

Tinkering With the Game

Innovations by black people helped change the shape of baseball

By Ron Thomas
Chronicle Staff Writer

The contributions black people have made to baseball haven't been limited to accomplishments on the playing field.

"Most people think of what blacks did on the field: the base hits, home runs, great catches by Willie Mays ... which is fine," said baseball historian Dick Simpson. "My point is that not only did they improve the game on the field, but black people were involved with fundamental innovations that became a part of baseball."

One innovation dates back more than a century. Several oth-

ers were developed in the Negro leagues, which, except for black newspapers such as the Pittsburgh Courier and the Chicago Defender, were largely ignored by the media. Because of the relative lack of media coverage and documentation of the Negro leagues, some of these innovations are supported by lore rather than facts.

"I'm not prepared to argue firsts," said Robert Peterson, the author of "Only the Ball Was White," the ground-breaking book about the Negro leagues that was published in 1970. "There's an awful lot of uncertainty in this field."

But there is no disputing that without innovations by black owners, coaches and players, the national pastime would not be the

game we know today. Here are some examples:

■ Shin guards now are worn by catchers to protect them from the spikes of players who are intent upon crossing home plate. But the first shin guards were invented by one two black second basemen, Binghamton's Bud Fowler or Buffalo's Frank Grant, who played minor-league ball in the 1880s in the International League. They invented the shin guards, which were wooden slats wrapped around their legs, because white opponents intentionally tried to spike them while sliding into second base.

In "Only the Ball Was White," Peterson excerpted an 1889 Sporting News story in which an unidentified white International
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**BLACK
HISTORY
MONTH**



Frank Grant, shown second from right on the bottom row in this developed shin guards to protect him from runners sliding into s

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League player admitted that he was "prejudiced" against teams with black players, yet "could not help pitying some of the poor black fellows" in the league. It is presumed the player was talking about the 1888 season when he said:

"Fowler used to play second base with the lower part of his legs encased in wooden guards. He knew that about every player that came down to second base on a steal had it in for him and would, if possible, throw the spikes into him.

"... I have seen him muff balls intentionally, so that he would not have to try to touch runners, fearing that they might injure him. Grant was the same way. Why, the runners chased him off second base."

In 1891, *Sporting Life*, a popular publication of the time, quoted another player, Ed Williamson, saying that the desire to injure Grant made the feet-first slide popular among white players. "... he put wooden armor on his legs for protection, but the opposition proceeded to file their spikes to a sharp point and split the (shin guards)," Williamson said.

In three International League seasons, Grant batted .351 and once led the league in home runs. He also was an excellent second baseman, but eventually the abuse forced him to switch to the out-

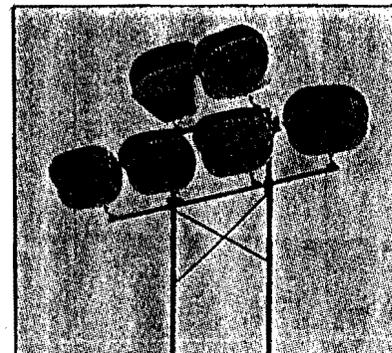


NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL MUSEUM INC.

Buck O'Neil was with the K.C. Monarchs when the team used a primitive lighting system in the '30s

'Black people were involved with fundamental innovations that became a part of baseball'

— HISTORIAN DICK SIMPSON



with his "squeezer" mitt.

"The mitts were kind of stiff, so he got the biggest mitt he could and took a lot of stuffing out of the mitt and caught most of the balls in the webbing," said O'Neil. "(The usual) catcher's mitts didn't hinge in the middle. They were round and you had to catch the ball with two hands. Pepper would put that right hand behind him and catch that ball with one hand.

"So many catchers missed on

field after he missed many games due to injuries in 1888. The outfield, said baseball historian James Overmyer, was "less predatory" than second base.

Beginning in 1890, professional teams refused to sign black players until Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1946 as a member of the International League's Montreal Royals, a Brooklyn Dodgers farm team.

■ The first night game in major-league history was played in Cincinnati's Crosley Field on May 23, 1935, an event that revolutionized the game. But beginning in 1930, the Kansas City Monarchs, who temporarily had withdrawn from the Negro leagues to become an independent team, had popularized night baseball by playing under portable lights purchased by team owner J.L. Wilkinson.

Technically, night baseball wasn't a black innovation because lighted fields had been used sparingly in the past and Wilkinson was white. But night baseball's value as a marketing tool was proven as the Monarchs competed against Negro league teams and on barnstorming trips throughout rural areas. The Monarchs' success helped convince major-league baseball to adopt night baseball.

