

**Lesson Title:** Only the Ball Was White

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Western Civilization, 10<sup>th</sup> grade

July 2006

### **Teaching Tradition American History Program**

Funded by U.S Department of Education

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<http://www.chillihistoryproject.com/>

**Lesson Overview:** The Negro Leagues rose from the ashes of segregation to become one of the most significant chapters of American history. While forever changing the face of Major League Baseball, the Negro Leagues, more importantly changed the face of America. Negro Leagues Baseball is not merely a baseball story it's an American story. This lesson plan will take a look at the segregation laws of the United States and how baseball followed the policies set up by the government.

#### **Essential Question(s):**

- \* Why did a "gentleman's agreement" between white owners ban Negro baseball players from the first professional league and its successor, the National League?
- \* Did segregation in the military have an effect on the status of baseball?
- \* Did the education non-integration policies carry to baseball segregation?
- \* How did the black ballplayers compare to the white players in the major leagues?

**Objective:** After completing this lesson the student's will be able to:

1. Analyze how government policies on segregation effected the game of baseball.
2. Evaluate how baseball and sports became a microcosm of the United States.
3. Evaluate court decisions that lead to the segregation laws in the United States.

Below are some of the court cases that refer to racial policies in the United States.

**1. Plessy versus Ferguson:** On June 7, 1892, a 30-year old man named

Homer Plessy was jailed for sitting in the “White” car of the East Louisiana Railroad. Plessy was only one-eighths black and seven-eighths white, but under Louisiana law, he was considered black and therefore required to sit in the “Colored” car. Plessy argument was that this was a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The judge at the trial was John Howard Ferguson. Ferguson found Plessy guilty of refusing to leave the white car. Plessy appealed to the Supreme Court and was also found guilty.

**2. 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment:** The objective of the amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law. The Plessy decision redefined the law to a simple term, “separate but equal”. The “separate but equal” reasoning changed many aspects of the American culture. This allowed Mayor League owners to justify their policies because the blacks had their own league.

**3. Brown versus Board of Education- 1954:** This case argued that racial segregation violates the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the Constitution, which guarantees all citizens equal protection of the laws.

\* The Brown decision initiated educational and social reform throughout the U.S. and was a catalyst in launching the modern Civil Rights Movement. Although the racial barriers had been broken, there were still very strong sentiments about playing with the black athletes.

\* The Brown decision found that Jim Crow laws in the southern states were unconstitutional and directly effected laws of segregation. The Jim Crow laws were enforced into the 60's.

### **Integration of the Armed Forces: .**

\* At the end of World War I the black American's participation was limited through legal, administrative and social barriers. They were excluded from many military activities and rigidly segregated in the rest.

\* The words *black* and *Negro* had been used interchangeably, with *Negro* generally as a noun and *black* as an adjective. Another question of usage concerns the terms integration and desegregation. The definition of integration was fully studied and by the mid 1960's the military saw the end of a long and important era in racial history of the Armed Forces. Integration calls for the random distribution of a minority throughout society. It is based on racial balance in areas of occupation, education, and residency.

### **The Negro Baseball League**

The Negro Baseball League was established on February 13, 1920 at a YMCA in Kansas City, Missouri. Andrew "Rube" Foster was the founder of the league and served as president. There were several black leagues before Foster's started the NBL but they had little structure and did not last long. The depression hurt the NBL but it was reestablished in 1933 and again in 1937. As in the white league, the NLB had their World Series. Over the years they played the National League winners against the American League winners before crowds from 20,000 to 50,000.

**Playing and travel conditions:**

**Fields:** Many times the player had to get the field ready. The maintenance was poor and the facilities were lacking. The Negro League did come up with portable lights to entertain the crowds at night. Most of the parks only averaged less the 10,000 capacity. Some park as few as 1000 capacity.

**Travel Conditions:** The players traveled mainly by bus, with an occasional train ride. There was no air conditioning on the buses and break downs were very common.

**Motels:** The player's stayed in "colored only" motels. It was common to have as many as four in one room and the conditions were bad. If they did stay in hotels with the white population, they usually had to enter through a back passageway.

**Restaurants:** They ate at "colored only" places. Many times the people in the city in which they were playing would give the players meals and share their houses with them.

**Records:** One of the many problems in comparing the white ballplayers to the black players is the record keeping. The NBL played some of their games against amateur teams. They played where they could get paid the most. Sometimes the good players would change teams in the middle of season to get on teams in the playoffs.

**Talent:** The talent of the NBL players was tremendous. Several times after the season they would play exhibition games against the white teams and most of the time beat them. There were many players in the NBL whom could compete with the stars of the Major League. Three of the stars include:

**Satchel Paige-** Satch in one year won 104 games out of 110. He got to the

Major Leagues at the estimated age of 45 and was successful. Many baseball experts felt he was the greatest pitcher of all times.

**Josh Gibson-** Josh hit over 800 home runs and is the only man to hit a ball out of Yankee Stadium fair. He is compared to Babe Ruth of the Major Leagues. Josh died at the age of 36. Because of some personal problems he was never seriously considered to join the white teams.

**Cool Papa Bell-** Papa Bell was so fast that he could turn the lights out and be in bed before the room got dark. This is actually a story that came about because of a three second short in the light switch. The NBL had very entertaining players and part of their mystique was to have fun and let the fans get their money's worth; great baseball was just part of the show. The colored barrier was broken in 1947 with the Los Angeles Dodgers signing Jackie Robinson. Branch Rickie, the owner of the Dodgers, screened many colored players and decided on Robinson. The reason Robinson was selected is that he was educated and Ritchie felt he would be able to take the tremendous pressure of being a black player in a white man's world.

### **Activities:**

After viewing the film "Only the Ball was White", have the students answer the following questions in constructive response form.

1. Most of the teams in NBL were located in the northeastern region of the United States. Explain three reasons why the teams were mainly in this area of the country.

- a) *Most of the teams were in the north because the southern states demonstrated more racism and they were still enforcing the Jim Crow laws.*
- b) *The teams traveled by bus or train and were limited to how many miles they could travel in a day.*
- c) *The northern cities had colored sections of town that were better fit to accommodate the teams.*

2. How did the policies of the Armed Forces and Department of Education lead to segregation in Baseball?

- a) *The policies of the military and the Department of Education did lead to segregation in baseball. With the changes in the military's interpretation of the term, "integration", it made segregation a violation of civil rights. In the case of Brown versus The Board of Education, the courts defined "separate but equal" a violation of civil rights. The interpretation of these terms lead to signing of Jackie Robinson and many other colored athletes. Before these changes, the military and education system were guilty to allowing*

*segregation to happen in many aspects of the U.S. Segregation but the government made it very easy for baseball owners to justify discrimination to black athletes.*

**Closure:** The students will watch the documentary “Only the Ball was White”. This 40 minute film illustrates the nature of the Negro Baseball League.

**Extension:** Recommendation to visit the NBL Hall of Fame in Kansas City. Have the students look into other sports and analyze their introduction to integration.

**References:**

1. History of the Negro Major Leagues- by Todd Bolton  
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[@http://www.info please.com/ce6/history](http://www.info please.com/ce6/history)
3. Integration of the Armed Forces, by Morris J Macgregor Jr.  
<http://www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/integration/IAF-FM.htm>
4. Film “Only the Ball was White,” Mpi Media Group, 1994, ASIN: 6302900824