

John Henry Lloyd

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In 1938, upon being asked who the greatest player in baseball was, a St. Louis sportswriter replied, "If you mean in organized baseball my answer would be Babe Ruth; but if you mean in all baseball, organized or unorganized, the answer would have to be a colored man named John Henry Lloyd."¹ If you say the name Babe Ruth today, baseball fans know who you are talking about and probably have legendary stories they can recite. However, if you say the name John Henry Lloyd today, not very many fans will know who you are talking about. Despite the fact that he was one of the greatest players of his time and, arguably, of all time, Lloyd receives little to no recognition outside of those who study the Negro Leagues, which he played in from 1905 to 1932.² His status in baseball history has been hindered both by the time in which he played and the lack of respect that the modern baseball establishment and baseball scholars have for Negro League players.

John Henry Lloyd was born on April 25, 1884, in Palatka, FL. He was raised mainly by his grandmother following his father's death and his mother's remarriage. Leaving school after elementary school, Lloyd began working and playing on the local amateur team. He eventually moved to Jacksonville while still a teenager, where he began playing for a semipro team, the Young Receivers.³

His professional career began in Macon, GA, as a catcher with the Macon Acmes.⁴ He soon became considered a "baseball wunderkind" in the South and was able to move to the North and gain a position on the Cuban X-Giants in 1906.⁵ Lloyd went on to play in Philadelphia beginning in 1907, where he began playing shortstop, the position for which he would gain acclaim for.⁶

Lloyd soon found fame in both the United States and Cuba as a premier shortstop and hitter. During his prime, Lloyd bounced from team to team; he later stated, "Wherever the money was, that's where I was."⁷ And wherever Lloyd went, success seemed to follow him. He was consistently among the top batters in the league, with some of his higher batting averages being .373 in 1916, .333 in 1920, and .349 in 1923.⁸ While playing in the Cuban Winter League for many years, Lloyd was also consistently at the top, putting up impressive batting averages like .400 in 1910 and .393 in 1915.⁹ Defensively, he was considered to be one of the best in the game. Frank A. Young, a sports editor for the *Chicago Defender*, wrote in 1942, "He started his professional baseball career as a second baseman, but as the years rolled in, Lloyd was better at shortstop where he was second to none – white or black."¹⁰ Lloyd earned the nickname "El Cuchara," or the shovel, in Cuba because of his propensity to scoop up dirt with the ball while fielding.¹¹

Later in his career, slowed down by age, Lloyd shifted from the more physically demanding shortstop position, going between first and second base, and also

began managing. However, even though he had played for over twenty years, Lloyd was still a formidable force on the field. He posted a batting average of .563 in 1928, at the age of 44.¹² According to box scores in the *New York Age*, there were occasions when Lloyd hit perfectly in games, going 6 for 6 in a double header on July 27, 1929, and going 3 for 3 in a game on May 24, 1930.¹³ He also gained a reputation for being a strong leader and example for his players, earning the nickname "Pop." A commentary in the *New York Age* creating a Negro League all-star team spelled out how Lloyd was thought of: "Lloyd is the daddy of them all. Fielding, hitting, running and throwing and a wonderful field general. I would also make him captain of the team."¹⁴ Before leaving the game, Lloyd left one more important mark: he helped break down the color barrier at Yankee Stadium in 1930, playing in the first African American game ever at the stadium.¹⁵

Following his lengthy career, Lloyd retired to Atlantic City, NJ, and worked as a janitor for the Atlantic City school district in addition to playing on semipro teams until 1942, when he quit at the age of 58.¹⁶ Though he had no children of his own, he became a father figure to many of the children of Atlantic City:

The youngsters cluster about him between sessions. They call him "Pop" and love to listen while he spins baseball yarns of the past. Sometimes they refuse to break away from him and "Pop" had to pick them up bodily and carry them into their classrooms. He is their hero, this big, soft-hearted, soft-spoken, congenial man with a tired look in his eyes, but the bubbling spirit of youth in his heart.¹⁷

Lloyd later served for many years as the commissioner for Atlantic City Little League, who later named a field in his honor. John Henry Lloyd died of arteriosclerosis on March 19, 1965, twelve years before he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.¹⁸

