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This Great Black Baseball Player Still Isn't in the Hall of Fame

John Donaldson died in obscurity, his statistics devalued because he played before baseball was integrated.

By Mary Pilon and Travon Free

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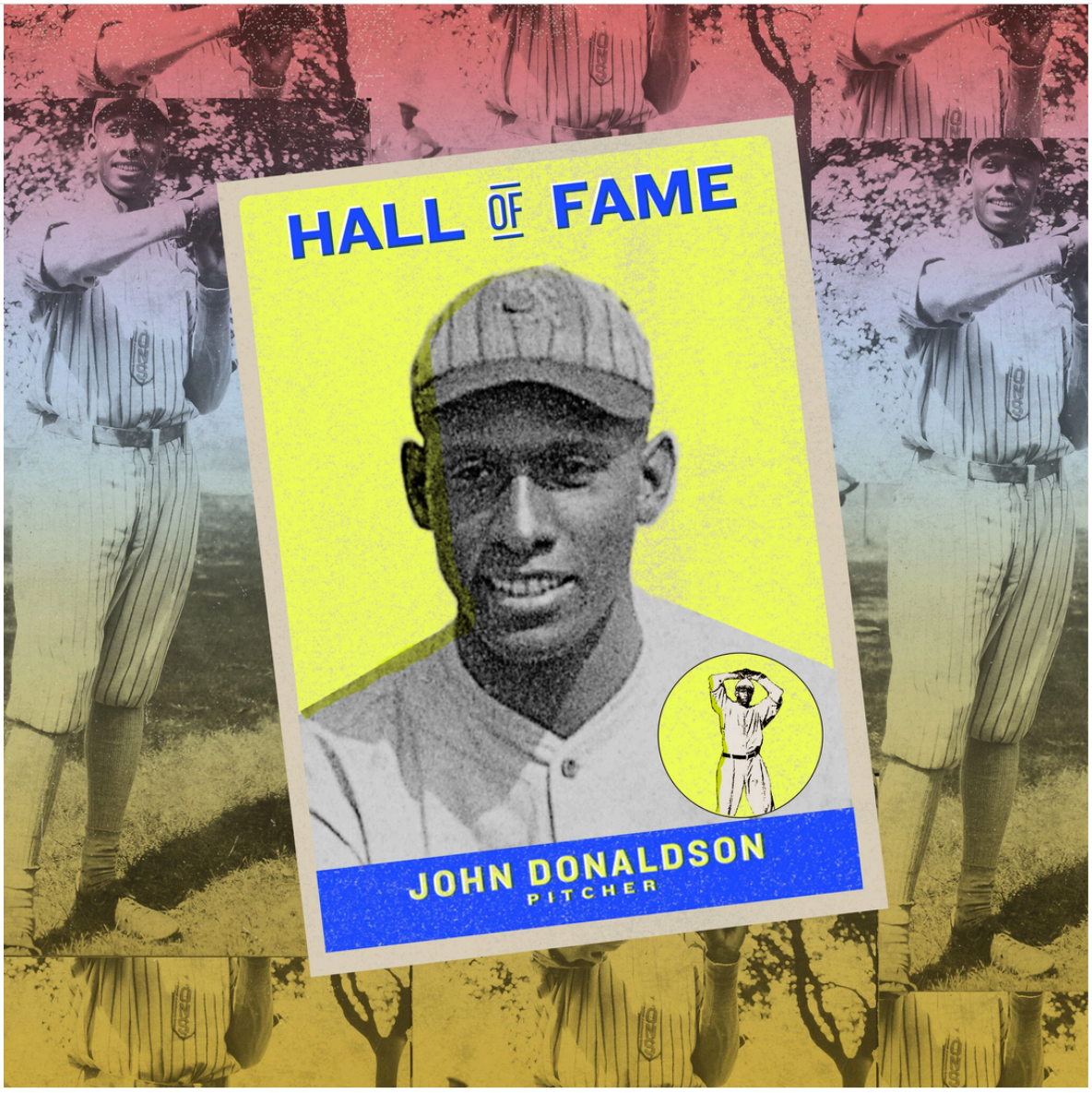

Illustration by Mark Harris; photographs by The John Donaldson Network

Most baseball fans have probably never heard of John Donaldson, a hard-throwing pitcher who drew sold-out crowds around the country for an astonishing three decades before he hung up his glove in 1941. His statistics establish him as one of the greatest to ever play America's pastime. Yet he died in obscurity.

Now, Donaldson's towering contributions to the Negro Leagues are being slowly resurrected after decades of racial injustice and institutional neglect. That's thanks to the efforts of a white guy who drives an Uber in Minnesota and to a network of amateur researchers that he organized to reconstruct Donaldson's career and push for his admission into the Hall of Fame.

It's been an arduous task; records about his life and career were scattered and often difficult to find. An earlier effort to elect him to the hall failed when a panel of historians considered experts on the Negro Leagues declined to select him in 2006. At the time, many of his career numbers were still not known. No explanation was given.

