

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	Speaker: <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:20	Jesse Thorn	Host	Coming to you from my home in the city I live in, the city of angels, it’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Didn’t write that. Just about every year on <i>Bullseye</i> , we bring you a week dedicated to my favorite sport, baseball. We usually try and put it out around opening day. Of course, baseball is very different this year. The season started late, the stadiums are almost empty, and by the time the airs, it’s possible that the season will not exist anymore. So, this year’s <i>Bullseye</i> Baseball Week is gonna be a little different, too. We’re gonna talk about baseball’s history. First up: an interview with Bob Kendrick.
			Bob is the president of the Negro League Baseball Museum. He’s had that job for almost a decade. The NLBM is pretty much the only place in the world dedicated to telling the story of the Negro Leagues—the leagues that gave rise to players like Hank Aaron, Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Satchel Paige. Not to mention, of course, the many players who were never allowed to play Major League Baseball.
			Bob and I had a really great conversation, so I won’t say much more than that, ‘cause I wanna get out of the way. But I’ll just say that even if you aren’t a fan of baseball, I really encourage you to hear what Bob has to say about this remarkable piece of Americana. Let’s listen.
00:01:38	Music	Transition	Electronic, synth heavy music.
00:01:43	Jesse	Host	Bob, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m so grateful to have you on the show.
00:01:46	Bob Kendrick	Guest	Well, I certainly appreciate the opportunity to join you. Thanks for having me.
00:01:50	Jesse	Host	So, Bob, this is the 100 th anniversary of the start of the Negro Leagues, and I want to talk about the Negro Leagues in a minute. But it occurred to me that I should ask in what context were African Americans and other dark skinned people, in the United States, playing professional baseball before 100 years ago, before 1920?
			<i>[Bob affirms.]</i>
00:02:18	Bob	Guest	Because professional baseball goes back decade before that. Oh, absolutely. And African Americans playing professional baseball goes well before the actual formation of the Negro Leagues, here in Kansas City in 1920. Jesse, we’ve been playing baseball since the late 1800s. And, actually, there was some evidence of African Americans playing even while being enslaved. So, it was certainly not a new phenomenon for Black folks to play baseball. Unfortunately, it was so haphazard. And booking agents were taking all of the money. So, you had all these independent Black baseball team owners, and it just lacked the organized structure. And even before the Negro Leagues were formed in

Kansas City, there had been some failed efforts to do a structured Negro Leagues. But in 1920, under the brilliance of Andrew “Rube” Foster, it got the necessary guidance and structure that it needed to succeed.

00:03:13 Jesse Host
00:03:19 Bob Guest

Were there integrated teams before 1920, at any point?

Yeah, there were. There were several instances where Blacks had gotten onto what would be considered a Major League team. Moses Fleetwood Walker playing for the Toledo team in the late 1800s. Edward White who was very light skinned—I’m not sure they knew that he was Black—having played on what would be considered a Major League team even before Moses Fleetwood Walker. Bud Fowler, guys like that who did integrate teams prior to Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier in 1947. But as we like to say, Robinson broke the color barrier in the modern era of Major League Baseball, after those players had been banned.

And so, that’s 60 years later that Jackie comes along, after Moses Fleetwood Walker, and breaks the color barrier with the Brooklyn Dodgers.

00:04:11 Jesse Host

So, in the 30 or 40 years before 1920, when professional baseball was being played pretty extensively in the United States, mostly African American players were playing on kind of wildcat, barnstorming teams. Teams that would come to town and play the team that happened to be there?

00:04:31 Bob Guest

Yeah, you had a combination of, you know—so, you did have these independent Black baseball team owners. But the challenge was how do you get games? And so, you’re basically taking on all comers and, like I said earlier, booking agents as they were trying to set up games were taking all of the money. And so, it just didn’t have the guidance. But yeah, you did have these games going on where barnstorming—even after the formation of the Negro Leagues, was still always a central part of the Black baseball experience. Major League Baseball did a little barnstorming, but not nearly to the degree in which they did it in the Negro Leagues, because the Negro Leagues were just prolific in their barnstorming as they took baseball into Canada and would oftentimes be the first Americans to play in many Spanish speaking countries.

And, Jesse, the thing that blows away a lot of the visitors at the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum is that it was actually a touring team of Negro Leaguers that introduced professional baseball to the Japanese, going all the way back to 1927. That’s seven years before Babe Ruth and his All Stars would visit Japan. They have been commonly credited with having taken professional baseball to the Japanese, but it’s not true. It was actually a team called the Philadelphia Royal Giants who would go to Japan, in 1927, play a 24-game exhibition series. They go 23-0 and 1 on that tour. The tour was so successful that several years later, Ruth and his All Stars would get invited over. So, yeah, you can see that barnstorming became such a prevalent part—and really, the game—our game—is a global game because of the Negro Leagues.

00:06:08 Jesse Host

So, you mentioned Rube Foster. Rube Foster is a huge figure in Negro Leagues Baseball history. Who was he and what was his role in helping to create the Negro Leagues?

00:06:22 Bob

Guest

He was an absolute genius. Yeah, Rube Foster—I think you could make the legitimate case—is the greatest baseball mind this board has ever seen. And Jesse, people still don't really know who he is, even though he is rightfully enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame. He was just lightyears ahead of his time. So, Rube Foster had been a great baseball player himself in the early era of Black baseball, prior to the formation of the Negro Leagues. So, Rube Foster had been a pitcher. Great pitcher. As a matter of fact, he earned his nickname, "Rube", when he beat the great Major League pitcher, Rube Waddell, in a head-to-head matchup. And then Rube Foster is also credited with having invented what we now know to be the screwball. Back then, it was called a fadeaway and Rube perfected this pitch. So much so, that the great Major League manager, John McGraw, would sneak Rube Foster into his camp so that Rube Foster could teach Christy Mathewson how to throw the screwball.

