

## The Cincinnati Reds and Racism

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Cincinnati, although technically a northern city, has been a racially tense city since before the Civil War began. The city has struggled with issues of race for over a hundred and fifty years. Similarly, the city's Major League Baseball team, the Cincinnati Reds, has also struggled with issues of race since the team was formed in 1869. In fact, Cincinnati has been exposed to African American players and teams since baseball began, even before the major leagues integrated. Historically, the Reds have not had a welcoming environment for African American players. Before and after integration, racist incidents occurred on the Reds team both on and off of the field. Even in recent decades, the Reds have had issues with racism within the club.

Issues of race in baseball came to Cincinnati long before the Reds became integrated. Cincinnati was one of the cities picked to have a Negro League team in 1887, yet the Cincinnati Browns, the Negro League Cincinnati team, never received enough support from the city in order to play any games.<sup>1</sup> This Negro League folded a few weeks later, most likely because it received no support from cities like Cincinnati. Clearly, Cincinnati was not a city open enough to have a Negro League's team. The Negro League players who barnstormed in Cincinnati did not find the city a welcoming atmosphere for blacks. When they visited the city, they were not allowed to stay in white hotels like they were in places such as Wisconsin. Instead, they were forced to stay in "the colored neighborhood and go to different people's houses."<sup>2</sup> Ted Radcliffe described the atmosphere in Cincinnati when he played for Gilkerson's Union Giants. He said that in places like Cincinnati "they thought we were kin to a muskrat."<sup>3</sup> The city was

unwelcome to black players and clearly the African American that played there did not feel that they were treated like human beings.

In the early 1900s, the issue of race appeared again in Cincinnati, specifically regarding certain players that the Reds added to their roster. In 1911, the Reds signed Armando Marsans and Rafael Almeida, two light-skinned Cuban players who claimed that they did not have any black heritage. These two players had previously played on Negro League teams, and later it was discovered that Marsans was most likely half-black, with Almeida also having black ancestry.<sup>4</sup> The Reds were able to bring these players onto their roster because they were Cuban, not African American, and their light skin made them passable as whites. Thus, as a result of the social stigmas of the time, darker skinned players who were not considered African American were socially acceptable.

Cincinnati eventually acquired a Negro League team, albeit for only a year. The Cincinnati Tigers played in the city from 1936-1937, at Crosley Field, the Reds' stadium. The Tigers were forced to enter the stadium through the back door, because they were black, and they played wearing the Reds' old uniforms. The team did not receive much recognition from the white community of Cincinnati, including the Reds' players themselves. Eddie Joost, a Reds player from 1936-1942, remarked that he "never had occasion to cross paths with (the Tigers)," and that he "just had no idea" that they even played at Crosley Field. Only African Americans really came out to see the Tigers, even when Negro League greats like Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige came to play them.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Phil Dixon and Patrick J. Hannigan, *The Negro Baseball Leagues: A Photographic History* (Mattituck, New York: Amereon Ltd, 1992), 63.

<sup>2</sup> Ted Radcliffe, "Ted 'Double Duty' Radcliffe," in *Voices from the Pastime*, ed. Nick Wilson (Jefferson, NCL McFarland & Company, 2000), 119.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>4</sup> Brent Kelley *Voices from the Negro Leagues: Conversations with 52 Baseball Standouts* (Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 258.

<sup>5</sup> Greg Rhodes and John Erardi, *Cincinnati's Crosley Field* (Cincinnati: Road

The Reds, too, were not able to accept the fact that black players might be as talented or even more talented than Reds players of the time. In 1936, the Reds played a Negro League All-Star team in Puerto Rico in a winter barnstorming game. In the series, the Reds were “thumped” in both of the games by the Negro Leaguers. As a result of these embarrassing losses, “the Reds decided to play the Negro Leaguers no more.”<sup>6</sup> The Reds players’ attitudes were extremely racist in this incident, unwilling to concede that black players might be better than them.

