

A legend unknown gets his due

Jose Mendez isn't as well known as other players who are inducted into Cooperstown today. But the Cuban All-Star, who was part of a traveling team that made a stop in New Ulm for an exhibition game in 1914, played a key part in making sure minorities got equal opportunities to play the game.

Editor's note: This is the first part of a two-part series on the All Nations traveling baseball team and Jose Mendez. Part of the information used in this story can be found in "Swinging The Ponce: Black History in Minnesota", available at on-line booksellers and at major bookstores everywhere.

Part two will appear in Tuesday's edition of The Journal.

By Michael Gasset
Journal Sports Writer

Baseball is our national pastime. It has grown as our nation has grown. The history of baseball and this country are intertwined and both have secrets in the past most probably wish to forget.

Ever since Abner Doubleday made his first rudimentary designs of the game in the pastures near Cooperstown, N.Y., people have been trying to hit or throw the ball harder and farther than anyone has before.

But like the people in our nation's past, there was a select group that could play the game and another group that was deemed second-class citizens and therefore not worthy of the first-class glory.

But among that supposed second class of citizens sprang first-class baseball players that time has almost forgotten.

For every great Major League Baseball player there was just as great a Negro League player. For every kid that wanted to be Babe Ruth, another wanted to be Josh Gibson. And for every pitcher that dreamed of being Christy Mathewson there was Jose Mendez.

All of these players have

something in common. Each was a great baseball player in their own right and own time. And each — with Mendez' induction this weekend — is a member of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

But only one of these players has had a part of his history woven into the fabric of the great baseball history of New Ulm. And as far as anybody knows, Mendez is the only Hall of Famer to ever grab a bat and toe the rubber inside our city limits.

Who is Jose Mendez?

Before we learn about how Mendez first came to New Ulm, we first must know who the ball player was.

According to his biography on the Hall of Fame's web site, Mendez was born March 19, 1887, in Cardenas, Matanzas, Cuba.

As a pitcher, he was one of the first internationally-known Cuban baseball stars. In his playing career spanning from 1908-1926, Mendez packed quite a punch as a pitcher and shortstop in the Negro Leagues.

A relatively small man, standing 5-feet-10-inches and weighing 152 pounds, he had long arms and an easy motion and he used his legs to help him propel the ball to the plate with great speed.

His long fingers helped him put spin on the ball and gave him a blazing fastball and a sharp curve. In November of 1908 Mendez pitched games that made him a legend.

The Cincinnati Reds became the first major league team from the United States to play in Cuba and Mendez was on the mound for the Cuban team and he dominated the Reds.

Mendez pitched 25 consecutive scoreless innings. In his first start, he allowed one hit by Miller Huggins in the ninth and struck out nine batters in the 1-0 victory.

His next appearance came in relief, where he held the Reds scoreless for seven innings, allowing two hits and ended with another shutout. His record against the Reds in that series was 2-0, with a 0.00 ERA and 24 strikeouts in 25 innings of work.

His legend became even more firmly established in 1910, when he beat the Philadelphia Athletics in Cuba and won a pitching duel against the great Christy Mathewson and the New York Giants in 1911. In that game, he threw four innings of scoreless relief and he became known as the "Black Mathewson."

It may have been considered an honor to be linked to Mathewson in that way, but it also spoke of the harsh reality of baseball at the turn of the century. Mendez and his dark complexion would never be allowed to play major league baseball. All because of the color barrier that had been established in 1887 that barred black players from the game until Jackie Robinson broke through in 1947.

And so Mendez pitched for his home country and with a barnstorming team called the Cuban Stars, which would play in the U.S. from 1910 to 1912.

Mendez then joined a traveling team called the All Nations in 1913 that was described as a touring team made up of the best baseball players from different nations.

Mendez

Continued on page 8B

Mendez Continued from page 1B

The team was so good because the owner, J. L. Wilkinson, a white businessman from Des Moines, Iowa, was a great judge of talent and knew that great pitchers could beat the best hitters from the heartland of Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and the Dakotas.

Wilkinson will be posthumously inducted into the Hall of Fame today along side one of his greatest pitchers, Mendez.

The All Nations was a great team because they played every day against the best competition they could find and because they featured Mendez and John Donaldson, a great black hurler from Missouri, as their starting pitchers. The All Nations helped integrate baseball by bringing interracial baseball to hundreds of American cities when they played against white teams in the Midwest.

And in 1914, All Nations along with Mendez made their way to New Ulm twice for four games with the New Ulm Athletics.

The following is how the June 24, 1914 New Ulm Review described the team:

On Monday the New Ulm team will line up against the touring All Nations team on the local grounds at North German Park.

The All Nations team is composed of players from all over the

globe, Hawaiians, Cubans, Chinese, Japanese, Americans and Negroes.

They have been touring the country for several years playing semi professional and minor league teams all over the country.

Their pitching staff is wonderfully strong, consisting of such men as John Donaldson and Joe Jackson. The local fans will probably remember the great hurling Jackson showed against the New Ulm team last season when he was on the mound for Good Thunder and won by a 1-0 score.

The rest of the field is made up of fast and clever fielders and every one is a 300 slugger so New Ulm will have to play at top speed to wrest the honors from the All Nations, as the latter have piled up a string of victories this season against some of the best teams in this section of the country. Should the A's win it would be quite an event to celebrate.

Game 1, June 29 1914.

New Ulm played well in that game with Conway on the mound. He pitched a complete game, striking out 13 All Nations batters. New Ulm took a 2-0 lead in the fifth inning but it was the sixth that really hurt the A's.

This is how R. G. Mayer, Sporting Editor of the New Ulm Review, described the game in

the Wednesday, July 1 1914 edition:

Things looked very bright for New Ulm as it seemed impossible for All Nations to score more than one run on Conway. But the balloon exploded with a loud bang in the sixth. Little Hannah Williams was the unfortunate goat of the contest for it was his error in the sixth that paved the way for the All Nations' scores.

With one gone, Williams fumbled Mendez' grounder long enough to give him life. Dunbar was passed and White scored Mendez with a clean hit to left. Two runs resulted when Conway fumbled Jackson's dinky roller.

When it was all said and done, the All Nations won the match 5-2. Mendez didn't have a spectacular game playing short-stop. He committed one error and was 0-for-5 at the plate with two stolen bases and a run scored.

But Mendez' legend would grow a few months later when All Nations would come back to town for a three-game set.

To find out more about what Mendez and the All Nations team did against New Ulm in the later series, check back in Tuesday's edition of the New Ulm Journal.

*Michael Gassett can be reached at
mgassett@nujournal.com*