Christy Mathewson threw the pitch all the way into the National Baseball Hall of Fame that he learned from Rube Foster. But Foster was best known as this visionary, this tremendous leader. He would organize and establish the Negro Leagues here in Kansas City, in 1920. So, for those who sometimes wonder why a Negro Leagues Museum is in Kansas City, it's because Kansas City is the birthplace of the Negro Leagues. So, Rube Foster leads this contingent of eight independent Black baseball team owners into a meeting at the Purcell YMCA. Out of that meeting came the birth of the Negro National League, the first successful, organized Black baseball league. Rube Foster would become the league's president. He owned the Chicago American Giants and he managed the Chicago American Giants.

And Jesse, as a manager, Rube Foster was so shrewd. Rube Foster was known to fine his ballplayers, in the early 1900s, as much as \$5 if you were tagged out standing up. You were supposed to slide. Rube would draw a circle down the first baseline and a circle down the third baseline, and if every one of his players couldn't drop a butt inside that circle, he would fine them. He was adamant about the style of play that became signature Negro Leagues Baseball. Fast. Aggressive. Daring. They bunt their way on. They steal second. They'd steal third. And man, if you weren't too smart, they were stealing home. And that—believe it or not—was the style of play that drew both Black and White fans who had been segregated in Major League ballparks—if Black folks were allowed into those Major League ballparks. For Major League games, they separated by chicken wire. At Negro League games, we sat side by side watching truthfully the best baseball being played in this country without question, the most entertaining brand of baseball being played in this country.

And so, Foster's brilliance led the Negro Leagues to its early heyday.

00:09:40 Jesse

Host

Where did these teams, especially in the early days of the league and eventually leagues, play?

00:09:50 Bob

Guest

Well, you know, interesting enough they were using a lot of Major League stadiums. And I think that's part of the reason why the early efforts to do a Negro Leagues failed, because they did not have

enough access to stadiums. And so, when—fundamentally, I think the two—the biggest thing that separated Major League Baseball and Negro League’s baseball was funding. All the Major League owners had their own stadiums. The Negro Leagues didn’t. And so, there were only a handful of Negro League teams that ultimately had their own stadiums. Uh-huh. But by and large, they were renting the ballparks from their Major League counterparts.

Which is one of the reasons why it took so long to integrate the game! Because the Yankees were in no hurry to see integration. Because the Negro Leagues were renting the ballpark from them, they were getting, you know, a percentage of the gate and likely all of the concession. The same thing could be said in other cities across the country. And so, that had as much of an impact in why it took so long to integrate as anything, because many of these Major League teams were making money off the Negro Leagues.

00:10:57 Jesse Host

I mean, it speaks to the legacy of systemic racism that, you know, one of the greatest differences between these two parallel sets of leagues was that the White Major Leagues had access to capital, be it through inheritance, businesses, or loans, to acquire real estate and develop it and then, you know, *[chuckles]* used that power to extract rent from the African American parallel league.

00:11:29 Bob Guest

[Laughing.] I couldn’t have said it better myself! That whole aspect has always been a part of the African American plight, in this country. And so, while these African American businessmen were certainly shrewd enough to be able to generate capital to put these teams together, they still had to turn to Major League Baseball in order to have the kinds of places that they needed to play these games. And so, when I hear people say, “Well, you know, the Negro League schedule was so haphazard.” No, not really, they just had to wait until Major League Baseball set its schedule so that they could see where the open dates were, because they were using so many of the—of their stadiums.

00:12:16 Jesse Host

How many people were going to Negro Leagues games?

00:12:21 Bob Guest

Man, they were filling up the ballparks. Matter of fact, in many cities across this great country of ours, they—the Negro League teams were outdrawing many Major League teams. And so, here in Kansas City, the Kansas City—Great Kansas City Monarchs played at, at that time, Muehlebach Field, and then eventually Municipal Stadium. The stadium, before they put on the upper deck for football, held about 17,000. Well, when the Monarchs played there, Jesse—17,000+, standing room only. Well, when they go to Yankee Stadium, they’re putting 40,000 in Yankee Stadium. Add Comiskey, on the south side of Chicago, they’ve got 50+ thousand in for the Negro League’s version of the All-Star game—the East-West Classic. So, they were filling up these ballparks in Washington, DC—home of, then, the Washington Senators. Clark Griffith was watching the Homestead Grays outdraw his Washington Senators.

Which, again, is one of the reasons why he had taken with the notion of signing Buck Leonard and Josh Gibson well before Branch Rickey made the move to sign Jackie Robinson. But again, he’s watching Leonard play a dazzling first base and he’s watching Josh Gibson hit balls where no mere moral had ever hit them. But he’s also watching all of these Black fans fill up his ballpark. And, “If I put the Negro Leagues out of business, I’m cutting off a source of my

own revenue.” Plus, the risk of being ostracized by your peers to make the move. So, he backed off of this. But again, the Grays were outdrawing the Washington Senators.

00:14:01 Jesse Host You know, you started your career as a sports writer and the Negro Leagues were essential not just to, you know, general cultural and economic life as a—you know, as a source of entertainment, but they were essential to the Black press, in the United States during the time they were running. It gave them, you know—it was something that was not extensively covered in the quote/unquote “mainstream press”—in the White press, at the time.

