

One of the world's greatest baseball pitchers of all time threw against the Kenmare team 91 years ago

John Donaldson to be considered for Baseball Hall of Fame this coming Monday

By Peter Gorton
Contributing author of "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota"
There was a time when just about everyone in North Dakota knew the name and fame of pitcher John Wesley Donaldson. He was a baseball legend. And in 1925, this famous black barnstorming hurler came to Kenmare.

This month, he is being considered for induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, in Cooperstown, New York. The story of Donaldson, who threw himself to be the "Greatest Negro Pitcher" in a time when baseball was divided by the color line, is a timely topic for your consideration as we await the final vote of 2006 Baseball Hall of Fame inductees. The final vote will be announced on Monday, February 27, 2006.

Donaldson's story was hidden away in hundreds of local newspaper stories that preserved some of the magical moments and the overwhelming numbers of strikeouts accumulated by this left-handed wonder.

The pitcher's prime years were 1911 to 1913, when he was the star hurler of the All Nations team. The All Nations featured a mix of players of many ethnic backgrounds, and the ballclub first brought interracial baseball to hundreds of American cities. He was the best-known barnstorming pitcher in the decade before Satchel Paige, and Paige pitched on many diamonds where Donaldson had dominated earlier.

On June 25, 1915 Donaldson and the All Nations arrived in Kenmare. That day the locals were defeated 5 to 3. The legend of John Donaldson also spread to another North Dakota city: a legend that was relatively unknown until recent years. I received a call five years ago from Steve Hoffbeck, my former high school history teacher, asking if I would like to join a team of writers to contribute to his latest book, "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota" (MHS PRESS, 2005). The book chronicles the accomplishments of black baseball players in the state. Hoffbeck wondered if I would like to take on the challenge of researching the career of a elusive old-time pitcher—John Donaldson. I took on the assignment and searched thousands of rolls of microfilm in archives in seven states and found the box scores of his long career, but seldom, baseball exploits.

Last July the Hall of Fame asked for recommendations of Hall of Fame-worthy ballplayers for a special Negro Leagues and Pre-Negro Leagues election. Already armed with the wealth of research I found in the Donaldson Network, a dedicated group with one goal, to uncover as much of Donaldson's hard-to-find career as possible before the final Hall of Fame vote. Today the volunteer network consists of over 150 researchers, historians and authors. To date we have documented over 250 victories and over 4,000 strikeouts for Donaldson—making him among the game's all-time best.

A brief history of Donaldson's career:

The color line prevented John Donaldson from entering white organized baseball and reaching the national stage—or reaching real fame and fortune. The weak structure of black baseball in the decade from 1910 to 1920 gave only limited opportunities for a highly-talented pitcher to thrive. All black professional teams, according to historian Jules "Foggy" Reed on barnstorming to locate audiences. Therefore, Donaldson became a barnstorming pitcher with the All Nations team, a touring ballclub founded and guided by a genius of marketing—the white owner J.L. Wilkinson (who is also on the special February Hall of Fame election ballot).

The All Nations squad competed against anyone who would play them—white semi-pro teams, regional all-star teams, and professional all-black teams—and Donaldson was the star with undepotable talent.

Donaldson and the All Nations team brought interracial baseball to town and cities across the face of the US, from Missouri to Kentucky and from Wisconsin to farthest North Dakota. Donaldson's charisma and competence was a countermeasure to the deep-seated prejudice of these communities and his stellar character acted against the stereotypes of them. His excellence on the mound was a detour to racism and his pioneering revenues on the mound planted the seeds to bring forth improvements in racial attitudes in



John Wesley Donaldson Pitcher - All Nations

these towns. Donaldson was the predecessor of Satchel Paige as a barnstorming hurler, for Paige pitched in many of the same towns where Donaldson had showcased his formidable talents just a decade or two earlier.

The heart of Donaldson's story is centered by his baseball skills. The left-handed pitcher, according to the noted historian Robert Peterson, "had near-perfect control and averaged 20 strikeouts a game" and had a "sharp-breaking curve ball that was faster than most pitchers' fastballs" during his prime seasons from 1912 to 1918. Upon the founding of the Negro League in 1920, he played mainly as an outfielder for the "top clubs," most notably the Kansas City Monarchs all the way into the 1930s.

Testaments to his greatness

Donaldson's tremendous talent and pitching skills prompted Hall of Fame manager John McGraw of the New York Giants to say, "I think he is the greatest I ever have seen and I would give \$50,000 for him if I weren't for the color line in baseball." John Henry Lloyd, according to baseball historian James A. Riley, regarded Donaldson "as the toughest pitcher he had ever faced." Riley rates Donaldson as the "first great black left-hander" and "one of the best left-handers in the history of black baseball."

