

The St. Louis Cardinals of the Sixties and Their Effect on Black/White Relations in St. Louis

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In baseball, it doesn't matter how poor a background a player comes from; he can still make it to the Major Leagues if he has the talent and the determination. However, not until after World War II did Major League Baseball management give black players a chance in their organizations.¹ At that turning point, WW II, baseball began to serve as a mechanism for furthering African American civil rights by integrating Blacks into the game, and it continues to give poor players opportunities today. The 1964 Cardinals provide the best example of baseball's influence on black/white relations.

Ever since New Yorkers played the first baseball match under modern rules in 1846, young, middle-class, white men played the game in gentlemen's clubs.² Although Major League Baseball never formally excluded African Americans from the game, the tradition of Whites playing the game continued, as prejudiced players and management never gave Blacks an opportunity.³

Of the sixteen major league teams in the first half of the twentieth century, the St. Louis Cardinals called the most southwestern city their own.⁴ Southerners cheered for the Cardinals because of this fact and because the Cardinals traditionally signed blue-collar, hard-nosed men from upper south states, with whom southern fans could associate.

The Cardinals of the 1930's had many players that built their blue-collar reputation. Frankie Frisch, who joined the Cardinals in 1927, serves as a great example of the Cardinals as a hard-nosed ball club.⁵ A later player-manager for the Cards, he furiously disputed any call made against St. Louis, hurling his glove around the field and stomping his hat into shreds.⁶ The Cardinals built their team around Frisch in the early 1930's, and he had a fantastic impact on the club. He had played for the Giants for eight years before coming to St. Louis, and New York reached four World Series in those eight years, but only one in the nine years to follow Frisch's departure to St. Louis.⁷ The Cardinals, on the other hand, had only won one pennant ever before acquiring him but reached four World Series in the next eight years.⁸

Leo Durocher, who would later become famous as the Dodgers' manager, also joined the Cardinals in 1927. Durocher embodied the "win or die trying" attitude of the 30's Cardinals. Durocher constantly thought about winning, noted as once saying, "Win any way you can as long as you can get away with it."⁹ He even coined the popular phrase, "Nice guys finish last."¹⁰

Pepper Martin joined the Cardinals a year after Frisch and Durocher. Baseball historian Lee Allen described Pepper Martin as "a chunky, unshaven hobo who ran the bases like a beserk locomotive, slept in the raw, and swore at pitchers in his sleep." In fact, Martin had spent time as a hobo prior to joining the Cardinals.¹² Sportswriters hailed him as "The Wild Horse of the Osage" because he ran the bases like a mad man, and rumors spread that he ran down rabbits in much the same fashion back home in Oldahoma.¹³

Dizzy Dean, very popular among fans because of his constant grammatically incorrect bragging, led the 30's Cardinals with an average of 24 wins per year between 1932 and 1936.¹⁴ Dean once bragged, "Anybody who's ever had the privilege of seeing me play knows that I am the greatest pitcher in the world."¹⁵ He could not, however, call himself the smartest pitcher in the world, as he dropped out of school in second grade, and also reminisced, "I didn't do so well in the first grade, either."¹⁶ However, as he insisted, "The dumber a pitcher is, the better. When he gets smart and begins to experiment with a lot of different pitches, he's in trouble."¹⁷ He believed that pitchers shouldn't try to think and pitch at the same time because it would mess up their focus on the pitch.