[Bob hums several agreements.]

00:14:44 Bob Guest But was extensively covered in Black newspapers, which were a huge business in the early part of the 20th century. And in a way, the existence of these Leagues was essential to those newspaper’s operation, because sports pages sell newspapers. Absolutely. And when you think about the formation of the Negro Leagues, it was actually, Jesse, at the urgence of the Black press. They pushed for the formation of an organized body so that Negro Leagues Baseball could be mirrored after Major League Baseball. And yeah, had it not been for the Black press, we’d know very little about the Negro Leagues for the reason that you mentioned. Mainstream papers just simply weren’t covering them. So, if they weren’t playing in a town that had Black press, man, they were basically ignored. As great as the Kansas City Monarchs were—and we’re talking about one of the greatest baseball franchises not in Black baseball history, but in baseball history—there is very little on the Monarchs in the archives of the *Kansas City Star*. And the *Kansas City Call*, the weekly newspaper—100 years old, itself—still publishes a weekly newspaper right up the street from where the Negro League Museum operates. They were the voice. They were the voice.

00:15:57 Jesse Host And that was same with the—whether it was the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburg Courier*, the *Amsterdam News*. These were the voices of Negro Leagues Baseball. My father grew up in Kansas City, in the 1940s and 1950s and was a big baseball fan, as a kid. And I will say that the local team at the time, the Kansas City A’s, was a truly horrible team that essentially operated as a farm team for the New York Yankees, though they were a Major League Baseball team. So, I will say—and this pains me, as a native San Franciscan and a San Francisco Giants fan—my dad died a Giants fan, but he grew up a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. It’s hard for me even to say out loud. But he grew up a Dodgers fan.

[Bob chuckles.]

00:16:43 Bob Guest And you know, his favorite player in the world was, perhaps, the greatest Dodger of them all, Jackie Robinson. But! His favorite Kansas City Athletic was the first baseman, Vic Power. And—Vic Power.

00:16:44 Jesse Host Vic Power helped integrate the Kansas City A’s, but was not, himself, African American. He was actually Puerto Rican.

00:16:52 Bob Guest No. *[Beat.]* Yes.

00:16:54 Jesse Host *[Bob affirms several times as Jesse continues.]*
 What was the role of Afro-Latino people in the Negro Leagues? Folks whose race could be read as African American, by White people of the early 20th century, but who actually represented a whole other African diaspora?

00:17:13 Bob Guest Oh, well, it was huge! It was huge, because what the Negro Leagues did, particularly for that darker skin, Spanish speaking athlete, was it provided a sanctuary for them to play. Once upon a time, White Cubans could play in the Major Leagues, but that was really it. And so, if you were of darker skin and you played baseball in this country, professionally, you played in the Negro Leagues. So, the Negro Leagues opened its doors to virtually any and everyone who could play. Their only criteria was, “Can you play?” And if you can play, you can play. And, of course, when the Negro Leaguers, who as I mentioned, were some of the first Americans to play in many of those Spanish speaking countries—Jesse, when they went to those countries, man, they’re treated like heroes.

They’re staying in the finest hotels. They’re eating in the finest restaurants that those countries had to offer. And then you come back home, and you’d be treated like a second-class citizen. And so, a lot of Negro League players would call those Spanish speaking countries home for one simple reason: in those countries, they weren’t Black baseball players, they were just baseball players. That’s all they ever wanted to be! And you speak of Vic Power. Vic Power was part of the Yankee’s organization before he comes over to Kansas City. Vic Power was waaay too flamboyant for the very conservative New York Yankees.

One of my favorite stories, he goes into a restaurant and it was a restaurant that, you know, was for White only. And Vic Power goes into the restaurant and the lady says, “Well, we don’t serve Negroes.” And I’m sure she didn’t use the word “negro”, but for this story, we’ll say, “We don’t serve Negroes.” And Vic Power, in his Puerto Rican accent, said, “Good. I don’t eat them.”

And so—*[Laughs.]* And so, that was Vic Power. So, he was way too outspoken, waaay too gregarious and flamboyant for the Yankees, but Vic Power—your father was right—was an outstanding baseball player. Vic Power could flat out play! And I don’t think he gets enough credit for how good he really was.

00:19:26 Jesse Host Bob... you’re not a young man, but you’re far from an old man. And I wonder, when you were growing up, what you knew about the Negro Leagues and what their legacy was to you, as a—you know—whatever age it is that one becomes really identified with sports, if you do become really identified with sports? Like, 12 or whatever.

00:19:49 Bob Guest Yeah! What—yeah. Exactly. And the thing is, Jesse, I didn’t. I didn’t identify. I only identified when I started volunteering with the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum, going back to 1993. I consider myself to be a baseball fan. And here was this entire chapter of baseball and American history that I really did not know about. Now, I knew the name Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, because those names—they transcended mainstreamly. Most baseball fans have heard those names, even if they don’t know how great these players were. You’ve heard those names. But I had no idea about

the breadth, the depth, the scope, the magnitude that this league represented, both on and off the field.

