

A Midwestern Pastime:

A look at race, John Donaldson, and baseball in the Midwest

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About 100 years ago, newspaper coverage of ethnic baseball teams started seeping into the Midwest. In 2011 when we think about integration and baseball, the first two names that most commonly arise are Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey. While Jackie Robinson's eternal influence on the game of baseball cannot be downplayed, many came before him without the same opportunities. One article from a 1911 Perry, Iowa newspaper states "Brown's 'Tennessee Rats,' an aggregation of colored players who have been winning from nearly every team they have played this year," the lack of respect for the talents of colored baseball players would go unappreciated for another 36 years, when Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers.

One of the players on W.A. Brown's Tennessee Rats was a pitcher by the name of John Wesley Donaldson, a black man born in Glasgow, Missouri in 1892. He began playing baseball at an integrated middle school where he was not only a star on the baseball diamond, but in the classroom as well. We have to stop for a moment to also realize that segregation was still widely implemented in the United States, so having a black student-athlete who

excelled in both realms was not the most common, and definitely not the most widely accepted. But in the region, Donaldson's stock began quickly rising as his professional career started in 1911 as a part of the Rats.

To this day, the name John Donaldson is not widely recognized outside of colored baseball enthusiasts and historians, and due to this, the question must then be posed, why? The quick answer is because of his skin color. However, in the time since the Civil Rights movement, Donaldson still goes unnoticed. In Donaldson's obituary, a quote from legendary New York Giants manager John McGraw says "I think he (Donaldson) is the greatest I have ever seen. I would give \$50,000 for him if it wasn't for the color line." When we see \$50,000 we may not think it's very much, but back then it was a fortune. It reiterates the lack of recognition and acceptance even more, considering a star such as Carl Hubbell received only \$17,500 in 1934.

While integration into what is now Major League Baseball didn't occur until 1947, that didn't deter people of color from forming their own leagues and playing the game they loved. With Donaldson's roots being planted in Missouri, his illustrious career was spent mostly with teams in the Midwest, where the teams traveled around the area barnstorming. While Donaldson was a part of the Tennessee Rats, which made a trip documented in the *Perry Daily Chief*, the local daily newspaper for Perry, Iowa. To put things in an early 1900's perspective, a few headlines leading up to the games read "Colored

Men Will Play Ball Here,” and “Colored Men Are Great Players.” The headlines alone give us a great insight into the mindset of early 1900’s Midwestern culture, a culture in which colored teams were allowed to exist and play against white teams, but not much more.

Perhaps Donaldson’s legacy has not been recognized due to the fact that the aforementioned trip included the cities of Jefferson, Redfield, Adel, Panora, Grand Junction, and Perry. Looking at a current map all of these Iowa towns are within a 50 mile radius, which back in the early 1900’s was more realistic due to transportation restraints, but does not necessarily mean that Donaldson should have been overlooked. After all, the same Perry newspaper is quoted as saying “The colored team are said to be clever and have been playing shut out games galore.”

The road trip in Iowa featured a game against the local Firemen in which Donaldson struck out 19, something that has only been repeated 6 times in the 100 years that have passed, the last being in 1998 by Kerry Wood of the Chicago Cubs. The paper said “The Firemen looked dangerous in their half of the ninth, when three men were on bases but Donaldson struck out three men and retired the side.”

Donaldson’s talents were taken to a very successful team known for their great diversity, the barnstorming All Nations team. The team played all over the Midwest, and was based out of Des Moines. The team was put together by J.L. Wilkinson, a man with a knack for scouting and signing great

ballplayers, including Donaldson. One question that many people ask is why players with such talent played for barnstorming teams like the All Nations in which they were seen as inferior teams, composed of various racial backgrounds? The *Indianapolis Freeman*, a black newspaper, answered the question quite eloquently “The woods are filled with good colored players, but they are fated to eke out a tolerable existence only, under the ban of displeasure of the racial gods, whoever they may be.”