Cincinnati and the Reds were exposed to African-American Major League players even before the Reds integrated. In fact, in his first season with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Jackie Robinson played in Cincinnati, on May 13, 1947. The racial environment was extremely hostile against Jackie, since Cincinnati was still officially segregated in 1947. Moreover, as the Reds were the closest Major League team to many of the Southern states, there was a greater chance of Southerners attending Reds’ games. The appearance of Robinson sparked much controversy in the city, however; it also attracted many African American fans to the ballpark. Twenty-seven thousand fans attended the game, with a large portion of them being black. While he may have had the black fans’ support, Robinson was not well received by certain Reds’ players and most of the fans. For instance, Ewell Blackwell threw brushback pitches at Robinson and he faced much heckling when he went on the field.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Cincinnati was an extremely racially hostile environment for Robinson, not only in his first game there, but throughout the entire season.

Robinson was not alone in facing heckling by Cincinnati fans. Crosley Field was one of the worst fields for black players, both before and after the Reds integrated in 1954, in part due to the close proximity of certain seats to the field. African American player Hank Thompson remarked, “The worst fans were in Cincinnati. Whenever there was a lull, some loudmouth would yell: N\*\*\*\*\* or ‘black unprintable’ and you could hear it all over the place.”<sup>8</sup> Reds fans, then, were some of the most un-accepting of black players before the team integrated, constantly yelling racial remarks and making African American players feel unwelcome.

The Reds were the seventh out of eight National League teams to integrate when they finally signed Chuck Harmon, an African American player, in 1954. For years prior to integration, the Reds management made many excuses for not signing a black player. For instance, in 1949 Warren Giles, the president of the Reds, said he believed that only “outstanding” African American players would be able to make it to the major leagues, and that there were not enough outstanding black players for every team to integrate right away.<sup>9</sup> Another time, after the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson in 1947, Reds’ manager Rogers Hornsby said “It won’t work out... ball players on the road live much closer together. It’s going to be more difficult for the Negro player to adjust himself to the life of a major league club, than for the white players to accept him.”<sup>10</sup> He used the Major League Baseball environment as an excuse to maintain racist values and keep baseball segregated. The Reds were never going to be able to integrate under the racist management of Hornsby, who was considered “one of the most prejudiced, uncouth, thoughtless” managers the Reds had ever seen.<sup>11</sup> He was unwilling to accept any African American player, no matter how talented, simply because of race.

After Hornsby was fired in 1953, the opportunity for the Reds to integrate finally arose. The new manager, Birdie Tebbetts, decided to do so by promoting Chuck Harmon, a player chosen “because of personal qualities as much as talent.”<sup>12</sup> Harmon was not alone in integrating the Reds; Nino Escalera, a black Puerto Rican, was also added to the roster in 1954.<sup>13</sup> The Reds and Cincinnati did not welcome Harmon and Escalera with open arms. Harmon was not allowed to remain in the lineup for more than a few games at a time; he would start for a few games and then be benched for no apparent reason.<sup>14</sup> Harmon remarked: “with the Reds you weren’t in the lineup... You go out there and have a 3-for-4 day or something like that and the next day he’d [the manager] say ‘Well, I guess you’re out of the lineup today.’”<sup>15</sup> This racist attitude did not allow him to develop successfully as a player or really learn how to play in the majors, both of which he should have been doing as a rookie in

<sup>9</sup> Rick Swaine, *The Integration of Major League Baseball: A Team-by-Team History* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2009), 157.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Kelley, *Voices from the Negro Leagues*, 225.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

West Publishing, 1995), 88-89.

<sup>6</sup> Donn Rogosin, *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball’s Negro Leagues* (New York: Kodansha America, 1983), 123.