And then I started to meet the players. And of course, one player in particular: my dear friend, the late, great John Buck O'Neil. And as I said on many occasions, once you were bitten by the Buck bug? Man, it was a wrap. You just wanted to be on Buck's team. The charisma, the passion, the commitment that he had to building an edifice where they would not be forgotten. And I do think, in the final equation, that's what we all want. We want people to remember us! And Buck wanted people to remember them for what they had accomplished in this country and then to also embrace the life lessons that come from their story. Because the thing, to me, that shaped his story is the fact that these athletes never cried about the social injustice. They went out and did something about it. "You won't let me play with you? Then I'll just create a league of my own. And then my league will rise to rival your league."

And when you stop to think about that, that is the American way. And so, while America was trying to prevent them from sharing in the joys of her so-called national pastime, it was the American spirit that allowed them to persevere and prevail. What's not to love about their story?

00:21:57 Jesse Host

All baseball and all professional sports are an entertainment. I think there is a sliding scale of the extent to which a professional sport is an entertainment and the extent to which it is, I don't know, quote/unquote "pure athletic competition" and there were a lot more baseball games, specifically, in the early part of the 20th century and going earlier that were more dedicated to entertainment. You know. There were barnstorming teams where everyone wore a dress and pretended to be a woman except for a few people who actually were women.

[Bob laughs.]

You know. There was—there was a great legendary—one of the most successful barnstorming professional baseball teams was called the House of David, and they all pretended to be observant Jews.

[Bob agrees several times and laughs.]

And some of them were involved in an unusual *[chuckles]* religious organization. But they also had a lot of ringers who just wore fake forelocks. There were all kinds of entertainments. If you went to see a Negro League baseball game, in 1930 or 1935, maybe you could describe both a proper League game and a barnstorming game, since they were both such big parts of how baseball players and teams made their money. What would you see and how might it be different from what you might see at a—at a Major League ballpark?

00:23:18 Bob Guest

Totally different. Negro Leagues baseball was—the pace of the game was just different. And Jesse, I think they understood—really understood that baseball was entertainment. And that doesn't mean that you weren't going to see great, fundamentally sound baseball, but man you were going to thoroughly entertained or—again, as my

friend Buck O'Neil would say, you couldn't go to the concession stand, because you might miss something you ain't never seen before. You know, that's what they brought to the game. So, the pace of the game was faster. Major League Baseball was essentially a base-to-base kind of game.

So, a guy got on base, you moved him over to second, and then the big hitters came up and drove him in. Nothing wrong with that, but again, the Negro Leagues would drop their butt and then they would go and steal second, they'd go and steal third, and if you weren't too smart, they're stealing home. That's the style that Jackie took with him over to the Major League. Jackie Robinson. And so, the pace of the game was just so fast and daring. And so, the Major Leaguers would oftentimes accuse the Negro League players of showboating. Yeah, you know, so, if I guy went in the hole, dove, flipped it behind his back, started to double play, the Major Leaguers would say, "Aw, he's showboating. They're just showboating."

Well, as again my friend, Buck O'Neil would say, "Number one, if you got something to show, show it!"

[They chuckle.]

And again! It's only showboating when you can't do it. And today is a sport center top ten highlight every night of the week when you see that happen. That was commonplace in the Negro Leagues. And so, yeah, the styles were different. Fans flocked to those games because it was so exciting. You mentioned the House of David. The House of David plays a great role in the story of Black baseball, because they would barnstorm all over the country playing with and against Negro League teams, most notably our Kansas City Monarchs. And, Jesse, one of my favorite stories associated with the House of David—and for those—I know you mentioned them and kind of gave a little bit, but for those who might not know who the House of David—House of David was a religious sect based out of Benton Harbor, Michigan, who were typically characterized by their very long hair and very long whiskers. Well, they're mimicking David, from the Bible.

And so, they did use baseball to spread the gospel, but as I mentioned, they play a great role in Black baseball, because they barnstormed regularly with Negro League teams. And so, in 1934, the Denver Post Tournament becomes the first organized baseball tournament to integrate. And the House of David would recruit the legendary Leroy Satchel Paige to pitch for them. Now, legend has it that Satchel, wanting to look like his White teammates—and I tell people all the time, you can't make this stuff up. It's too good. Satchel wanted to look like his White teammates, put on a wig and a fake red beard and would strike out some 51 hitters in 3 games. The House of David would win the \$7,500 prize money for winning the tournament and you could rest assured that Satchel got a laaarge percentage of that \$7,500 prize money. It's one of our favorite stories, because it's so indicative of the showmanship of Satchel, but also the tremendous talent of Satchel.

