

Tweed Webb: 'He's Seen `Em All'

### JAY FELDMAN

Anyone interested in researching the Negro leagues should contact this man. Former player, manager, and historian, he **has** seen nearly all the great black stars.

A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO, when there was a vacancy on the National Baseball Hall of Fame Veterans Committee, SABR's Negro Leagues Committee submitted the names of several candidates who could be expected to promote the cause of former Negro-league stars worthy of Cooperstown enshrinement but thus far overlooked. Nominees included ex-players such as Hall-of-Famers Hank Aaron, Willie Mays, Ray Dandridge, and Buck Leonard; noted sportswriter Sam Lacy, and historian Normal (Tweed) Webb.

At age eighty-four, Tweed Webb is possibly the oldest living chronicler of black baseball. He's certainly one of the most dedicated and vocal. His motto "I've seen `em all" - bears testimony to his more than seventy-five years of service as a fan, batboy, player, manager, sportswriter, officer scorer, historian, and, still today, tireless crusader for black baseball.

Webb, who acquired his nickname from a tweed suit worn in grade school, was introduced to baseball in 1910, when his father, a semi-pro ballplayer, took him to a game between the hometown St. Louis Giants and the Indianapolis ABCs. His career began in earnest seven years later, at age twelve, when he worked as batboy for Rube Foster's visiting Chicago American Giants. The Giants were one of the all-time great clubs, with a lineup that included such stars as Bingo De Moss, Dave Malarcher, Jimmy Lyons, and Carlos Torrienti.

In 1919, Webb lived in Cleveland, where his uncle Pete Miles, a major stockholder in the Cleveland Tate Stars, introduced him to greats like Ben Taylor, Turkey Stearnes, John Donaldson, and future Hall-of-Famer John Henry Lloyd. On his return to St. Louis, Webb began organizing ball-games between local street teams. "I was always an organizer, always trying to get things going," he says. "I'd form up a team from my street and get a game with a team from another street."

Those pick-up games also provided the first outlet for two of Webb's later passions: sportswriting and baseball history. "I'd write up a little story, `Tweed Webb Stars at Shortstop,'" he relates with an elfish grin. "I got a kick out of seeing my name. I wished I could be a writer." The historian in him kept the scorecards from those games (he still has several); it was about this time that he also began clipping and compiling newspaper articles.

In 1920 and `21, Webb played shortstop for the St. Louis Black Sox, a semipro team managed by his father. Next year the squad entered the newly-formed Tandy League - St. Louis' first black semipro circuit that would become a training ground for the Negro leagues. They competed under several names before becoming the St. Louis Pullmans, and dominating the league for a decade.

The apex of Webb's playing career came in 1926, with the Fort Wayne Pirates, an associate member of the Negro National League. "I was a good ballplayer, a smart ballplayer," he asserts. "I was 5'3", 140 pounds, little bitty guy, but I stood ten feet tall. Littlest man out there, with the biggest mouth. Hard to strike out. Good bunter. Good arm. I was a hustler.

"But to tell the truth, I didn't like that life. Bad traveling conditions, bad accommodations. The professional players were a rough bunch. I didn't drink or smoke, and I didn't like the women that hung around the players. And the pay was low - twenty-five dollars a week."

So he returned to St. Louis, became a sign painter, and resumed his association with the Tandy League - a connection that would continue until 1966 and earn him the sobriquet "Mr. Tandy." In his more than forty years as player, manager, official scorer, and publicity director, he had a hand in developing numerous future major leaguers, including Luke Easter, Al Smith, Sammy Pendleton, Sam Jethroe, Nate Colbert, and Ted Savage. (In the late forties,

Webb also founded the short-lived Rube Foster League, the best known graduate of which was Elston Howard.)

In 1934, Webb branched out into sportswriting with a weekly column for the St. Louis Argus, one of the city's two daily black newspapers (he also wrote for the St. Louis American for a couple of years in the mid-thirties). Except for 1943-5 when he was in the Navy, Tweed Webb's "Hot Stove League" was a fixture for the next thirty-seven years. During the 1940s, he also covered the annual East-West all-star games and Negro League World Series.

As a reporter for the Argus and the official scorer for the St. Louis Stars' home games in 1932-49, Webb compiled records and photographs that would prove valuable decades later, when the history of the Negro leagues became a subject of serious study.

As anyone who has ever approached the field knows, black baseball history presents a problematic discipline, the main difficulty being the lack of reliable statistical data. "I get requests almost on a weekly basis from SABR members wanting statistics or other information on different players or teams or leagues," relates Negro Leagues Committee chairman Dick Clark. "I'm not sure people really understand that we just don't have the information, that we can't just go out and find it in a book. We have to look for it. And Tweed has been one of our main sources. He was one of the first to start researching black baseball."