Earlier, in that same year, his brother Daffy Dean's rookie season with the Cards, Dizzy predicted, "Me and Paul [Daffy Dean] will probably win forty games."¹⁸ Although this comment may have seemed brash to readers of the newspaper at the time, he followed up by saying, "It ain't bragging if you can do it."¹⁹ Surely enough, the two brothers combined for forty-nine wins that season, thirty from Dizzy.²⁰

Future Hall of Famer Joe Medwick joined the Cards in 1932, and he represented the spirit of the 30's Cards, too.²¹ In the 1934 World Series Game 7, Medwick slid hard into third base on a triple, and when he went out into the field the next inning, fans pelted him with so much debris, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the commissioner, ejected him from the game so that fans would stop.²² Other players loathed him for his ridiculously all-out playing style. After hitting him with a pitch one day, Bob Bowman claimed, "I'm not a villain...every pitcher in the league has been thanking me for hitting that son-of-ab****."²³

So, this group of confident, gritty, do-anything-to-win baseball players came together in the early thirties to form what many called the "Gas House Gang" for their aggressive playing style.²⁴ They won World Championships in 1931 and 1934, and Southerners fell in love with the hustling, scrappy team that would do anything to win. Due to the players that they acquired and the fact that they had the southern most team in the major league, the Cardinals grew as a southern baseball franchise with a fan base of white southerners. All the background the Cardinals had would make it very difficult for a black man to make it on the team. They basically had a fellowship of hardscrabble, white players. Breaking that fellowship would take a lot of work.

The Major Leagues felt pressure to integrate baseball during the time of World War II. Blacks, who had fought for the United States in WW II,²⁵ wanted to have the right to play baseball, as well. Communists picked up the cause for Blacks and used examples such as the Klu Klux Klan and southern black lynchings to discredit American democracy in the eyes of the Blacks.²⁶ One communist picketer outside of a baseball stadium during WW II carried a sign reading, "IF WE CAN STOP BULLETS, WHY NOT [BASE]BALLS?"²⁷ He referred to the fact that Negroes had fought in the war, but Whites still would not accept them to play in the national pastime, baseball.

Finally, in 1946, a major change occurred, when Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play Major League Baseball. Prior to this integration, there existed the

Major Leagues and the Negro Leagues separately. The Brooklyn Dodgers called up Robinson to play for the big league ball club after only one year in the minors.²⁸ As the first ever Negro to play in Major League Baseball, Jackie Robinson received a lot of heat from many different sources. Even before he made it, teammates tried to impede on his progress. Robinson recalled in his autobiography, “Some of the players would not play with me on the team.”²⁹

This racism simply could not compare with what he met at big league ball games. Not only did Jackie find himself in a hitting slump to begin the season, he had non-baseball issues that he had to face, as he remembers a game at Philadelphia, “Hate poured forth from the Phillies dugout. ‘Hey, n*****, why don’t you go back to the cotton field where you belong?’”³⁰

Fortunately, Dodgers veteran shortstop Pee Wee Reese got along very well with Robinson, giving him support when necessary.³¹ He mentions in his autobiography, “When I first joined the club, I was aware that there might well be a real reluctance on Reese’s part to accept me as a teammate. He was from Ekron, Kentucky. Furthermore, it had been rumored that I might take over Reese’s position on the team.”³² Reese, however, accepted Robinson surprisingly willingly. Reese told a reporter after Robinson joined the team, “When I first met Robinson in spring training, I figured, well, let me give this guy a chance. It may be he’s just as good as I am. I don’t think I’d stand up under the kind of thing he’s been subjected to as well as he has.”³³

One final attempt to dislodge Robinson came in 1947. Our good friends, none other than the St. Louis Cardinals, organized this effort. The National League president, however, when notified of this plot, stepped in to resolve the situation. Robinson recalled in his autobiography, “Frick reacted immediately and notified the Cardinal players in no uncertain terms that they would not be permitted to get away with a strike.”³⁴ Frick addressed the Cardinal’s team at the Hotel New Yorker before the game. “If you do this you will be suspended from the league . . . I don’t care if half the league strikes... they will be suspended and I don’t care if it wrecks the National League for five years... the National league will go down the line with Robinson...”³⁵