00:26:42	Bob	Guest	And the House of David would actually tour with the Monarchs when the Monarchs introduced night baseball, in 1930. The Monarch and the House of David took night baseball all the way out to Seattle. This is five years before the Major Leagues ever had a night game. You had Major Leagues play their first night game in 1935. The Kansas City Monarchs introduced night baseball in 1930, and by the time they played a game in Cincinnati in the Major Leagues, the Monarchs and the House of David had gone all the way out to Seattle with Night Baseball.
00:27:15	Jesse	Host	If you're playing professional baseball and you're Black, in Kansas City or in Chicago, there is a world of African American business infrastructure to support your life there or your visit there, right? Like, if you go into Pittsburg, there's a restaurant for you to eat at and hotel for you to stay at and so on and so forth. But if you're playing a few games in between your scheduled dates in Kansas City and Chicago and you're in Springfield, Illinois, or whatever—was that always the case?
00:27:53	Bob	Guest	Yeah, it was challenging for them. And so, their challenges didn't come on the baseball field. The baseball field in many respects, Jesse, was their sanctuary. Their challenges came as they were traveling the highways and byways of this country. You know, not knowing where you could get stopped and get something to eat or have a place to stay. And the irony of this is that they would ride into a town, fill up the ballpark, and yet not be able to get a meal from the same fans who had just cheered them. Or not have a place to stay. So, they slept on the bus and would eat their peanut butter and crackers until they get—could get to a place that offered them basic services. But a thing that I share with my guests is what you have to admire about the spirit of the Negro Leagues is they never allow that to kill their love of the game.
			Baseball kind of became that place where they could get away from that. But when they're playing the Major League stadium, they couldn't use the locker-room. They couldn't take a shower. You know, those are the kinds of hardships. And one of the great quotes from my late friend, John "Mule" Miles, and my dear friend Lauren Meyer, who was a filmmaker—has a wonderful film called <i>The Other Boys of Summer</i> —and in the film, she interviewed John "Mule" Miles. And as he says, "I'm not complaining, I'm just explaining. Yeah, 'cause I want you to know what it was like. I'm not complaining about it! We dealt with it. We did what we had to do. But I do want you to know what the life was like."
00:29:28	Jesse	Host	More with Bob Kendrick after the break. Stay with us. It's <i>Bullseye</i> , from MaximumFun.org and NPR.
00:29:35	Promo	Clip	Music: Upbeat, cheerful music plays in the background.

Allie Goertz: Hi, I'm Allie Goertz!

Julia Prescott: And I'm Julia Prescott. And we host—

Both: —[Round Springfield!](#)

Julia: *Round Springfield* is a new *Simpsons* podcast that is Simpsons-adjacent—

Allie: Mm-hm.

Julia: —um, in its topic. We talk to *Simpsons* writers, directors, voiceover actors, you name it, about non-*Simpsons* things that they've done. Because, surprise! They're all extremely talented.

Allie: Absolutely. For example, David X. Cohen worked on *The Simpsons*, but then created a little show called *Futurama*!

Julia: Mm-hm!

Allie: That's our very first episode.

Julia: Yeah!

Allie: So, tune in for stuff like that with Yeardley Smith, with Tim Long, with different writers and voice actors. It's gonna be so much fun, and we are every other week on MaximumFun.org or wherever you get your podcasts!

[Music fades out.]

00:30:18 Promo Clip

Music: Thumpy, percussive music.

Sam Sanders: Back in the day, as Netflix began to gain popularity, it's rival, Blockbuster, was looking for an edge.

Peter Kafka: At one point, the investors were asking Blockbuster to sell jeans in the store.

Rani Molla: *[Chuckles.]* Yeah, you just imagine these, like, older investors being like, "You know what the kids want? They want jeans."

Peter: You get a Tom Cruise movie and some stonewashed jeans.

Sam: The downfall of Blockbuster and the rise of Netflix. Listen to *It's Been a Minute*, from NPR.

[Music ends.]

00:30:39 Jesse Host

Welcome back to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bob Kendrick. He's the president of the Negro League Baseball Museum—one of the only institutions in the world dedicated to telling the story of the Negro Leagues. Let's get back to our conversation.

I've always found that the life of a professional athlete is inherently tragic, because—if we're lucky—we live to be 75 or 85 years old. But there are few who can maintain professional level athletic skills beyond their 30s. What was it like for Negro League players, who were dealing with the fact that they were re-entering quote/unquote "normal life" burdened both by racism and its attendant laws and structures, in the United States, and the fact that many of didn't have skills other than *[chuckles]* sports. You know, they hadn't gone to college. Some had. Uh—but—

00:31:44 Bob Guest

Well, Jesse, some had. And you know, one of the—one of the interesting facts about the Negro Leagues—and I'm so glad you mentioned that—is that some 40% of the athletes who played in the

Negro Leagues had some level of college education. Less than 5% of those who played in the Major Leagues had any college education, for the simple reason that the Major Leagues, Jesse, didn't want you to go to college, then. They got you right out of high school, if you went to high school. They got you right out of high school, put you in their farm system, and then you work your way to the big leagues. Well, the Negro Leagues didn't have that kind of sophisticated farm systems. So, what did they do? They trained on the campuses of historically Black college and universities. And then they would play the Black college baseball teams and then they recruited a great deal of their workforce from those HBCUs.

So, they actually had a disproportionate number of college-educated athletes, in comparison to the Major Leagues. But you're right, when you're talking about a post-sports career—and I think this is for any athlete—that transition into normal life is never easy. Because they've missed the adulation, as well. You have to remember, they were stars. They were stars in their own communities. Yeah, but they were stars. And as Buck would say, when they went to the restaurant, you're gonna get the finest table, the waitress gonna give you the best service. You know, just as it is today. And so, when you're transitioning away from the limelight, so to speak, and into a realm of just normalcy, you know, you become one of us normal, working class citizens, because none of them made enough money where they would just be institutional wealthy after their playing careers.

So, they did transition there. Now, some became scouts in our sport. Buck O'Neil would transition into the Major Leagues as a scout, became the Major's first Black coach. But not a whole lot of them. So, some became schoolteachers and educators. Others went into doing work. Cool Papa Bell, you know—some guys were janitors, you know, later on in their lives. Just trying again to take care of their families.

00:33:53 Jesse Host

I think, in many people's imagination, the Negro Leagues ended with the integration of Major League Baseball, in 1947. That's not the case. They continued for more than a decade after that. What was it like for the players who were great players, perhaps were—for whatever reason—not Willie Mays or Hank Aaron or Monte Irvin, players who got the opportunity to play in the Major Leagues after baseball integrated, but were still great players when Major League Baseball started to block the Negro League's shine and when the Negro Leagues eventually folded?