During his time, Lloyd was commonly known as the "black Honus Wagner" and was considered one of the best players in baseball, white or black.¹⁹ Today, for the scholars and former players of the Negro Leagues, Lloyd's name still stays near the top of the list of the greatest players ever. Several books and articles taking surveys of past players and historians on who should be named to the all time greatest players' list for the Negro Leagues include John Henry Lloyd among the most mentioned.²⁰ However, despite the respect Lloyd got from his contemporaries and continues to get from scholars of the Negro Leagues, his name rarely comes up when the greats of baseball are recalled outside of a discussion of the Negro Leagues. One is pushed to wonder why this is, considering the career Lloyd led. What reasons could there be that Lloyd is not recognized today?

One reason that comes to mind is that of simple statistics. If Lloyd simply did not stack up as a player to the other, more recognized players, his lack of recognition might be understandable. If, compared to other Negro League players, both his contemporaries and later players, and compared to Major League players, Lloyd's batting averages and fielding were not as good, or did not place him among the top notch players of either league, the lack of acknowledgement could be understood. However, a look at Lloyd's statistics puts him in the company of many great players, white or black, and, in many cases, put him above them.

While most of the statistic books compiled on the Negro Leagues do not include fielding statistics, from what is written on Lloyd one can deduce that, defensively

speaking, he was a top rated player. "He was a graceful fielder, with exceptional range, who glided across the infield from second base to third, snatching hits from frustrated players."²¹ As mentioned before, he was often compared to Honus Wagner, considered to be one of the best shortstops ever to play in the Major Leagues. Connie Mack once said, "You could put John Henry Lloyd and Honus Wagner in a paper bag, and whichever one you pulled out, you couldn't lose."²²

Lloyd was also a top notch hitter in the Negro Leagues during his era and his numbers stack up favorably against those players of the later Negro Leagues. He held single season batting averages that were in the top five in thirteen years of his career, placing him with the likes of Oscar Charleston and Joe Williams, as well as later players like Josh Gibson.²³ Not many have come close to Lloyd's best single season batting average of .563; Josh Gibson's closest was .462.²⁴ Lloyd is also in the top ten of the Negro League players in lifetime batting averages, with an average of .337.²⁵

It would also be errant to say that Lloyd's batting averages did not compare to those of the white major leaguers. While it can be difficult to fairly compare the statistics of the black and white players, as the length of their seasons differed and the reliability of Negro League statistics is not always very good, some generalizations can be made. By looking at the batting champions of Major League Baseball, one can see that Lloyd would have held his own. The highest single season average in Major League Baseball is Roger Hornsby's 1924 record of .424, significantly lower than Lloyd's .563.²⁶ Lloyd's batting averages were, for the most part, consistently close, if not higher, than the major league's highest averages in the same years.²⁷ Lloyd's lifetime average of .337 would also place him in the top twenty of all-time major league leaders, placing him ahead of players like Stan Musial, Cap Anson, and Joe DiMaggio.²⁸

As I stated above, these statistics are not completely comprehensive nor are they adjusted to take into consideration things like season length, but the overall point is made that Lloyd would deserve to be recognized if the basis for recognition rested solely on statistics. So, if it is not for the fact that he was not a good enough player, what other factors could come into play which would keep Lloyd from being a recognizable figure?

One such factor could be that he played in an earlier era of the Negro Leagues, one which received little publicity. Even a cursory glance at newspapers at the beginning of Lloyd's career show that the first black teams received little press attention as compared to white baseball, even in African American newspapers. For example, Lloyd played for the Chicago-based Leland Giants in 1910, a team which is considered one of the best ever assembled.²⁹ In 1910, one of Chicago's white newspapers, the *Chicago Evening Post*, had very few mentions of the Leland Giants, mostly consisting of simple listings of games to be played; there were only a couple of instances when specific players were even mentioned.³⁰ The *Evening Post's* sports page was, however, dominated by news of the two white Major League teams, the White Sox and the Cubs.³¹ That same year the African American newspaper, *Chicago Defender*, rarely printed box scores or accounts of the Leland Giants' games; when they were included, they often were given a very small portion of the page.³² In contrast, the *Chicago Defender* in 1910 often carried at least a quarter of a page of news regarding white baseball during the season.³³ As African American baseball often

went virtually unreported in the early years, those who did not make an effort to find out about it probably knew very little, and players like Lloyd did not receive the same recognition later players received who benefited from more press attention.