Former Negro League players voted for John Donaldson as their choice for the first-team left-handed pitcher in the renowned 1997 Pittsburgh Courier poll of the best black players of all time. The color line forced Donaldson to pitch in hundreds of towns across the country from Palm Beach to Pasadena, always living up to the expectations of greatness thrust upon him by his town and by his peers. Town after town along the nation's railway system witnessed first hand the pitcher and the man who, nearly a century later, deserves to be inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame on the merits of his accomplishments.

Filled the stands everywhere

Donaldson traveled throughout the United States and thrilled crowds everywhere he went. The organization that employed his presence turned profits throughout his career. One tactic used by managers was advertising Donaldson and his teammates. Large banner headlines printed the ticket buying public with facts that would build his legend and fill the stands of small town American everywhere they went. This promotion of an African American from Glasgow, Missouri, was revolutionary. Never before had a black man took such prominence in local newspapers, building a famous persona with every stop on the railway system.

Donaldson broke many deep-rooted stereotypes. One such example took place in Duluth, Minnesota, on June 15, 1923. Traveling on the rails with his barnstorming ballclub and their corresponding side-show, Donaldson arrived in the Zenith City to acclaim from the local press. He knew the civil unrest that had besieged the local community a mere three years prior. On June 15, 1920, three black car workers were brutally lynched by a mob of nearly 10,000 angry citizens seeking revenge for an alleged assault upon a young white woman. Donaldson took the mound and proceeded to defeat a group of all-star players from across the region. As blacks fled the city in fear, Donaldson backed the current and spoke with a universal language that he had so eloquently begun speaking years earlier—baseball. This ostentatious display of courage was only one instance of the special character that was John Donaldson.

In the spring of 1927 an ambitious symbol of American courage was pinned on a young Minnesotan named Charles Lindbergh. He grew up in tiny city of Little Falls as the son of a Congressman. As the world read headlines of his daring solo crossing of the Atlantic, John

Donaldson was invited to headline the baseball festivities associated with the celebration of his homecoming to Little Falls. With Donaldson on the mound the mood was electric. The crowd gasped for air as they first heard the single engine of the Spirit of St. Louis as she taxied and chugged her way over the pines. In unison, spectators craned their necks to catch a glimpse of the famous Lindbergh as he flew overhead. Donaldson and Lindbergh shared one thing in common that day: They were famous to all who were lucky enough to see them with their own eyes.

Hall of Fame biography

Short Biography of Donaldson from the Hall of Fame website announcement of the February 27, 2006, vote of the Negro League and Negro League players, managers, and owners:

John Donaldson (John Wesley Donaldson), 1913-1934 (A left-handed pitcher with a devastating curveball who excelled in the pre-Negro League era. The manager of J.L. Wilkinson's All Nations Team, which broke ethnic barriers with players from different countries and nationalities... Won more than 250 games during his barnstorming career and averaged better than 11 strikeouts per game... Finished his career playing centerfield and pitching with the Kansas City Monarchs... A first-team member of the renowned 1997 Pittsburgh Courier players' poll of the Negro League's best players.

Highlights, record:

John Donaldson's verifiable statistical analysis consists of games Donaldson pitched in that have been documented in hundreds of surviving newspaper accounts. John Donaldson's major statistics are:

Wins: 225-
Strikeouts: 3894-

Donaldson is presumed to be the all-time leader among black pitchers in Wins (225) and Strikeouts (3894) and is among the top black pitchers all-time in Earned Run Average.

The Donaldson number uncovered even greater number totals. If the combination of both documented games are combined with known to date Donaldson currently registers with 264 wins, 94 losses and 4,058 strikeouts as of January 19, 2006.

How Donaldson's record was discovered:

December 6, 2005 - Minneapolis Star Tribune

A legend of the past gets shot at Hall

It is the cross of things when a person finds his or her true calling. It is rare, still, to look the moment in the eyes, realize it for what it is, and follow the winding, relentless path with abandon.

Meet John Donaldson and Peter Gorton — two men whose lives have intertwined in the rarest of ways, with the possible end result being Donaldson's election to baseball's Hall of Fame.

Gorton, who works for a downtown Minneapolis law firm, received a call out of the blue five years ago from Steve Hoffbeck, his old social studies teacher.

Hoffbeck was writing a book on the history of black baseball players in Minnesota and wondered if Gorton, despite inexperience in the area, would take a crack at researching an elusive old-time pitcher named John Donaldson.