00:34:38 Bob Guest

Yeah. Yeah. And you're right. See, that transition took 12 years. You know? Before every Major League team had at least one Black baseball player. Boston—the last team to integrate, when they signed Pumpsie Green in 1959. So, it was a very slow, meticulous process as it related to bringing Black players in. Now, the only exception, really, was the Brooklyn Dodgers. Branch Rickey was very aggressive signing Black talent. The rest of the Major Leagues kind of came along, you know—it was kind of like Johnny-Come-Lately. They were very slow and so, basically you bring a player up and then eventually you bring another player so that that player wouldn't be so terribly isolated. But it wasn't as if Jackie breaks the color barrier and Black folks just ran on into the Major Leagues.

And there were a lot of Negro League players who did not get the opportunity.

[Bob affirms several times as Jesse speaks.]

00:35:27 Jesse Host

Yeah, they didn't have, like, a big try out where all the African American professional baseball players got to come by, and they got drafted onto Major League teams. There were Major League teams that still had one or two Black players in the early 1960s.

00:35:41 Bob Guest

Oh, absolutely. And teams like Boston, who was the last—could have had pick of the litter or star Black talent and passed on it, because they really didn't want a Black player. You know. They were the last because they ultimately felt like, "Okay, everybody else got one, I better get one now, too." And that was really the case with the American League, by and large. The National League was far more aggressive signing Black players, which is also one of the reasons why the pendulum of power shifted to the National League. But that really good Negro League player—most of them though, Jesse, were past their prime.

You know, the superstars of the Negro Leagues really were past their prime. I tell people all the time, the Major Leagues got some really good players who became great players, Mays and Aaron and Ernie Banks and Roy Campanella, guys like that. They get Monte Irvin. Monte Irvin is 30 when he comes over to join the New York Giants. And he still has a really good career, at 30! But man, if they get Monte Irvin when he was 20 or 21 years old? There was nothing that couldn't do! You know, Monte Irvin had been kind of tabbed the guy to be the first. He was ahead of Jackie, and really the Negro League owners—if someone was going to break the color barrier, they wanted it to be Monte Irvin. But Monte Irvin had the same pedigree that Jackie Robinson had.

You know, Monte Irvin was college educated, had served in the military, was married, stable, good looking guy. So, he had star quality written all over him! And he was a better baseball player than Jackie Robinson was, at that time. Monte Irvin was a superstar for the New York Eagles! Uh-huh! Baseball was Jackie's weakest sport. Which, again, tells you how talented Jackie Robinson was, because he becomes a Hall of Fame caliber baseball player. So, there were other guys in the Negro Leagues who were better baseball players than Jackie Robinson. But that really good Negro Leaguer didn't get a chance. And then those other superstar guys were too old. You know, you get Satchel when he was reportedly 42 years old. He was likely 52 at that time, because most news sites would believe that he was at least 10 years older than what he claimed to be! And only Bill Veeck would have given Satchel an opportunity.

But some of the other guys from the Negro Leagues, they just didn't get a fair shake. You know. A guy like a Ray Dandridge, who was a tremendous player in the Negro Leagues. Well, when he—he gets up to the Minneapolis Millers, and the Minneapolis Millers were the New York Giant's AAA team. Well, Dandridge's named MVP of the Millers when he was almost 38 years old. You know as well as I do, they were not going to take a 38-year-old Black man to take a young White kid's job. It wasn't gonna happen! I don't care how

00:38:47 Jesse Host good he was! And so, yes, he was bitter about it. Because he was out-playing all these young kids and there was no realistic chance for him to get there. Satchel Paige is maybe the single most legendary—

[Bob laughs.]

—uh, Negro Leagues baseball player. One of the most legendary baseball players in any league. And he's an interesting case, to me, because there's—besides him simply having a record of extraordinary performance, particularly when he was younger, as a barnstorming player and in the Negro Leagues—there's these two really interesting facets to him, as a guy. One is, he had extraordinary success in the Major Leagues as a middle-aged man. But there's this other thing about him that I think is really interesting, which is: as extraordinary as he is as a player, he's perhaps even more extraordinary as a story. Like, he obviously understood his brand *[chuckles]* and—

[Bob agrees and laughs.]

You know, he was getting a cut of the gate and he knew how to make his life into a story and was one of the most, you know—no pun intended—colorful baseball players who's ever played.

[Bob laughs.]

Maybe the most. Right? And that seems to me like it is reflective of a two-sided coin, which is: on the one hand, there is no doubt that in the Negro Leagues, they were playing a more entertaining form of baseball that was more fun and more exciting. Right? On the other hand, because Satchel Paige could strike somebody out with his hat on his foot throwing it backwards through his legs, you know, whatever. Right?

[They chuckle. Bob agrees several times as Jesse continues.]

Like, because these guys could do anything. But those stories—as amazing as they are—I think in part became the story of the Negro Leagues and can run the risk of diminishing the quality of play and the extraordinary qualities of the—of the business and its significance in American history. And also, in some cases, reinforcing negative stereotypes that White people have propagated about people of color through American history, certainly. You know. The, like, “all smoke, no fire” or whatever. Showboating and so on and so forth.