"Others had used lights as a novelty for maybe one game, but Wilkinson developed a system that could be used on a long-term basis," said Janet Bruce Campbell, author of "The Kansas City Monarchs." "It proved to be their salvation during the Depression because so many teams were going broke, especially minor-league and black teams."

The Monarchs played their first night game on April 28, 1930, and Peterson said they introduced

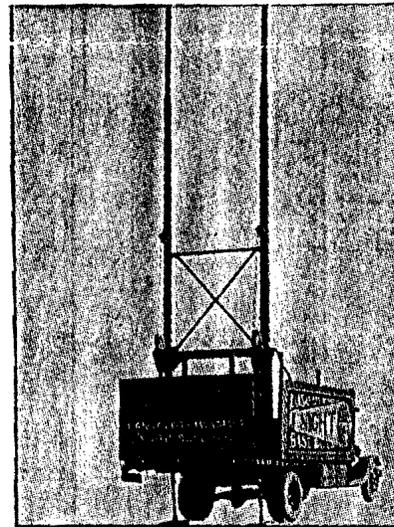
night baseball in many cities including Pittsburgh and Detroit. In 1933, Gus Greenlee, who was black and owned the Negro leagues' Pittsburgh Crawfords, installed lights in his team's stadium, Greenlee Field.

Before lights had been introduced, baseball teams suffered because they could only play during daylight, when most potential fans were working. Buck O'Neil, who played for or coached the Monarchs from 1938-55, said they tried to get around that problem by scheduling twilight games which started at 6 p.m. and continued until sundown. Even so, games often ended before farmers, who worked extremely long hours, could arrive. Weekend games were another way to get around the daylight problem, but, said Campbell, "If there was a rain-out on weekends, it was financially devastating."

So Wilkinson asked a Nebraska company to build a portable lighting system which would be transported by trucks. Telescoping poles were implanted in a truck bed, with each pole supporting six floodlights raised about 50 feet above the field. A 100-kilowatt generator was put in center field to provide electricity to the trucks, which were placed along the foul lines and behind home plate.

"With the lights, he got everybody to the game," O'Neil said. "And the lights were an attraction."

O'Neil said batting, fielding ground balls and catching low line drives weren't that difficult, "but if a high fly ball would go above the lights, you had to wait until it came below the lights (to see it). But if you learned how to judge the ball, you had some idea where



NEGRO LEAGUES BASEBALL MUSEUM INC.

Lights mounted on the backs of trucks helped several Negro-league teams popularize night baseball

it would come down."

Campbell wrote there were even more problems, such as outfielders trying to make sure they didn't trip over the generator's wires while chasing a fly ball. "I think players realized (lights were) almost a necessary evil," she said. "It allowed them to survive during the Depression but it wasn't the ideal conditions."

■ Now it's commonplace to see a catcher snap the ball into his glove one-handed while he keeps his right, throwing hand behind his back to protect it from injury. Former major-league catcher Randy Hundley, who played with the Chicago Cubs from 1964-77, popularized that style, then Hall of Famer Johnny Bench perfected it.

But a half-century ago, the Negro leagues' Lloyd (Pepper) Bassett, who starred from 1934-50, already was catching one-handed

"So many catchers missed so many games with (injured) knuckles or split fingers, but Pepper didn't have that problem."

Bassett, one of the Negro leagues' best catchers, introduced another playing style that probably never has been emulated: catching in a rocking chair. In "Invisible Men" by Donn Rogosin, Bassett explained that when he played for the New Orleans Crescents in the 1930s, they weren't drawing well, so "I had to figure out some way to put some people in the park." He used that gimmick only sparingly, but it became his trademark.

■ The batter walks up to the on-deck circle, drops a doughnut-shaped weight over his bat, then swings the bat a few times to limber up before stepping up to the plate. Ever wonder who invented that doughnut?

The answer is the late Elston Howard, a major-league catcher from 1955-68 who was best known as the handler of New York Yankees pitching staffs that won four World Series. He introduced the product — "Elston Howard's On-Deck Bat-Weight" — in the late 1960s to speed up a player's swing and strengthen his arms, wrists and forearms.

"Bat-head speed is so important, and when you can make the bat-head feel lighter you can whip the bat," said baseball announcer Tim McCarver,

Howard's invention, which he created with two friends, is far less cumbersome than loosening up by swinging a lead bat or swinging several bats at a time. The doughnut is made of metal dipped in plastic, and it has become such a fixture in major-league baseball that three doughnuts are displayed in the Baseball Hall of Fame.