Even in the time before the Negro Leagues were created, colored players of all nationalities were heralded for their exceptional baseball skills. The All Nations team was the team to beat, not only known for the skill of John Donaldson, but Jose Mendez as well. Behind the great pitching staff of All Nations, the team won 92 of 116 total games in 1913, a staggering winning percentage of .793. 1913 was also the year that Donaldson pitched three consecutive no-hitters. Donaldson’s first two years with All Nations saw him also winning an astonishing 80 games while only losing five. Not only could he pitch well, but he could also pitch often, something that has evolved to only pitching every five days as is customary in the present day system.

Throughout his seven seasons with All Nations, John Donaldson drew a crowd whenever they were expected to come to town. They traveled in their own railcar from town to town, to ensure the availability of lodging every night. Throughout the time based out of Des Moines, All Nations created a baseball team not only accepting of other races, but also featured a cross-dressing

man to appear accepting of women. While the decision by manager J.L. Wilkinson could be seen as a publicity stunt, it still promoted diversity, and sought to end segregation and stereotyping. The team itself was composed of blacks, whites, Indians, French, Asians, and Latin Americans. The existence of a club of this nature in its time period is one that truly represented what America is still viewed as today, the “Melting Pot.” The team name All Nations meant just that, there were no restrictions on who could be a part of the team. It was a revolutionary idea at the time, and without teams like the All Nations, it is hard to say if the United States would have adopted integration into Major League Baseball when they did.

The All Nations team moved from Des Moines to Kansas City in 1916, and dissolved in 1917 due to World War I, when many of the players from the team were drafted, including John Donaldson. Upon his return from the war, Donaldson continued his baseball career in New York, until the founding of the Negro League in 1920. With the creation of the Negro League, colored players finally had a successful and functioning league that was the most legitimate league they had ever been a part of. Once the Negro League was established, Donaldson was signed by his former employer, J.L. Wilkinson, to play as a part of the Kansas City Monarchs.

Unfortunately, by the time the Negro League had been created, John Donaldson was already considered a veteran, and was forced to move from pitcher to center field, only occasionally pitching. The fact that the Negro

League wasn't created by the beginning of John Donaldson's baseball career is probably the largest factor as to why he is so widely forgotten. Only having the opportunity to play on small barnstorming teams for the majority of his best years, Donaldson was only able to garner local, and a small amount of regional, publicity and recognition during his years playing. It is only now that we can look back, almost 100 years too late, and appreciate the feats he accomplished.

After a few years with the Monarchs, Donaldson moved up to Minnesota to play on a small team named the Bertha Fishermen, where he was paid a handsome \$325 a month. The Fishermen were a part of an independent league due to the restrictions of the local league regarding colored players. Once again, Donaldson encountered the now reoccurring issue of being held back due to his skin color. Only a few short years before Donaldson arrived in Minnesota to play baseball, three black circus workers were lynched. The general sentiment was expressed in the local *Ely Miner* a few days after the lynching's occurred, saying "The lynching in Duluth will have a wholesome affect on the class of help carried by ordinary circus troupes. The chances are that no colored help with a carnival attraction or circus in the county will be tolerated hereafter." Having attitudes expressed so openly, and with racial tensions still very high, Donaldson's decision to relocate his family to an area like this tells us a lot about his character as a human being, and ultimately tells us how much value he held on diversity and integration.

The character of John Donaldson played a big role in his success in baseball, and kept him a little safer than other colored players because of his day-to-day behavior. Of course, his reputation for playing baseball helped keep him safe as well, because a large majority of the crowds that attended the games went due to his presence. They wanted to see “John Donaldson, the world’s greatest pitcher, with the speed of Walter Johnson.”

Although everyone in the region wanted to see Donaldson on the mound, the sentiment towards all colored players, no matter how talented, was still negative. It is evident in the cynical writing in the *Chicago Defender*, and permeated the seemingly normal day-to-day articles of the previous day’s game. With portions such as

“John Donaldson, the great- well, what of it. But there is a lot to it when you come to think that a fellow that has the reputation that he has for strikeouts, probably more than any man in the country, even including the great Walter Johnson and Ed Walsh. If our friend was white he would be the highest priced pitcher in the big league. But alas, poor prejudice how it works against us!”

