

Racial History of Washington, D.C., Sports

By Cary Smith

From the 1930s to 1960s Washington D.C. was a city with two sports franchisees, baseball and football. At the time, the franchises were viewed as being on opposing sides regarding the idea of racial integration of the Black community. In truth, neither the Washington Redskins nor the Washington Senators owners were happy about racial integration. Each had their own reasons for not wanting to allow blacks to play in their leagues. The contrasting behavior between Redskins owner, George Preston Marshall, and Senators owner, Clark Griffith, was that Griffith did not fight integration when it happened; while Marshall fought integration until it almost killed his team.

The Washington Senators appeared to be the most appropriate team to take those first important steps towards letting an African-American into the Major Leagues. Clark Griffith was known for trying to get players at the cheapest price. One of his ways to get cheap labor that he used frequently was to hire Cuban ball players. The ethnicity, and authenticity, of many of the Cuban players was brought into question by fans and the media because of their dark skin. Griffith's hiring practices showed that he did not judge a man based on the color of his skin, but on his baseball skills and his willingness to be under paid.

Griffith was also seen as a friend to the Black community because he leased Griffith Stadium to the Homestead Grays, a black baseball team, on the weekends that the Senators were out of town. Griffith enjoyed going to the Grays games when he could and watching the likes of Josh Gibson, and Ray Dandridge and Willie Wells when the Newark Eagles were in town. ¹ Sports writers Sam Lacy and Wendell Smith were continually cajoling Griffith to sign some of the Grays players for the Senators since he seemed to admire their skill so much.

When Lacy proposed the idea of integrating baseball to Griffith his reply was that "Southern-born major leaguers wouldn't play with Black players and there would be clashes on the field." ² Griffith had been weary of on field racial clashes due to an incident in 1924 when a black player slugged a white umpire, which caused fans to riot on the field. After that until the 1940s he banned games involving white and black teams at Griffith Stadium.

The Senators were not a very good team during the late 1930s and 1940s so Lacy tried appealing to Griffith's competitive side. He insisted that Josh Gibson could be signed for a cheap price and would be twice as good a hitter as the Senators current catcher. Lacy reports that Griffith said, "Integrating the Major would kill the institution of Negro Baseball." ³ It would seem as if Griffith was worried about destroying the Negro Leagues. In reality, he was worried about his own financial interests. Griffith knew that if baseball became integrated the Negro Leagues would die, and he would lose the rental fees that the Grays were paying to use Griffith Stadium. Griffith counted on the money the large crowds generated to see the Grays on the weekends during which the Senators were away. Griffith was already in financial trouble, and he went so far as to sell his Hall of Fame son-in-law, Joe Cronin, to the Boston Red Sox to cover his debts. The integration of baseball would have ruined Griffith because he would have lost money.

Griffith was not a racist for wanting to keep blacks out of the Major Leagues he was financially dependent on the Negro Leagues to keep his own business going. Grays star, Buck Leonard, liked to tell the story about when he and Gibson were called into Griffith's office to see if they were interested in playing for the Senators. ⁴ Nothing came of the meeting and no one knows if it ever really happened, but it shows that the black community expected Griffith's Senators to be the first team to break the color barrier because of his racially unbiased history.

The American League was not as quick to sign black players as the National League, so it took seven years after Jackie Robinson played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers for the Senators to sign their first black player, Carlos Paula, in 1954.

By 1962, Clark Griffith had passed away and his adopted son, Calvin Griffith, had moved the Senators team to Minnesota. During that season, the Redskins football owner, George Preston Marshall, was forced by the government to sign the team's first black player. In the 1920s blacks were playing in the NFL, but by 1933 all the black players had been pushed out of the league by the owners. It is rumored that Marshall had a large part in setting up the gentleman's agreement to exclude blacks after the 1933 season.⁵ Just after World War II the Los Angeles Rams and the Cleveland Browns broke the color barrier permanently. By the mid 1950s every football team had black players, except the Washington Redskins.

People started to take notice of the lack of color on the Redskins roster and referred to the team as the Paleskins. The NAACP organized picket lines outside of the Redskins games in attempt to force the team to hire black players.⁶ It was easy for fans to switch their team allegiance to the to the Baltimore Colts, whose star player was a black man, Lenny Moore. When the team's owner was asked by sports reporter, Wendell Smith, why he did not hire any black players Marshall tried to side-step the issue by saying, "I just haven't come across any that I thought could make my club. I'm not prejudiced, really."⁷ It seems strange that could he not find any qualified players, since the rest of the league was able to find skilled, if not star, black players. Besides how good would a player have to be to improve a team with continuous records of 3-9 (1959), 1-9-2 (1960) and 1-12-1 (1961)?