The later players, such as Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige, are also more recognizable today because they were playing around the time of integration, a time in which white fans and the baseball establishment were paying more attention to the Negro Leagues. Prior to the signing of Jackie Robinson, there were many failed tryouts involving some of the Negro League stars, like Robinson and Sam Jethroe; these tryouts, and the failure of teams to sign black players, were brought to the attention of Americans by the press, such as columnist Dave Egan and sportswriter Sam Lacy.³⁴ Following the signing of Jackie Robinson, white owners began scouting and raiding the Negro Leagues for talent, pressured both by the success of other teams who had signed black players and by the increasing emphasis on integration in Major League Baseball. Players like Roy Campanella, Larry Doby, Sam Jethroe, and Dan Bankhead, who were all former Negro Leagues players signed to the majors, may have been pushed into obscurity had it not been for the fact that Major League Baseball had decided to integrate at that time and was looking for black talent.³⁵ Lloyd and his contemporaries, playing before the period of integration, did not have the benefit of this attention from the press and Major League Baseball.

Lloyd is also a victim of history; historians really did not pay much attention to the Negro Leagues until the 1970s, after which Lloyd and most of his contemporaries had passed away. The early Negro League players are sorely underrepresented in oral histories and interviews conducted by historians because of this fact. Included in the table of contents of some of the books which compiled these interviews are the debut years of the players interviewed. The earliest debuts of players in these books fall in the mid 1920s, twenty years after Lloyd's debut in professional baseball.³⁶

These later Negro League players who are included in oral histories and interviews do not always remember players like Lloyd because they were not around at the same time. There are some younger players who were managed by Lloyd who had first hand experiences with him. One such player is Bobby Robinson, who had this to say: "Pop Lloyd was playin' then. He was an outstanding player. A class by hisself. He could do it all."³⁷ However, players like Robinson are few and far between. Usually any comment made about Lloyd in interviews is based on hearsay from older players who told them stories. Representative of this is a comment made by Quincy Troupe: "Willie Wells was the greatest shortstop in my time, and some people say of all time. I guess most old-timers go with John Henry Lloyd, but I never saw him."³⁸ Because the players of Lloyd's era are not around to contribute their stories to the annals of history, their stories are lost and the recognition that some of them deserve is lacking.

Another factor that could play a role in the lack of recognition for Lloyd could be contributed to the lingering effects of racism that still inhabit the baseball establishment today. Unfortunately, the baseball establishment and baseball scholars and enthusiasts have not been quick to right the wrongs of the past. They are often unwilling to consider Negro League players in recognizing the greats of the past and, when it does occur, it is often with an air of tokenism.

Negro League players are rarely mentioned when baseball writers and historians compile lists of what they consider the greatest players of all time. For example, an

article in the Society for Baseball Research's journal hypothesizing on what kind of salaries baseball greats would make if they played today does not include one Negro League player that did not play in the majors for an extended period of time, such as Roy Campanella. The authors state,

The selection of old-time players...is based strictly upon our judgment. We have included most of the twentieth-century Hall of Fame players, and we have attempted to include all other quality players as well as the more commonly recognized players...We believe that we have not overlooked any hitters or pitchers who might be ranked in the top 50 of each table.³⁹

The authors mention that they included "most of the twentieth-century Hall of Fame players," but they did not include any of the Negro League players who, by 1992 when the article was written, had been inducted into the Hall of Fame. They also state that they tried to include other "quality players," but they did not see fit to include the quality players of the Negro Leagues. While, admittedly, it would be harder to formulate the Negro League players' salaries than for the white players, if the authors, as baseball scholars, were really committed to including all quality players and Hall of Fame members, they would have made an effort to include the Negro League players who had been shut out of the majors by the color line.