After such a history, no one could expect the Cardinals to acquire a black player. National League President and MLB Commissioner Ford Frick had a theory explaining why the Cardinals and other teams may not want black players. “What baseball operators had done through the years was bow abjectly to what they though was overwhelming public opinion. They were afraid to make a move. They were afraid of upsetting the status quo, afraid of alienating the white clientele that largely supported the professional game.”³⁶ Because the Cardinals’ fan base consisted mainly of white, racist southerners, they had no reason to sign black players for fear of alienated or angering the Whites. In fact, from 1925 to 1945, the Cardinals had the only seating that segregated Blacks and Whites.³⁷

Everything changed, however, when the Cardinals announced their new owner, August A. Busch, Jr. on February 20, 1953.³⁸ No one in the Cardinals’ front office considered Busch, the Budweiser tycoon, a fantastic baseball mind, but he assumed that, since he succeeded so much with beer, that he would with baseball, too.³⁹ He did, however, have a positive impact on the Cardinals organization by bringing the first black players to the team, albeit haphazardly.

Busch could not believe that he had bought an entirely white team upon realizing this

fact. After all, Budweiser sold more beer to black people than any other company did.⁴⁰ Furthermore, three-fourths of America's population at that time lived in the South, and, as stated earlier, St. Louis had the furthest southwest team in the league.⁴¹ According to the 1950 Census, 89.5% of America's population consisted of whites.⁴² Also according to the 1950 Census, American-born Whites made up only 77% of St. Louis City's population.⁴³ So, St. Louis didn't have such a dominating white population as most other cities in the U.S.

Worried about a possible black boycott of his beer, Busch asked coaches at spring training, "Where are our black players?"⁴⁴ When told that the team had no black players, he responded by saying, "How can it be the great American game if blacks can't play?"⁴⁵ and so ended the Cardinals' reputation as a lily-white ball club.

When Busch tried to trade for his first black player, a minor leaguer by the name of Tom Alston, the Pacific League team that offered him described him as 23 years old.⁴⁶ When Busch found the 25-year-old Alston, he responded angrily. In Busch's thinking, a baseball player's average career had ten seasons, and a player who had already played for two years had used up 20% of his career – the Pacific League expected too much money for a "used" product. Because Busch had only dealt with machinery before, in his thinking, he deserved to pay only 80% of the original price.⁴⁷ The San Diego ball club realized his inexperience in professional baseball and did not deal with him until they sent Alston to St. Louis in January 1954,⁴⁸ when he played as the first black on the major league Cardinal team.

Between the February 1953 disagreement and the 1954 deal of Alston, the Cards signed their first Black, Len Tucker. However, he never got the chance to play in the Big Leagues, perhaps due to prejudice in the front office, and he left the Cardinals' farm system after the '55 season. "I've always said that when your fate is in someone else's hands, they can squash you or let you go, and they did both to me."⁴⁹

The Cardinals traded for their first key black player in the off-season before the 1958 season. Manager Fred Hutchinson convinced general manager Bing Devine to acquire black outfielder Curt Flood and another player from the Reds for two minor leaguers and a flopped major league pitcher.⁵⁰ The next year, pitcher Bob Gibson, whom the Cardinals had signed as an amateur free agent in 1957, reached the big league level.⁵¹ Gibson played a rough style of baseball. "When I knocked a guy down, there was no second part of the story."⁵² Hitters feared him for his reputation for hitting batters, but Gibson justified himself, "You've got to have an attitude if you're going to go far in this game."⁵³ Gibson, in seventeen years with the Cards, won two NL Cy Young Awards, an NL MVP Award, and nine Rawlings Gold Glove Awards, appeared in eight all-star games, recorded 251 wins, registered a 2.91 ERA, and entered the Hall of Fame in 1981.⁵⁴

Despite a stellar lineup, the Cardinals struggled midway through the '64 season, with a record that wavered above and below the .500 mark. Under pressure to make a deal, Cardinal management had its eye on a young black outfielder playing for the Cubs, Lou Brock. Lou Brock had not had a good time in Chicago. He had only hit .257 in his four seasons with the Cubs.⁵⁵ He also provided a liability on defense, not having learned how to flip down his sunglasses and see fly balls in the sunny outfield of Wrigley Field.⁵⁶