But Donaldson may have another shot in December, when the hall's Early Baseball Era Committee meets to consider a roster of players, managers, umpires and executives whose greatest contributions to baseball took place before 1950. Any candidate whose name appears on at least 75 percent of the ballots will be inducted next year into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, joining 35 other Negro League players. The 10 candidates will be announced this fall.

The first step to righting an injustice is to admit that it occurred. That's why this small group of baseball activists, led by Peter Gorton, the Uber driver, have been assembling their evidence and telling Donaldson's story.

Perhaps one day the Hall of Fame will listen. It certainly should. His story is more than about baseball. It's about the pain of social change. It's probably not a coincidence that Donaldson attended seminary, but, against his mother's wishes, ultimately chose to preach by example the gospel of change on the field of dreams.

Mr. Gorton has so far uncovered 413 wins by Donaldson and 5,091 strikeouts. This means, according to Mr. Gorton, that Donaldson has more wins and strikeouts than any pitcher in segregated baseball — in the Negro Leagues, on barnstorming teams and in the semi-pros — before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947.

He was one of the biggest stars in the game's barnstorming era, a time when Black players risked their lives to play in towns where lynchings were carried out with impunity. Barnstorming players competed in matchups between Black and white teams that included major leaguers in the off-season, among them Babe Ruth. Donaldson played in at least 724 cities in the United States and Canada, according to Mr. Gorton's research, and pitched 14 no-hitters and two perfect games. A power pitcher, he was far ahead of his time in his technique.

He was also a leader. He was among the founders of the Kansas City Monarchs (he is credited with coming up with its name), the Negro Leagues team that was a training ground for the Hall of Famers Ernie Banks, Satchel Paige, Robinson and other great players.

After Donaldson's famed pitching arm wore out, he became one of the first Black scouts for Major League Baseball, working for the Chicago White Sox, where he spotted talents like the young Willie Mays (though the White Sox didn't sign him). He mentored many players on and off the field, including Robinson.

Yet for all of his accomplishments, he spent his final years on the overnight shift as a postal worker in Chicago and his days teaching baseball to children in Chicago's parks system. For decades after his death, his grave was unmarked.

The slow detective work that pieced together this story came about by accident, when Mr. Gorton saw Donaldson's photo in a museum in Minnesota in the early 2000s. He stared at the photo, startled by the sight of a racially integrated baseball team (there were a few, like the All Nations team, for which Donaldson once played) well before Robinson put on a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform.

While most are familiar with the Negro Leagues, the practice of Black teams playing white teams of that era is often overlooked but was important in showing that racially integrated baseball could succeed. Or, in the case of the All Nations team, that a single team could be racially integrated, play nationwide, and thrive.

For Mr. Gorton, a middle-aged white man and impassioned baseball fan, the reconstruction of Donaldson's life and career has meant confronting inconvenient truths about the country and the sport that he loves, and about the nation's history of redlining, violence, segregationist school policies and racist unions. He has spent 20 years and filled his basement with towers of paperwork as he amasses ever more evidence for his second appeal to the Hall of Fame to admit Donaldson this year, the centennial year of the Negro Leagues.

Donaldson's story had long been buried. It's part of a larger story about the wall that kept Black players out of "the Show" — the major leagues. Even today, statistics from the barnstorming era and the Negro Leagues are played down, even though those players had nowhere else to showcase their talents.

Mr. Gorton said he is trying to call attention to Donaldson because his life was full of lessons about resilience and being an agent of social change. "Donaldson's story was a life-or-death struggle," Mr. Gorton said. "A huge part of the Black baseball struggle in America is misunderstood. Everyone thinks that it's chiseled in stone in 1947 but we're learning something new every day. We need to figure out that history."

Donaldson's story also reveals a hard truth about progress — that it's messy, complicated and almost instantly rewritten by those who had tried to slow it down. We love to trumpet Robinson's career, for example, and should, but seldom mention his post-retirement advocacy work against racial injustices including redlining.

The world is full of Donaldsons, people who change things for the better, their contributions unnoticed. Telling their stories matters immensely not merely in building the arc of progress, but in also showing the world as it really is.

“The ability of John Donaldson to have a lasting legacy was systematically eliminated by both baseball and the society he lived through,” Mr. Gorton told us.

“He never had a chance,” he added. “Not only with ‘on the field opportunities’ but in life as well. History cannot remember what it knows little about, and actively tries to minimize.”

Perhaps the truth about baseball, and any kind of seismic change, is an inversion of the fabled line from “Field of Dreams.”

No one built it for players like Donaldson. But they came anyway.

And we are all are better for it.

Mary Pilon, a former sports reporter for The Times and author of “The Monopolists,” and Travon Free, a television writer, are the screenwriters of “Barnstormers," a film in development about John Donaldson and Peter Gorton.

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