<sup>7</sup> Rhodes and Erardi, *Cincinnati’s Crosley Field*, 120.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

1954. When asked whether he had a fair shot on the Reds, Harmon responded with a definite 'no', describing how he would be taken out of the lineup even after he had a good game.<sup>16</sup> Harmon also faced racism in the ballpark itself, whether it was from fans or other players. He received death threats and hate mail constantly during his seasons on the Reds. One incident in New York caused FBI agents to be stationed at the team's hotel for Harmon's protection.<sup>17</sup>

Neither Harmon nor Escalera were considered top prospects in comparison with other black All-Stars like Jackie Robinson who integrated. This was a pattern the Reds would continue to follow in choosing African American players until about 1956. Until that year, most of the black players chosen were older players, who were mostly educated men or men who were previously in military service. These players were picked first to deal with the racism and bigotry of the Major Leagues so that they could be mentors for the next generation of younger black players who were often more talented.<sup>18</sup> This method of adding black players to the roster truly emphasizes the racism managers expected in Cincinnati. They did not want their talented black players having to face the racism alone; therefore, they signed veteran black players first in order to ease the city into the idea of African American ball players. This system seemed to further exacerbate the differences in race on the Reds, though, because players were recruited for different reasons depending on their race. In the first years of integration on the Reds, white players were recruited for talent alone, while black players were recruited to help other players or based on certain personality qualifications.

Beginning in 1956 with the signing of Frank Robinson, the Reds began signing black players based on their talent, instead of their personalities or for mentoring purposes. Frank Robinson was one of the greatest Reds players of all time. He was Rookie of the Year in 1956, the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1961 and helped lead the Reds to the National League pennant that same year.<sup>19</sup> He was on the Reds for nine years, and throughout this time he was a leader in homeruns, runs batted in, and was a talented fielder. However, despite

being one of the best players the Reds had ever seen, Robinson still faced extreme racism both on and off of the field. In his rookie season, Robinson won many accolades and was rather successful; yet, he remembers being unhappy and uncomfortable the entire year. One reason he did not feel accepted by the team was because he was not accepted by the city because of his race. He and the other black players had to stay at the Manse Hotel, which was for blacks only, and there were many places from which he was restricted. He describes that he "never really felt that [he] was part of the ballclub, that [he] truly belonged," despite being one of the best players on the team.<sup>20</sup> As a black player, Robinson had to deal with issues of racism and segregation, despite his outstanding skill level.

Even after that first season Robinson continued to be mistreated by both players on and off of the field. Even Robinson's own teammates were not particularly friendly to him off of the field. He recalls that none of the white players ever invited him to join them for any social event, whether that was going out for drinks or dinner.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the white players' wives were not welcoming to Barbara, Frank's wife, either. In one instance, all of the wives of players on the team were invited to a baby shower except the black wives. When Barbara tried to look past the incident and send a gift anyways, the white wives would not even let her do that.<sup>22</sup> Although Robinson's teammates were willing to play with him and support him on the field, most were unwelcoming to him off of the field, highlighting that many of the players were unwilling to break racial patterns. Many of the Reds players had played baseball in a white-dominated environment for years. Even if they had played with black players, Robinson was the first real black star for the Reds; therefore, many white players were not used to being overshadowed by a black player. Some of their racist attitudes could have stemmed from this jealousy and unwillingness to let a black player steal their spotlight.

Robinson also faced incidents of racism in Cincinnati itself, since the city was still unofficially segregated in the 1950s and 1960s and most people still thought of blacks as second-class citizens. For instance, when Robinson and his wife were looking at houses to buy, they were told they had to look in certain neighborhoods, since some were still all

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Jacobson, *Carrying Jackie's Torch: Players Who Integrated Baseball and America* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2007), 112.

<sup>18</sup> Swaine, *The Integration of Major League Baseball*, 161.

<sup>19</sup> Jack Klumpe and Kevin Grace, *The Cincinnati Reds: 1950-1985* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 49.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Robinson, *Extra Innings* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1988), 30.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 53.

white.<sup>23</sup> Another time, after the Reds had clenched the pennant in 1961, there was supposed to be a party for the players downtown. However, when Robinson and Vada Pinson, another black player, attempted to go inside, they were denied entrance because of their race. The owner was only willing to let them in after he realized that they were Reds players.<sup>24</sup> Clearly, the city of Cincinnati was unwilling to accept African Americans into social settings. Still, the worst incident of racism that Robinson faced was at a restaurant in Cincinnati in 1961. After some arguments between white men and Robinson's friend, a chef drew a knife and threatened Robinson. Robinson responded by taking a gun out of his pocket, after which he was arrested, but the chef was not.<sup>25</sup> This incident emphasized the different standards of law enforcement based on race; Robinson and his friends were punished, while the white men were not.