The Cards and Cubs then pulled the trade that had possibly the most surprising outcome in baseball history. On June 15, the trading deadline, 1964, as the Cardinals stood in eighth place in the National League, the Cardinals sent Ernie Broglio, a former twenty-game winner who posted a sub-3.00 era in two different years, another quality starter, and a poor hitter to the Chicago Cubs for bust prospect Lou Brock and two mediocre pitchers.⁵⁷ Bob Gibson, a strong voice in the clubhouse, hated the deal, along with first baseman Bill White and veteran shortstop Dick Groat.⁵⁸ Who could blame them? No one trades a 20-game winner for a prospect. NO ONE. Even fans taunted the Cardinals for their decision. “Brock for Broglio! Who would make a deal like that?”⁵⁹ a Houston fan once yelled behind the Cards’ visitor dugout. The future, however, would speak for itself as Lou Brock got into a groove in St. Louis. All this time, Brock had one true supporter, former Negro League star Buck O’Neill, the Cubs scout who had helped Brock reach the Show.⁶⁰

The trade may have seemed odd, but Lou Brock knew something that the rest of the league didn’t. At the time of the trade, he had just started getting used to playing with the Cubs. He traced it all back a game against the Reds earlier in the same month as the Cubs dealt him. In that game, a Cincinnati hitter drilled a long fly ball to right-center. On the run, Brock leapt into the wall with his glove extended in a spectacular effort. Upon crashing into the ground, he got up and searched the ivy for the ball. Then, a fan in the bleachers shouted, “Look in your glove, Brock.”⁶¹ Surely enough, the young outfielder realized that he had, in fact caught the ball.⁶² He ran back to the dugout smiling for the rest of the game. His teammates didn’t understand, but he had just made a breakthrough as a player and felt a huge load of stress coming off his shoulders. For the couple of weeks prior to the trade, he became the hottest hitter in baseball.⁶³

St. Louis freed Brock to become a superstar. From the very first day that he arrived in the city, manager Johnny Keane helped him feel comfortable. When a reporter asked to interview Brock a few days after having arrived in the city, Keane told the writer, “Bob, why don’t you wait a bit, until he gets a better feeling for this place, and there’s less pressure on him.”⁶⁴ The manager gave Brock freedom on the field. “We’ve seen you hit the ball and we know you have power,” he told the youngster, “We don’t care how you hit the ball, as long as you hit.”⁶⁵

As soon as the Cardinals acquired Brock, they shot back into contention for the pennant as he stole 33 bases and hit 348 for the remainder of the season.⁶⁶ O’Neill recalled the trade in his autobiography, “Ernie Broglio... came up with a sore arm and won seven games in his three seasons with the Cubs. People always ask me if I feel bad about the trade, but I just felt happy for Lou.”⁶⁷ To make a long story short, the National League leaders, the Phillies, unraveled in September, and the streaking Cardinals won the pennant on the last day of the season.⁶⁸

At that time, the Cardinals looked ahead at the seemingly insurmountable task of defeating the Yankees in the World Series. The stress hit one Cardinal pitcher extremely hard. When driving to Game 1 of the Series with an old friend, closer Barney Schultz suddenly pulled over off the road. He told his friend that he couldn’t see very well. Upon arriving at the ballpark, he went immediately to talk with the doctor, almost unable to see.⁶⁹ The doctor understood what had happened and told Schultz, “What you’re suffering from, Barney, is stress. That’s all. For weeks, the game has been hanging on every pitch you’ve thrown in every game you’ve pitched,

and now you're showing a little reaction. It's nothing new. I've had it as a doctor –after an operation. You'll be fine. Get some dark glasses, and a good night's sleep, and try and relax. You don't even know the pressure you've been under.”⁷⁰