While the baseball establishment has moved in some aspects to recognize the Negro League players, they too often fall into the trap of quotas and tokenism. For example, letting nine Negro League players into the Hall of Fame in the 1970s was seen as a major step, but baseball also considered it a completed step at the time. In 1971, the Hall of Fame created a Special Committee on the Negro Leagues to select a group of Negro League players who deserved recognition.⁴⁰ The Special Committee consisted of

five former players (Eppie Barnes, Roy Campanella, Monte Irvin, Judy Johnson, Bill Yancey), three former 'executives' or promoters (Frank Forbes, Ed Gottlieb and Alex Pompez) and two writers (Sam Lacy and Wendell Smith). Joe Reichler and Dick Young also met with the committee, although they didn't vote.⁴¹

Between 1971 and 1977, the Special Committee voted in nine players: Satchel Paige, Buck Leonard, Josh Gibson, Monte Irvin, Cool Papa Bell, Judy Johnson, Oscar Charleston, Lloyd, and Martin Dihigo.⁴² The induction of these players was a major step in the right direction for the Hall of Fame.

However, after the Special Committee on the Negro Leagues inducted these nine players in the 1970s, they "voted to disband, informing the Hall of Fame that their assignment had been completed...and the power to select Negro League players was transferred to the Veterans Committee."⁴³ The Hall of Fame's Veterans Committee has inducted nine more Negro League players since the 1970s: Rube Foster, Ray Dandridge, Leon Day, Bill Foster, Willie Wells, Joe Rogan, Joe Williams, Turkey Stearnes, and Hilton Smith.⁴⁴ However, not much has changed despite these additional inductions. Five of these inductions stemmed from pressure from Negro League players on the Veterans Committee, including Buck O'Neil, who, by the 1990s, were frustrated by the lack of inductions for Negro League players since the

demise of the Committee on the Negro Leagues and demanded a separate committee. "In 1995, the Hall finally agreed to consider Negro Leaguers on their own ballot, but only for five years."⁴⁵ There continue to be arguments for more of the Negro League players to be inducted because they too deserve the recognition.⁴⁶ However, James Riley, the research director at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, is not hopeful about the extent to which Negro Leaguers will be allowed into the Hall of Fame: "There's still a bias against Negro Leaguers. It's residual from the original mind-set that kept them out of the majors to start with."⁴⁷

Some argue, however, that the number of Negro League players inducted into the Hall be kept at what they consider a reasonable number. Robert Peterson made the argument in his book, *Only the Ball Was White*, that

during that 1900-1947 era, the Negro percentage of America's population remained fairly constant at ten percent. Arbitrarily, then, it could be assumed that ten percent of the Hall of Fame members for that era should be Negroes... This means that eight Negroes who played behind the color line should be added to the Hall of Fame.⁴⁸

While Peterson did write his book prior to the first Hall of Fame inductions and was attempting just to get Negro League players in the door, he does not make much of an argument for inducting all of the players who deserve that honor. Bill James calls Peterson's number "a modest, reasonable minimum."⁴⁹ I would agree that it is a nice minimum, a number to shoot for, but not a number to stop at. I would also agree that the Hall of Fame should show some restraint in who they induct so as to keep induction into the Hall a privilege and honor, not a right. However, electing eighteen black players to the Hall of Fame when they are under much pressure, and then essentially ignoring the Negro Leagues when they are not, says that the Hall is only interested in filling a quota and alleviating protests, not in truly acknowledging all those who deserved recognition.

Despite the fact that he was possibly one of the greatest baseball players of all time, John Henry Lloyd continues to be ignored outside of the realm of Negro League study. Unfortunately, not much can be done to rectify the fact that the early Negro League teams and Lloyd himself did not get much publicity. Nor can much be done about the fact that the remaining Negro League players do not remember Lloyd, as he played in an earlier era. However, the baseball establishment and baseball enthusiasts and scholars can change their approach to how they handle the Negro League players. Until they realize that the Negro League players deserve to be recognized to the fullest extent, not just as a token gesture, players like Lloyd will continue to languish in the shadows of history.