In the final years of his career in Cincinnati, Robinson began to have trouble with the Reds' management. Starting in 1961, Bill DeWitt became the new general manager of the Reds, and Robinson never felt that DeWitt treated him fairly in the four years he managed him. DeWitt would not give Robinson the raises Robinson felt he deserved and he even let Robinson spend the night in jail after the gun incident, when he could have bailed him out that same night.<sup>26</sup> This unfair treatment culminated in DeWitt trading Robinson to the Baltimore Orioles in December of 1965, which is known as one of the worst trades in the history of the Reds.<sup>27</sup> There was no solid reason for DeWitt to trade Robinson, other than his race; Robinson was still one of the Reds' best players, and continued to be a great player for many years. In fact, in his first season with the Orioles, he won the Golden Glove Award and was the American League player of the year. Robinson's career with the Reds highlights the racism still present on the team throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The Reds had finally integrated and obtained talented African American players. However, the team and the city's refusal to truly accept the black players and make them feel included as part of the team hindered the Reds' progress toward racial equality.

Throughout the 1970s, the Reds prospered

under the "Big Red Machine," which included black players such as Dave Concepcion, Wayne Simpson, Hal McRae, Joe Morgan, George Foster, Dan Driessen, and Ken Griffey, Sr. This dynasty would lead the Reds to five league titles, four National League pennants, and two World Series in the 1970s. For the first time, African American players were seen as equal to the white players, and many were recognized as stars by fans in Cincinnati. However, racial problems continued, as some of the Reds players still did not feel that they were getting equal recognition as the white players. For instance, after being traded to the New York Mets in 1982, George Foster "accused the Reds of maintaining a double standard, claiming that he and other veteran black stars, like Dan Driessen and Ken Griffey Sr., didn't receive the treatment from the club that their accomplishments warranted."<sup>28</sup> Although black players were successful and were finally receiving more recognition for their talents, some still felt slighted, even in the 1970s. This is important to the development of black players in Cincinnati because while the African American players finally were gaining recognition, they did not feel as appreciated as they wanted to. This implies that the city was still recognizing the accomplishments of the white players over those of the black players.

Racism continued to haunt the Reds into the 1990s as well. In 1991, Marge Schott, the owner of the Reds, fired Tim Sabo, the "only African American employee in the Reds' front office."<sup>29</sup> Sabo believed that he had been fired because of his race and sued Schott. During the lawsuit, Schott's past racist remarks about players were made public, once again highlighting the Reds as a racist team. As a result of this incident, Schott was suspended for one year and fined by Major League Baseball. After making more racial remarks in 1996, Schott was again suspended and did not ever regain full ownership of the Reds.<sup>30</sup> Incidents like these, happening in such modern times, highlight the racial tensions that are still present in Cincinnati the Reds.

Overall, the Reds have had a very turbulent racial history. Most incidents that occurred early on in the team's history highlighted the fact that the team and the city of Cincinnati were completely unwelcoming to blacks, such as when the Reds refused to play Negro League teams after 1936.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Mike Shannon, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Cincinnati Reds* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2008), 49.

<sup>28</sup> Swaine, *The Integration of Major League Baseball*, 164.

<sup>29</sup> Shannon, *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, 67-69.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

After the Reds integrated in 1954, the city and team slowly became more open to African American players and the successes that they would bring. However, most white people were still unwilling to accept black players as equals in all aspect of their lives. White players were willing to play with Chuck Harmon and Frank Robinson, but they made no effort to include them or their families off of the field. The city of Cincinnati itself too did not provide a welcoming environment to the black players and their families, as players like Robinson were not welcome at team celebratory parties with the rest of their team. Even in the glory days of the 1970s black players felt slighted because of their race,

highlighting that the Reds management was still not treating all players completely equal. The incidents with Marge Schott in the 1990s also shed damaging light on race issues within the Reds. Evidently, the Reds have had problems with racism for many years, and these problems have not disappeared even in the last twenty years.

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