The Yankees had a team very different from the Cardinals. Although the Cards had decided to accept black players, the Yankees held out for as long as they could, which influenced the entire American League, as well.⁷¹ The Yankees had dominated the league for such a long time without Blacks, and the front office didn't feel like they had to get Blacks. George Weiss, the owner, had a large impact, making it known that he only wanted middle class Whites in his stadium, no white rubble and Blacks coming to cheer on black players.⁷² This Yankee ideal has carried over somewhat to today, because the owner, George Steinbrenner, forces his players to have shaved before games so as not to tarnish their reputation.⁷³

However, the careful eye may have observed a difference in the Yankees in the 1964 preseason from their former selves. After having only barely defeated the Giants in the 1962 Series and swept by the Dodgers them in the 1963 Series, the Yankees appeared to lose their dominance.⁷⁴ Broadcaster Jerry Coleman noted that he did not see the same toughness and discipline in the spring of 1964 as he had in past teams.⁷⁵

All these factors lead up to the Cardinals surprising everyone and winning the Series in seven games over the Yankees in 1964. The Cards went on to win two more Series in that decade, and, as a result, Blacks and Whites in St. Louis tended to get along a little bit better with each other. The Whites felt that, if the Blacks help our team win, then maybe they aren't so bad, after all.

This environment became evident in the late 60's, at the time of many race riots. In 1965, a race riot exploded in Watts, CA, a ghetto section of Los Angeles.⁷⁶ The same happened in 1967 in Detroit, and, in that year, up until October, over 150 cities had race-related incidents.⁷⁷ In 1968, Governor Otto Kerner of Illinois and his National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released its findings in the Kerner Report.⁷⁸ This group decided, “White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture that has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II.”⁷⁹ Interestingly, they blamed the riots on the Whites, not the Blacks, unlike many others may have done. The commission stated that these three causes triggered the violence of race riots: frustrated African Americans, approval of violence by white terrorists and black protesters, and a feeling of powerlessness belonging to Blacks at the time.⁸⁰ In conclusion, they described the nation as, “moving toward two societies, one black, one white –separate and unequal”⁸¹ They actually officially recognized segregation in the United States. In order to stop this event the report suggested the removal of all racial favoritism in education, jobs, and housing, more awareness of the problems of minorities, and better communication between different races.⁸²

Unfortunately, the Kerner Report did not solve any problems. After Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior's assassination on April 4, 1968, 130 ghettos had racial disorders. This came as no surprise, as he had spearheaded the Civil Rights Movement as a voice for all Blacks. From 1957 to 1968, he had spoken over 2500 times, while traveling over six million miles.⁸³ Back in 1963, he had lead a march in the city of Detroit. In his speech, he said, “the most damaging effect of

segregation has been... It has given the segregator a false sense of superiority and it has left the segregated with a false sense of inferiority.” Truly a great leader, King also spoke the day before his assassination. On April 3, 1968, he told the audience in Memphis, Tennessee, “The nation is sick; trouble is in the land, confusion all around... But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the twentieth century. Something is happening in our world.”⁸⁴ King filled fellows of his race with hope and helped end segregation in America.

While all this happened in the United States, St. Louis remained oddly quiet. How could such a southern city avoid the inevitable race riots? The answer lay in the Cardinals. Because the Cards played so successfully from 1964 to 1968 (three N. L. Pennants and two World Championships⁸⁵), the people in St. Louis enjoyed an amiable atmosphere. Blacks and Whites in the city got along because the Cardinals depended on both Blacks and Whites in order to succeed. Due to this friendly atmosphere, no race riots occurred in St. Louis.

Baseball had brought an entire city of two different races together under a common cause –cheering their ball club on to the pennant. Although the Civil Rights Act benefited Blacks significantly, Whites had not yet accepted them as Americans. It took baseball to get Whites to get along with Blacks. Thus, baseball furthered the intentions of African American civil rights.

Footnotes

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