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Black star's story deserves telling

BY GORDON WITTENMYER
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The greatest baseball player you've probably never heard of might also be the most influential to ever play in Minnesota.

And if Pete Gorton has his way, John Wesley Donaldson will gain a deserved place in baseball's Hall of Fame a week from today, when the hall announces results of a special election to consider 39 Negro League players and nine other African-Americans who played before the Negro National League was established in 1920.

"The key to this whole story is Donaldson's in the middle of everything," Gorton said. "You start to look at the history of the game, and you turn around, and he's everywhere. It's hard to imagine this story could be so lost."

Gorton, a native of Staples, Minn., contributed a chapter to the book "Swinging for the Fences: Black Baseball in Minnesota" that chronicles Donaldson's career.

Born in Glasgow, Mo., three years before Babe Ruth, Donaldson became the star pitcher for J.L. Wilkinson's All Nations, a multiracial barnstorming team based in Des Moines, Iowa. When Wilkinson moved the team to Kansas City, Mo., in 1920 as one of the founding franchises in Rube Foster's Negro National League, Donaldson followed. But after a brief, successful stint in the NNL, Donaldson hired out his valuable left arm to the highest bidders among semipro teams in such Minnesota towns as Bertha, Lismore and St. Cloud. He lived much of that time in Minneapolis with his wife, Eleanor.

He then started his own barnstorming team and made a comfortable living, even during the Depression.

"As I kept doing this and the research kept piling up, the historical significance of John Donaldson just jumped off the page," Gorton said. "John Donaldson's story is about opportunity. He had an opportunity, as limited as it was, and he took advantage of it. He thrived in every baseball situation he was in."

Like many black barnstormers of the time, Donaldson faced white major leaguers and fared well enough to prompt New York Giants manager John McGraw to say, "I think he is the greatest I have ever seen."

Because of sketchy records and a playing prime that predated the organized Negro Leagues, Donaldson's significance slipped through the cracks of baseball history until Gorton's recent work.

Donaldson's prominence in the region had the impact of, say, Satchel Paige spending his summers barnstorming through Minnesota, Gorton said. The research even suggests that Paige owes much of his style and form to Donaldson, Paige's pitching coach during the 1930s.

Donaldson was a charismatic entrepreneur who apparently got the most out of his baseball talent, including a devastating breaking pitch that helped him record 235 verified victories and 3,832 verified strikeouts.

Perhaps most impressive, he traversed towns in Minnesota to play ball, sometimes as the only black player on a small-town semipro team, at a time when the Ku Klux Klan was active in the state.

Three years to the week after the notorious lynchings of three black circus workers in 1920 in Duluth, Donaldson led a barnstorming troupe into Duluth, where he pitched and beat a team of white all-stars from the Iron Range, 6-3.

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