In 1962, both the Redskins and the second version of the Senators were set to move into the new federally funded RFK stadium. The Secretary of Interior, Stewart L. Udall, informed

Marshall that he was either going to hire a black player and comply with fair employment act or the Redskins would not be allowed in RFK stadium.⁸ Marshall tried to ignore the threats, but soon realized it was not a matter to take lightly.

Because of the Redskins poor record in 1961, they had the first overall pick in the 1962 amateur draft. The team searched the country scouting black players to see whom they could draft. Marshall picked Ernie Davis out of Syracuse as his ticket into the newly built RFK stadium. Davis was told before the draft that he was going to be picked by the Redskins, yet he was leery of playing for the team because of their history of poor race relations. Even before the start of the season Davis was traded to the Browns for another black star Bobby Mitchell. Davis never did get to play for the Browns because he passed away from leukemia before he would have been able to suit up. Mitchell however, went on to be a star player for the Redskins and a longtime coach with the team.

In 1962, The Redskins had a record of 5-7-2, which wasn't very good, but that is the same number of wins the team had achieved in the previous three years combined. Mitchell became a hero in the city and RFK was nicknamed "The House That Bobby Mitchell Build"⁹, because so many fans attended the games only to watch him play. Once Marshall saw that the team could be better with black players he signed Charlie Taylor. Alternately Mitchell and Taylor would lead the team in receiving for twelve of the next thirteen years.

Since the early 1960s, the Redskins have gone on to have a strong tradition of black stars such as Gary Clark, Art Monk, Doug Williams, and Darrell Green. In 2000, they became one of the few teams that have employed a black head coach. Sadly Terry Robskie lasted only three games in that position. It has been forty years since the Redskins have played as an all white

team. George Preston Marshall is no longer with the team; however, there are still people in the black community who see attending a Redskins game as supporting an anti-black establishment.

From the greed and financial self-preservation of Clark Griffith, to the out-right racist practices of George Preston Marshall; the Washington sports society has noted racial biases on many levels. The two owners both held back blacks from playing professional sports, but for dramatically different reasons. Griffith may have wanted to help the black players, but not at his own expense. He did what he could by providing a place for the Negro League team to play. When integration finally happened Griffith was right there with the rest of the American League. Marshall, on the other hand, dragged his feet when football integrated and was forced by the government to change his hiring policies.

Endnotes

1. Ric Roberts, "Maury Wills, Ernie Banks Revive a Great Tradition: Griff Knew 'Those Two Bowlegged Men' Had It; 'Old Fox' Was Captivated by Ground-ball Gloving of Wells and Dandridge Because Majors Never Produced Their Superiors" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, July 8, 1961 National Ed. Vol. 2 Iss. 14
2. Tim Lacy, "Sports Editor Helped to Lay Groundwork for Integration into Baseball" *New Pittsburgh Courier* May 10, 1997 Vol. 88, Iss. 38 sec. A.
3. Tony White, "Lacy; A man who stands for something and falls for nothing" *Afro-American Red Star* August 7, 1998 Vol. 106, Iss. 50 sec. A
4. Charles L. Griggs "From the SIDE LINES': Another Negro League legend passes on" *The Jacksonville Free Press* December 10, 1997 Vol. 11 Iss. 48
5. Michael E. Lomax, "THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE OF PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL" *Journal of Social History* Fall (1999) V33 i1: 163.
6. *New Pittsburgh Courier*, "Sports Scene . . . New York" October 20, 1962 Vol. 3 Iss. 29
7. Wendell Smith, "Wendell Smith's . . . SPORTS BEAT" *New Pittsburgh Courier* April 22, 1961 Vol. 2 Iss 3.
8. Ric Roberts "Scores Believe Biased Redskins' Boss Should Still Be Denied Use of Stadium: Marshall Felt, Still Convinced, Racism Is Right D.C. Fans Fear Marshall May Go Back on Promise" *New Pittsburgh Courier* August 26 1961 National Ed. Vol. 2 Iss. 21
9. Tim Lacy, "Another Viewpoint: Healing an old wound" *Afro-American red Star* December 22, 2000 Vol. 109 Iss. 19 sec. A

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