00:41:03 Bob Guest Exactly. And that's why Jackie had to be the first guy. And again, that doesn't mean that the others couldn't have done it, but this was so much more than about baseball ability. And for everything that you just mentioned, Jackie defied the stereotypical depiction of African American athletes. Satchel... could have been the first. And Buck O'Neil always believed, because Satchel was such a big star—White folks knew who Satchel Paige was—that he would not have gone through as much of the racial hatred that Jackie went through. But there's also too great of a risk that a pitcher could fail, and then of course, Satchel's age and the showmanship and

flamboyancy of Satchel Paige too closely adhered to that stereotypical depiction of those Black athletes.

And here comes Jackie Robinson who is polar opposite. Jackie Robinson is, you know, has some cache surrounding him because he had been an all-American football player, at UCLA. And so, he's college educated, he had served in the military. He's disciplined. He would become married to the beautiful Rachel Robinson. He is stable. And so, when Jackie Robinson walks into that dugout with the Brooklyn Dodgers, hell, he might have been the most intellectual being in that dugout. And so, many of these Southern born ballplayers, who were in the Major Leagues, they were seeing a Black man up close and personal for the first time and, "He's nothing like I heard they were." And so, yeah, that was so important, in this equation. It really was. And so, you know, in many respects, Satchel was the Negro Leagues. He was the Negro Leagues' biggest star. Uh-huh. But you couldn't take Satchel.

And that's why Branch Rickey very shrewdly chose Jackie Robinson.

00:42:59 Jesse Host

It's *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest is Bob Kendrick. Bob is the president of the Negro League Baseball Museum. I just wanted to give you a heads up that we aren't recording our guests in studios, these days, for obvious reasons. Bob recorded this interview himself, from his home in Kansas City. And at about this point in the interview, Bob's recording equipment stopped working. Now, luckily we had a backup recording of him talking to us, via phone, so the rest of the interview will sound like him on the phone because, uh, that's what we have a recording of.

[Scene changes.]

Bob, I think often that integration of Major League Baseball is told as a—almost like a founding myth of Americana. That it is a triumph of the spirit of America and, uh, as it's *[chuckling]* often told, it's a triumph of all the young, White people—like my dad—who were rooting for Jackie Robinson, and of Branch Rickey, and—uh, you know, an older White guy who was looking for a competitive and financial advantage and maybe was also... fine with the social justice implications. And you know, and a player who was both an extraordinary player and an extra—by all accounts, an extraordinary human being and fulfilled the role—the singular role—of—that was asked of him, to be "a credit to his race". In quotes.

But... there is also the reality that when that happened, it's not like *[chuckling]* when they started adding Black baseball players to the Major League Baseball, they started adding White baseball players to the Negro Leagues or they started adding Black owners to Major League Baseball. So, what did we lose when Major League Baseball integrated and as the Negro Leagues faded and eventually closed up shop, in the late 1950s?

00:45:07 Bob Guest

Well, I'll be honest, I don't know if the African American community realized what it was losing, when they lost the Negro Leagues. Because, Jesse, wherever you had successful Black baseball, you had thriving Black economies. And so, what was good for the soul of our country, what was good morally, what was good socially, was

devastating economically. And so, when we lost the Negro Leagues, we lost that catalyst that was—that spark for a thriving economy. And I don't know if we realized that. And in the final equation, we asked for integration. *[Chuckles.]* What we wanted was equality. And we're still fighting for equality, today. And so, yes, there was absolutely—you know, I reference it as a bittersweet story. Because there's no question that this changed things dramatically in our society.

And we do make the bold assertion that Jackie's breaking of the color barrier wasn't just a part of the civil rights movement, it actually was the beginning of the civil rights movement. As you well know, that's 1947. That is well before those noted civil rights characters. That's before Brown vs. the Board of Education. And that's before Rosa Parks' refusal to move to the back of the bus. As my friend, Buck O'Neil, would so eloquently say, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was only a sophomore at Morehouse College when Robinson signed his contract to play in the Dodgers' organization. President Truman would not integrate the armed forces until a year after Jackie. So, for all intents and purposes, this is what indeed started the ball of social progress rolling, in this country. That spawned integration in our society.

And once the—our society became integrated, those smaller, Black-owned businesses could no longer compete. And sad to say, Black folks then went to these businesses that once upon a time would not allow them in. To think about this: a woman could go into a store and if she touched a hat, she had to buy it. That hat was now permanently stained. And so, now all of the sudden, you could go in and so, you know, that's a whole other sociological kind of issue, which is waaay too sophisticated for my country boy feeble mind. So yeah, there was a lot lost when we did lose the Negro Leagues. But again, it moved our country in ways in which I don't think we ever fathomed possible, from a social standpoint.

00:47:41 Jesse Host

Bob, we have to go, but I just wanted to mention to you that... I mentioned to you that my father was from Kansas City and I—*[getting choked up]* sorry.

00:47:54 Bob Guest

No, no, no, no. I understand.

00:47:59 Jesse Host

[Beat. With some difficulty.] He passed away relatively recently and when I went up to my hometown, where I was—I was born, San Francisco, to his house to take him with my stepmother into hospice—and when I was leaving to drive back to LA, I looked around his room and I thought, is there anything here that he saved that I wanted to take home with me? And... he and I and my brother had gone on a *[chuckles softly]*—he inherited some money so that he could buy a two-year-old car, which was the first car we'd ever had that worked. And we decided to take a long driving trip from San Francisco, one summer. And we decided to go to as many baseball games as we could. And our goal was to drive from San Francisco all the way to Kansas City, where my father—where my father lived as a child and was born.

And it was a long and difficult trip. But also, was an amazing trip. And when we got to Kansas City, one of the places we went was the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum. And it had just recently opened, at that time. I think this was 1994 or 5.