Passages such as these make me wonder what colored people truly thought about the teams that did exist. Clearly the writer of the previous piece was jaded towards the situation, and who can blame him? Racism didn’t necessarily have to run rampant for there to be bitterness towards prejudice and unfair treatment. Donaldson was quoted in the *Ironwood (MI) Daily Globe* as saying

“I am clean morally and physically. I go to my church and contribute my share. I keep my body and mind clean. And yet when I go out there to play baseball it is not unusual to hear some fan cry out: ‘Hit the dirty nigger.’ That hurts. For I have no recourse. I am getting paid, I suppose, to take that. But why should fans become personal? If I act the part of a gentleman, am I not entitled to a little respect?”

Half the reason this essay is being written is because arguably one of the best pitchers to ever grace the mound is a virtual unknown to a majority of baseball fans due to a few reasons. Obviously one is because he is black and didn't have the opportunities that white players did, but the other put Donaldson at a severe disadvantage. Due to the fact that the Negro League had not been created, he got lost in the crowd even more than if he had spent his entire career in the Negro League.

While the Negro League did not have the coverage that Major League baseball had, it had substantially more press than that of the barnstorming teams going through small farm towns. All this being said, Donaldson was on the 2006 Hall of Fame Ballot in which 39 Negro League and Pre-Negro League were examined by a special committee of 12 Negro League and pre-Negro League baseball historians. Curiously, John Donaldson appeared on the Negro League ballot instead of the pre-Negro League ballot, which may have inhibited his chances of being elected. After all, Donaldson only pitched a few seasons in the actual Negro League. It is also unclear how many votes

Donaldson received due to the secrecy of the voting procedures, but one has to wonder whether he was one vote shy of the 75 percent required to enter the Hall of Fame, or a bit further off the mark. After looking at his career and the staggering numbers he put up on a consistent basis, it is hard to imagine he missed the mark by much. By no means am I saying that his presence in the Negro League would have guaranteed him a spot in the Hall of Fame, but he would have had a better chance.

Donaldson's career continued to flourish even as he progressed through his thirties. After all, what seemed to be big money on his initial contract in Bertha, \$325 a month at age 32, Donaldson received an even larger contract, \$450 a month, from his next team in Lismore in 1925. More and more throughout John Donaldson's career, his salary and age were parallel and always increasing. But in the considered time frame, and the color of his skin, one cannot blame John Donaldson one iota for making career decisions the way he did.

Over the next couple years, Donaldson jumped to a few different teams, eventually returning to Bertha in 1927, if only for a short amount of time before they lost their star again to more money and this time, notoriety. Donaldson signed on with a team out of Scobey, Montana, where they toured as John Donaldson's All-Stars. Although Donaldson's time with the team was very brief, as he played for four teams in 1928, it was a first for Donaldson to have a team name include his name.

Throughout his career, Donaldson learned to capitalize off of his celebrity status, even when the rest of the nation was going through the Great Depression. The Depression caused many teams, including the team in Bertha, to fade rapidly as the American people became more and more financially conscious, attempting to conserve what little they had.

Peter Gorton, another John Donaldson historian, noted that during the Depression, “The local ball club cashed in on the crowd that a ‘Donaldson guaranteed to pitch,’ game would bring. Often times this was a means of bringing financially strapped town teams back to the black in their ledger books. A Donaldson game was a highly anticipated game on the schedule, and the crowds would turn out in droves.” Donaldson, never one to waste his talents, always had someone at the doorstep petitioning for his services. Even though the *Billings Gazette* deemed Donaldson “One of the ‘grand old men’ of baseball... veteran of every league from the majors down,” he could still draw a crowd by showing “Billings fans that his ‘clancking’ arm has lost, little of its potency in the years since he was hailed as a discovery by John McGraw.”

Even with Donaldson’s long and rich legacy, he could never escape what some saw as his biggest flaw, the fact that he was “blacker than stove polish” as one newspaper put it. While it may have not been viewed as an overt act of prejudice at the time, the uproar would be endless if it were to happen today. It is something that came with the territory in the 1930’s, and John Donaldson knew that, managing to effectively maneuver his career along a path in which he was successful both on and off of the field.