"People are always asking me about specific records, for example, whether Josh Gibson or Turkey Stearnes hit more home runs," says Webb. "I hate to say it, but the records of black baseball are inadequate. In many cases, the true statistics just don't exist. It's hearsay; anybody that's got

any sense knows there's nothing to prove it. But now, what happens sometimes is that some writer will go talk to John Doe and the guy will tell him, 'I hit .400 that year,' or, 'I hit 500 home runs,' and he'll go and write the story that way, but there's no proof."

Still, Webb has been a source for many writers and researchers, providing records, anecdotes, personal recollections, and photographs for numerous projects, including Charles Whitehead's biography of Rube Foster ("A Man and His Diamonds") and Phil Dixon's forthcoming comprehensive pictorial history of black baseball. "He's probably more knowledgeable about St. Louis [black] baseball than anybody," states Dixon, "and overall, he's one of the most knowledgeable people around the country. As far as a writer of [black] baseball, he's certainly one of the oldest around."

In his tireless, decades-long crusade for the affirmation of black baseball Webb has made his greatest mark. Says Bob Burnes, retired sports editor of the St. Louis Globe Democrat, who has known Webb for more than thirty years, "Tweed Webb has done more in bringing recognition to the black player than anyone else. Cool Papa Bell is in the Hall of Fame because of Tweed's insistence."

In addition to his campaign for the induction of his longtime close friend Bell, Webb has also worked doggedly for the inclusion of other former Negro leaguers, including 1981 inductee Rube Foster. "Everybody talks about how I campaigned for Cool Papa Bell and Rube Foster for the Hall of Fame," says Webb with uncharacteristic shortness, "but I shouldn't have **had** to campaign for Rube Foster he should have been the first. Not only was he a great pitcher and manager, but he was the founder of the Negro National League, the father of modern Negro baseball. There wasn't anybody did more for black baseball than Rube Foster. And they waited until 1981 to put him in. That was nothing but a joke."

His crusade far from over, Webb remains determined to see the great players and teams receive their due. "There are about a dozen men from the Negro leagues in the Hall of Fame, but some of the greatest have yet to be inducted. When most people talk about the Negro leagues, they know Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, and Cool Papa Bell, and that's about all. Well, I've seen greater ball-players than them."

Webb's immediate candidate for the Hall is Smokey Joe Williams, a flamethrower who starred in 1910-32. "I've been campaigning for him for the last five, six years. He was the greatest fastball pitcher I ever saw. Faster than Paige. He pitched a no-hitter against the New York Giants in 1919 in an exhibition game - struck out 24 and lost the game on an infield error. That was all swept under the rug. It's a mystery to me why he's not in the Hall of Fame."

After Williams, Webb has a lengthy list of other nominees. "There was Bruce Petway, a tremendous catcher with Rube Foster's club - a great hitter and he could throw. There was a series of exhibition games in Cuba where he threw out Ty Cobb sixteen out of seventeen tries. I wrote about that fifty years ago. People just can't believe it. Most places you'll read that he threw him out two out of three times.

"There's Biz Mackey, another catcher, who played ball for the Newark Eagles till the age of fifty. He was something. He should be in the Hall of Fame without a doubt.

"Almost nobody knows about John Donaldson; Chester Brewer; Bullet Rogan; Turkey Stearnes, who hit as many home runs as anybody; Jimmy Lyons, the fastest man in baseball before Cool Papa Bell; Pete Hill; Willie (Devil) Wells, one of the great shortstops; Dick London, another great shortstop. You have pitchers: Hilton Smith and Newt Allen, both of whom wrote to me asking me to put their names before the Hall of Fame. There's Willie Foster, Rube's brother.

"And there are plenty of other great players, but the problem is that not enough people saw the old-timers play. That's about it, right there. [Veterans Committee members] Roy Campanella and Monte Irvin don't know anything about those players, except what they've heard. They have no business being on that committee. I'm qualified to be on that committee."

Webb continues his crusade from his home, lobbying for the election of Smokey Joe Williams, answering the letters he receives from around the country, and reporting on special events - particularly illnesses and deaths of old-time players. In 1970, he organized the Oldtime Negro Baseball Players Association to aid former players, and he remains available, as he has been for the last fifty years, to deliver a tribute at a ballplayer's funeral. "If the family calls me, I drop everything to be there."

In the past fifteen years, as the history of black baseball has found a widening circle of enthusiasts, Webb's contribution has become more generally known. In 1974, he was the first black to be inducted into the St. Louis Amateur Baseball Hall of Fame. The same year, he appeared on "The Joe Garagiola Show" with Cool Papa Bell and Satchel Paige and selected his all-time Negro-leagues team. On July 9, 1975, St. Louis congressman William Clay read a tribute to Webb into the Congressional Record, and in 1986, he was the recipient of a "SABR Salutes" award.

The personal honors please him, but his devotion is to the cause: "I'm a dedicated man," he says proudly, hauling out his well-thumbed scrapbooks, notebooks and files, and spreading them out for perusal. "This is what I've done with my life."

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Jay Feldman is a freelance writer and an organizer of the "Baseball for Peace" trips to Nicaragua.

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