent, he was not allowed to play in the all-white big leagues.

Donaldson joined the All Nations team in 1912, made up of many different races and nationalities, including a Hawaiian, Cubans and black players.

The barnstorming All Nations traveled the country playing any team that was game, including Langdon's ball club, and bringing interracial sports to the smallest towns of America.

All Nations played in 125 towns in Minnesota and at least 30-40 towns in North Dakota, according to Gorton.

Despite the rampant racism of the time, even the Cavalier County Republican acknowledged Donaldson's talent in a preview story July 6, 1916.

"The line-up of the All Nations includes such men as Jack Donaldson, the world's greatest colored pitcher,"

the story said.

Gorton says such a story was not always the norm for newspapers of the time.

"Black baseball is a different research topic in that lots of newspapers wouldn't report on black people," Gorton said. "It seems kind of funny for us to think of that this day."

"Then to have Donaldson be in headlines in some places and be a star and be famous, that makes his career that much more extraordinary."

Sometimes papers omitted stories on the All Nations team if the local team lost. Gorton said in some cases, the owner of the newspaper would have some

kind of stake in the local baseball team as well.

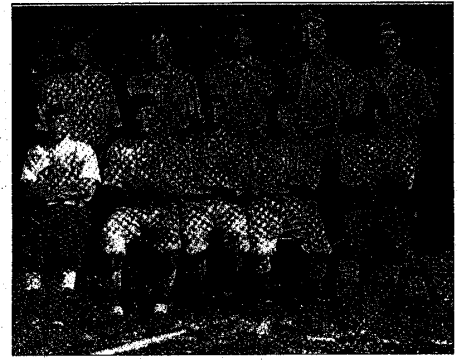
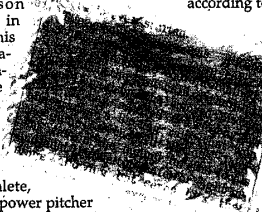
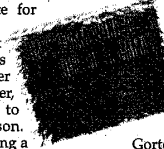
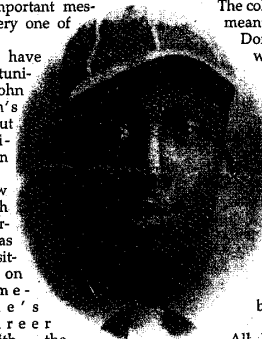
In Rochester, Minn., Gorton said, "The owner of the baseball team was the newspaper guy, so he never reported when they lost."

Gorton describes one newspaper of the time with a story of a cross burning in the first column, and a story of Donaldson's All Nations beating the local team in column seven.

"And you scratch your head and wonder, how is this guy making it?" Gorton said.

Apparently, Donaldson was making it on talent and charm.

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Submitted Photo

This newspaper photo of the All Nations baseball team appeared in 1913.

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What a record

According to Gorton and his network of researchers, Donaldson is presumed to be the all-time leader among black pitchers in wins, strikeouts, winning percentage and shutouts.

Donaldson had over 250 wins and over 4,000 strikeouts. Those numbers will keep growing as more documentation is discovered.

Hall of Fame manager John McGraw of the New York Giants once said, I think Donaldson is the greatest pitcher I've ever seen and I would give \$50,000 for him if it weren't for the color line in baseball."

What a guy

And Donaldson had a likability factor. "He was so well liked by everyone," Gorton said. "There've been letters to the editor in the newspapers that say, 'We really love this guy, go see him.'"

Various reports describe Donaldson as a churchgoer who contributed to his church, loved his mother and had no bad habits like smoking, drinking or cursing.

In 1918, Donaldson served his country in World War I, fighting in France.

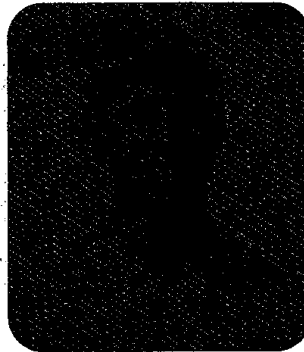
Playing and scouting

The Negro League was created in 1920. That led Donaldson to other baseball opportunities. He spent three years playing on the Bertha, Minn., team and some seasons for other towns in Minnesota in the 1920s.

Donaldson finished his career playing center field and pitching with the Kansas City Monarchs.

In 1952, Donaldson was recognized as a first-team member of the famous Pittsburgh Courier poll of the Negro League's best players. That poll was voted on by players recognizing the greatest black players of all time.

In 1949, Donaldson made history by becoming the first full-time black talent scout in the big leagues for the Chicago White Sox. This was in response to the overwhelming success of Jackie Robinson, the first black player invited to play in the big leagues with the Brooklyn Dodgers.



John Wesley Donaldson
1925

"After Jackie Robinson, there was this rush to find African American players that they couldn't look at before," Gorton said. "He knew the community, which was a high commodity in 1950. He signed some great players."

Gorton believes the door for Jackie Robinson began to open up four decades earlier when John Donaldson joined the multi-racial, multi-cultural All Nations team. "And they all played together, they all lived together and they all survived together. And in 1912, that was an amazing thing."

Of course, Gorton hopes the great John Donaldson is inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame Feb. 27. But even if that doesn't happen, he still plans to spread the news.

"It's time to talk about this story that has been forgotten that touched so many small towns, and so many people had such a wonderful experience with him. It just flies in the face of what we think of race relations at that time," Gorton said.

And Gorton hopes there are people in North Dakota who may remember John Donaldson.

"Somebody in Langdon might come forward and say, 'I knew all about this guy,' or 'my grandpa talked about him all the time,'" Gorton said. "He was respected in Langdon and that's important for the people in Langdon to know."