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Endnotes

- ¹ This quote is widely reported, however, with slight variations in the wording. Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 79.
- ² These are the official years that Lloyd played; he also played on various amateur and semipro teams prior to and after these dates. Dick Clark and Larry Lester, eds., *The Negro Leagues Book* (Cleveland: The Society for Baseball Research, 1994), 203.
- ³ Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 75.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Mark Ribowsky, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues* (New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995), 66.
- ⁶ Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 76.
- ⁷ Ibid., 77.
- ⁸ John Holway, *The Complete Book of Baseball's Negro Leagues* (Fern Park, FL: Hastings House Publishers, 2001), 110, 144, 179.
- ⁹ Ibid., 76, 109.
- ¹⁰ Jim Reisler, *Black Writers/Black Baseball* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994), 65.
- ¹¹ William McNeil, *Cool Papas and Double Duties: the All-Time Greats of the Negro Leagues* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), 209.
- ¹² Holway, *The Complete Book of Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 238.
- ¹³ "Perfect Score for Lloyd at Bat on Sunday," *New York Age*, 27 July 1929, 6; "Oms Pitches Cubans to Win Over Lincolns," *New York Age*, 24 May 1930, 6.
- ¹⁴ "'Old Timer' Picks an All-Star Baseball Team," *New York Age*, 10 January 1925, 6.
- ¹⁵ "Lincoln Giants Win 5 Of 6..." *New York Age*, 12 July 1930, 6.
- ¹⁶ Clark and Lester, eds., *The Negro Leagues Book*, 48.
- ¹⁷ Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 78.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., 79.
- ¹⁹ William McNeil, *Baseball's Other All-Stars* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 53.
- ²⁰ Examples of these kinds of books and articles are: McNeil, *Baseball's Other All-Stars*; McNeil, *Cool Papas and Double Duties: The All-Time Greats of the Negro Leagues*; Tom Weir, "Negro Leaguers had Major Stats," *USA Today*, 25 June 1999, 6(C).
- ²¹ McNeil, *Baseball's Other All-Stars*, 53.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Holway, *The Complete Book of Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 62-265 passim.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 479.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 472.

- ²⁶ Bill Wise, ed. *1963 Official Baseball Almanac* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1963), 210.
- ²⁷ Holway, *The Complete Book of Baseball's Negro Leagues*, 62-265 passim; Wise, *1963 Official Baseball Almanac*, 210-211.
- ²⁸ "Batting Average Leaders," Official Site of Major League Baseball. Available from www.mlb.com; Internet.
- ²⁹ McNeil, *Baseball's Other All-Stars*, 47.
- ³⁰ *Chicago Evening Post*, 1910.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² *Chicago Defender*. 1910. While the *Defender* has fewer mentions of the Giants than the *Evening Post* it must be kept in mind that the *Defender* was issued weekly and the *Evening Post* was daily.
- ³³ *Ibid.*
- ³⁴ Jules Tygiel, *Extra Bases* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 70.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ³⁶ Some examples of books like this include: Brent Kelley, *The Negro Leagues Revisited* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000) and Brent Kelley, *Voices From the Negro Leagues* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998).
- ³⁷ Kelley, *The Negro Leagues Revisited*, 6.
- ³⁸ Quincy Troupe, *20 Years Too Soon* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1977), 148.
- ³⁹ Elizabeth Gustafson, Lawrence Hadley, and Mary Jo Thierry, "Who Would be the Highest-Paid Baseball Players?" *The Baseball Research Journal* 21 (1992): 87.
- ⁴⁰ Jeff McCord, "Color Commentary," *Texas Monthly* 27 (Aug. 1999), 52.
- ⁴¹ Bill James, *Whatever Happened to the Hall of Famer?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 189.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 188.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 188.
- ⁴⁴ "Hall of Famers by Induction Year," Baseball Hall of Fame. www.baseballhalloffame.org; Internet.
- ⁴⁵ McCord, "Color Commentary," 52.
- ⁴⁶ Examples include: William Rhoden, "Keep the Vote Between the Lines," *Sporting News*, 31 January 1994, 7; Mike Towle, "Interest in Negro Leagues on the Rise," *Sporting News*, 11 May 1992, 17; and McCord, "Color Commentary."
- ⁴⁷ McCord, "Color Commentary," 52.
- ⁴⁸ Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, 254. Peterson's estimate of the African American population between 1900-1947 is fairly accurate. The actual percentage of the African American population for each decade ranged from 9.69% in 1930 to 11.62% in 1900, with the average percentage for 1900-1947 being 10.38%. "United States - Race and Hispanic Origin: 1790-1990," U.S. Census Bureau. Available from www.census.gov/population/documentation/twps0056/tab01.pdf; Internet.
- ⁴⁹ James, *Whatever Happened to the Hall of Famer?*, 191.