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Restoring the lost legacy of a baseball giant

BY EARL HORLYK
Editor

Back in the day, everybody knew his name.
Back in the day, everybody knew his legend.

John Wesley Donaldson, "the left-handed pitcher," was the star hurler of J.L. Wilkinson's All Nations baseball team.

He and his team barnstormed their way through Le Mars on a sunny May day back in 1913.

The All Nations, featuring a mix of players of every ethnic background, was the first team to bring interracial baseball to the midwest. And Donaldson was widely heralded as being the "World's Greatest Negro Pitcher."

At a time when baseball was divided by the color line, John Wesley Donaldson was a household name.

When Donaldson made his way through Le Mars (by rail), he was at the ultimate height of his athletic prowess.

"The All Nations played in Le Mars on May 25, 1913," says Donaldson aficionado Pete Gorton. "They played a game against some local sluggers."

"That day, Donaldson held the local sluggers scoreless," he contends, "and struck out 14 batters in a 1-0 All Nations victory."

Gorton chuckles as he reads the over-the-top prose featured in the sports section of the Le Mars Globe-Post dated May 27, 1913.

"Midwestern communities were, at the time, very rural," explains the Minneapolis-based writer. "Ordinary people didn't have access to newspapers so news spread by word of mouth."

"And that's how the legend of John Donaldson spread," he says. "One community at a time. One victory at a time. All by word of mouth."

The career of John Wesley Donaldson quickly became an obsession for Gorton.

"About six years ago, I received a phone call

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(SENTINEL PHOTO BY EARL HORLYK)

Minneapolis-based writer Pete Gorton has spent the past six years tracing the career of baseball legend John Wesley Donaldson. With voting scheduled to take place next week, he is also spearheading an effort to get the left-handed pitcher inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Donaldson: John Wesley Donaldson played in Le Mars in 1913

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From Steve Hofbeck," he recalls. "Steve had been my old high school history teacher. He was then writing a book called 'Swinging for the Fence: Black Baseball in Minnesota,' which would chronicle the accomplishments of black baseball players in the state."

"He asked me if I wanted to research on this elusive old-time ball player by the name of John Donaldson," Gorton laughs. "My first response was 'Who the hell is that?'"

Combing through reels and reels of microfilm in archives from seven states, Gorton quickly discovered an incredibly gifted and colorful ball player who had been unjustly overlooked.

At his pitching peak, Donaldson "had near perfect control," according to baseball historian Robert Peterson, and his "sharp-breaking curve ball was faster than most pitcher's fastballs."

Upon the founding of the Negro League in 1920, Donaldson played mainly as an outfielder for the top clubs, most notably the Kansas City Monarchs, well into the 1930's.

"Here was a guy who preceded Satchel Paige by a full two decades," marvels the enthusiastic Gorton. "Paige pitched in many of the same towns where Donaldson showcased his formidable talents twenty years earlier."

"Donaldson paved the way," he explains.

"He was the true trailblazer."

According to Gorton, Donaldson's excellence on the mound was a deterrent to racism and his pioneering presence on the mound planted the seeds to bring forth improvements in racial attitudes one city at a time.

"It wasn't just Le Mars and the midwest that benefited from Donaldson's presence," he explains. "Donaldson played ball all year round,

a story of a man who was covered by the media and adored by the fans and had an outstanding career on the baseball diamond."

"His talent made him memorable, not the color of his skin," Gorton says decisively.

Although Donaldson never gained the full recognition for his pitching skills during his lifetime and was never admitted into major-league baseball during his career, he made history by becoming the first full-time black talent scout in the big leagues for the Chicago White Sox in 1949.

In this small way, baseball's establishment rewarded him for his loyalty to the game.

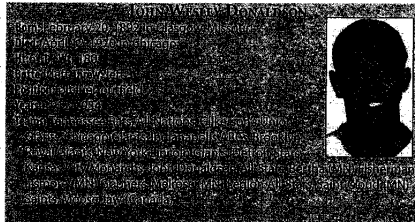
Yet even after his death in 1970, little was remembered of his accomplishment. But his fellow black ballplayers knew of his skill and his greatness as a pitcher was rediscovered by modern-day researchers and historians, and he was included in a ballot of 39 Pre-Negro and Negro Leagues players for possible induction into Baseball's Hall of Fame.

This is what Gorton has working towards for the past six years.

"It would be a dream come true," he says. "When the vote is conducted on Feb. 27, I would love to see the most famous barnstorming pitcher of them all, John Donaldson, may once again be awarded a place among baseball's finest player."

"He was an absolute American original and a true trailblazer," Gorton continues. "And it was his talent that made him memorable."

"It made him a legend," he says.



DONALDSON'S RECORD

John Donaldson's verifiable statistical analysis consists of games Donaldson pitched in that have been documented in hundreds of surviving newspapers from his era.

John Donaldson's major statistics are:
Wins: 235+
Strikeouts: 3,950+

Donaldson is presumed to be the all-time leader among black pitchers in Wins, Strikeouts, Winning Percentages, and Shutout games, and is also among the top black pitchers all-time in Earned Run Averages.

Pete Gorton has documented much of Donaldson's career. He has revealed that Donaldson had 235 wins and 84 losses and a winning percentage of .737. He also notched 3,832 strikeouts, an ERA of 1.37 and 86 shutouts.

He completed 296 of 322 starts (92%), had 22 one-hitters, six on-hitters, and a perfect game.

He also had 30 strikeout games, 26 games with more than 20 strikeouts, and a total of 166 double-digit strikeout games. Donaldson batted .334 in over 1,800 at bats.

Along with these numbers, there are 37 more games that described events but box scores have not been documented. During these games, Donaldson went 27-10 with 193 strikeouts.

This would put his strikeout total over 4,000.