Donaldson was able to not only be a great baseball player, but also, because of his success on the diamond, was profitable in his business undertakings. All of this was possible due to outstanding performance on the baseball field during a time in which being black was seen as second class.

As Donaldson entered his late thirties, the demand for his talents shifted from his pitching skills to his skills on the other end: in the batter's box. John Donaldson could not only make opposing hitters look foolish while he was on the mound, but he could also make opposing pitchers look foolish when he was at the plate. Throughout his career Donaldson consistently hit the ball, amassing a career average over .300, while batting over .400 on various teams in his younger days.

As John's playing days began to decrease with age, he began to adopt the role of mentor for the younger generation of players. In one of the more unique ventures in his life, Donaldson bought an old baseball field, created a team in Fairmont, Minnesota, and traveled around using the John Donaldson All-Stars name again. While Donaldson did not always pitch, he would still make appearances on the mound, dominating even as he grew older. As the Depression made it more difficult to survive as a barnstorming baseball team, John Donaldson returned to the Kansas City Monarchs to complete his illustrious playing career.

When Donaldson's playing career came to an end he became a coach with the Monarchs, sharing the roster with famed pitcher Satchel Paige. Even as his career in baseball was winding down, the issue of race was still looming

large. The issue was even addressed in a 1942 article in the *Chicago Defender*, in which the commissioner of baseball at the time, Kenesaw M. Landis speaks about the issue. Fay Young, writer for the *Chicago Defender* at the time said "Time and time again the *Chicago Defender* has pointed out that there was no rule in organized baseball against hiring a ball player because of his race or creed or color. Yet the color question is and has been there for years. While there isn't any law or ruling in the constitution of either league- there seems to be an unwritten law which stands up and the buck as been passed from owner to manager and from manager to owner. The fact is none have been hired since back when John McGraw played a Negro at second base and palmed him off as an Indian until Pop Anson (long dead), then playing for the Chicago club raised a howl and McGraw let his dark skinned "Indian" out."

All this being said, Jackie Robinson still did not break the color barrier in Major League Baseball for another five years, even after the commissioner of baseball said that if "any... manager, or all of them, want to sign one, or 25, Negro players, it is all right with me."

Although the issue had been directly addressed by Major League Baseball, there was still a cloud that hung over the league. It is as though there were an unwritten rule that the professional teams would, and should, keep blacks off of their teams, even if it meant losing that potential talent. Once Jackie Robinson became a part of the Brooklyn Dodgers, it was as if the floodgates had

opened. In another article from the *Chicago Defender*, writer Russ Cowans puts it best in saying

“John Donaldson, rated one of the greatest southpaws ever to step on the mound, has been signed by a major league team. But slender southpaw will not be tossing up his twisters to puzzle batters; instead, he'll be scouring the oods and beating the bushes in search of promising young players for the Chicago White Sox. Take 30 years off John Donaldson's age and he could sign with the White Sox as a starting pitcher.”

It is in this prose that we once again come to the realization that John Donaldson was simply born too early. Even if Donaldson had been born later it would have taken quite a bit for him to overcome the color of his skin, something that in the early years of baseball's desegregation was still an issue. It is only now that we can look back and truly appreciate what John Donaldson did in his time as a ballplayer, mostly because we have become a more accepting nation, willing to look past the color of someone's skin, appreciating what the person brings to society. For the world, John Donaldson was more than just an amazing baseball player, but an exemplary citizen in a time when he had every right to rebel and go against the grain.

With that, please review the following statistics that are still being compiled on John Donaldson. All of the data compiled thus far is part of an ongoing project to bring the legacy of John Donaldson into the light, and has is docu-

mented through various box scores from hundreds of newspapers from his time. Donaldson compiled 235 wins in his career, striking out 3950 batters, with more of both categories being uncovered. His winning percentage, with current data, sits at an astonishing .737, and has a calculated earned run average of 1.37. According to an article in the *LeMars Sentinel*, John Donaldson had games of 30 strikeouts, 26 games with over 20 strikeouts, and 166 double-digit strikeout games.¹⁸

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¹⁸ Ibid.