5,000 rolls of microfilm. He keeps meticulous track of boxscores, and his computer is choked with files, scanned clippings and photos. He and his wife, Kelly, spent an anniversary on an old ballfield.

It's all part of a greater good. "This guy just got inside me," Gorton said. "There's something about him. Every day we would come up with something astounding."

Legend spread quickly

Donaldson, a flame-throwing, knee-bending left-hander pitched for a barnstorming team called All Nations that made several appearances in small Minnesota towns starting around 1912—eight years before the formation of the Negro League.

Word of his legend spread quickly as he moved from town to town, dispatching with ease the best hitters the area had to offer. Documented if show he was 80-5 over a two-year stretch. Equally impressive was his diplomacy and grace in an era of fierce segregation.

"He was famous, and people in Minnesota loved him," Gorton said. "They also respected him because he was so good, so nice."

Donaldson later pitched three games for the town team in Bertha in 1920. Later, when commuting by train on the weekends from Minneapolis, where he lived with his wife, Eleanor, and sent several seasons for other Minnesota towns during the 1920s.

John McGraw, the Hall of Fame manager from the New York Giants,



Kenmare Maroons of 1910... Pictured with its mascot dog in the center and the young city of Kenmare in the background is the Kenmare Maroons amateur baseball team. Some of these same players may have faced All Nations pitcher John Donaldson when he came to town in 1915.

Largest crowd of season comes out for All Nations vs. Kenmare baseball game

Reprinted from The Kenmare News June 24, 1915 (Announcement of the upcoming game).

Reprinted from The Kenmare News July 1, 1915 (Report on the big game)

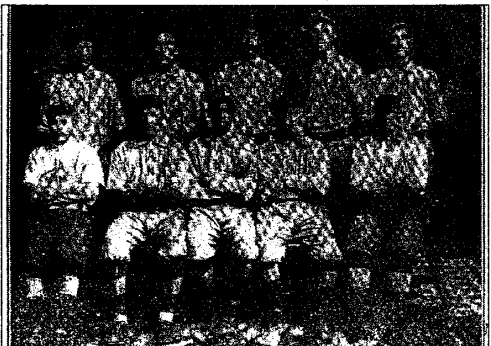
BASEBALL ATTRACTION

The Schmeizer Arms Co.'s World's All Nation Star Players of Kansas City, Mo., will play engagement with the Kenmare ball team on the local diamond at 2 p.m. tomorrow afternoon. John Donaldson, without doubt the greatest colored pitcher in the world; Jap Jacobs, oriental pitcher, who won nineteen out of twenty games for Japan University; Blackout, the greatest all-around player on the club are now touring the United States in their own private car and will greet you on the Kenmare diamond Friday, June 25th.

ALL NATIONS WIN

In a hard fought battle between the All Nations and Kenmare last Friday afternoon, the former team won out in the finish. For a number of innings the local team held the score down to 3-3, when in the last of the seventh inning two more runs were brot in by the traveling aggregation, making the score 5-3 in their favor. The game was witnessed by one of the largest crowds out to a game this season, many being in attendance from Norway, Nobe, and Berthels. The majority of the business houses closed shop from 2 to 4 o'clock to let the clerks see the game.

Only two Kenmare players were named in reports of the baseball games of 1915, Bronsgrum and McNeil. Teams played included Portia, Lansford, Kenaston, Bowbells, Donnybrook, Crosby, and Ambrose.



The All Nations team photo - 1913

once said, "I think he is the greatest I have ever seen, and I would give \$50,000 for him if it weren't for the color line in baseball."

Donaldson scouted for the White Sox after the game was integrated. He died in 1970 and is buried in suburban Chicago.

Hall of Fame consideration

Finding these facts — and that was just a quick snapshot — made Gorton wonder how he could get others to appreciate something he considers historically significant. "The answer came this summer, when the Baseball Hall of Fame announced an open call to nominate players from around 1912—eight years before the formation of the Negro League."

Gorton increased his efforts to find official statistics, enlisting a network of 150 people across the country to scour old newspapers. Gorton kept the nominating deadline of Halloween. In late November, Donaldson was listed among the 31 candidates to gain entry to the Hall of Fame in the special election.

Gorton and his "Donaldson network" have documented more than 200 victories and 3,500 strikeouts already by the time of the vote in every place that he played and became the drawing card and the moneymaker of the organization he was connected with "WELLS FORD ADVOCATE."

"His strikeout record is 26 men in one game, and it is said that for his color he would be in the big leagues." LITTLE FALLS DAILY TRANSRIPT.

"Scoring for the locals was a tough proposition," Donaldson seemed unable to get over his strikeout habit," MARSHALL NEWS MESSNGER.