[Bob affirms.]

00:49:33	Bob	Guest	And I got to meet Buck O’Neil briefly. He was just around. <i>[Laughs.] [Inaudible].</i> He would do that! He’d just come hang around. You know, to shake his hand. And sitting next to my dad’s bed, when I— <i>[struggling for words]</i> when I was looking around at this room that wouldn’t—that he would not occupy again, was a little souvenir baseball bat from—from that trip to the museum, that he had save for those... now 25, 26 years. And it was one of a couple of things that I brought home with me to my house. And... uh, I just—I wanted to thank you for that, uh—for that experience. You were already involved in the museum, at the time. Though you weren’t working there for money, yet. And thank you for stewarding this wonderful place and this amazing American story. Um. I really appreciate it and it has a lot of—a lot of meaning to me, personally. So, thank you.
00:49:37	Jesse	Host	
00:50:37	Bob	Guest	Aw, well, it’s an honor for me to do this work. It is absolutely a labor of love. Not only for me, but I think our entire team. And I think that they—Jesse, that is not lost on any of us and this is kind of what drives and motivates us, is that we have an opportunity to leave a legacy. We understand that this museum is so much bigger than any of us and that if we do our work properly, we have an opportunity to secure its future so that it will be here for future generations to enjoy. And I think anytime that you can leave a legacy in this world, that is something that is so meaningful. And so, you know, every day is—we’re motivated to keep the legacy of these legendary and courageous athletes alive. And it’s an honor to be able to do this work.
00:51:28	Jesse	Host	Bob, I’m sure that you wish you could be welcoming more people through your doors, during the centennial of the Negro Leagues and that more of the celebrations that you had planned, in partnership with Major League Baseball, could take place this year—given the way that the pandemic has affected going to things, including baseball games and museums, although your museum is open for visitors now, in a relatively limited way. But I hope that some of those centennial activities can become centennial-and-one activities, next year.
00:52:06	Bob	Guest	Yes. <i>[Laughs.]</i> Absolutely. We’ve already come up with the concept of “Negro Leagues 101”, and for those who’ve ever stepped foot on a college campus, those 101 classes were the only ones I passed! So, we’re gonna do the—create an educational initiative that will kind of carry and drive next year’s celebration, as we keep—create a continuum of things that we weren’t able to get done, this year. Certainly doesn’t diminish the fact that this is still a milestone year, and the launching of our “Tip Your Cap to the Negro Leagues” campaign really gave a boost to this milestone celebration, this year. You know. This virtual campaign, it just really took off and it was a crazy idea that I had that—after we couldn’t do our national day of recognition with Major League Baseball, where all 30 teams were going to honor the Negro Leagues and essentially do an in-stadium Tip Your Cap with fans and players.

And as you well know, in our sport, there’s nothing more honorable that a ballplayer can do than a simple tip of the cap. It is the ultimate show of respect. And so, I came up with this notion to do a

virtual tip of the cap—could we get fans, perhaps a few players, current and former, to take a picture or video of themselves tipping their cap in honor of the Negro Leagues? Well, little did I know that it would go viral! And when we launched this campaign on June 29th of this year, we launched it with four US presidents tipping their cap: President Obama, President Bush, President Clinton, President Jimmy Carter. And then we, Jesse, went into outer space and got a literally outer worldly tip of the cap from astronaut Chris Cassidy, who was aboard the international space shuttle when he tipped his cap.

I think at that point, we realized we had something pretty doggone special here. And that effort is still continuing, and so we're keeping the Tip Your Cap campaign going certainly through at least August 16th, but with the popularity of this, we're likely to keep it going through the end of the centennial year. And for those who might be interested in tipping their cap, you can upload a photograph of yourself or short video, you know, to our photos@tippingyourcap.com and then the website, if you wanna go on and look at these amazing folks who have tipped their cap in honor of the Negro Leagues, the website is at www.tippingyourcap.com, and I was excited 'cause most recently we got a hat tip from the Temptations—Motown's Temptations. So, this thing has just been amazing.

00:54:51	Jesse	Host	Well, Bob, I sure appreciate you taking all this time. It was great to get to talk to you about the museum and the history of the Negro Leagues.
00:54:59	Bob	Kendrick	Yeah, no, I appreciate the opportunity. Thanks for having me.
00:55:02	Jesse	Host	Bob Kendrick. President of the Negro League Baseball Museum. If you're in the area and you're in a position to visit, the museum is open for a few folks to look around safely. You can also donate to the museum by going to its website, NLBM.com . It's been tough for this incredible museum to lose their 100 th anniversary of the Negro Leagues year and your financial support makes a big difference.
00:55:28	Music	Transition	Relaxing music with a steady drumbeat.
00:55:30	Jesse	Host	That's the end of another episode of <i>Bullseye</i> . <i>Bullseye</i> is produced out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California—where, as of this recording, the Giants are 6 and 7 and the Dodgers are 9 and 4. But! The Giant are fundamentally good, and the Dodgers are fundamentally evil.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones, one of which I have and none of which my Dodgers fan colleagues have. Our producer is Kevin Ferguson, Dodgers. Jesus Ambrosio, Dodgers. And Jordan Kauwling, who was a Phillies fan until the Philly fanatic made her drop her hotdog and didn't replace it and became a Dodgers fan. They're our associate producers. We get help from Casey O'Brien, who is blessedly neutral in this eternal battle. He's a Twins fan, and I think we can all agree on Twins' utility catcher, Willians Astudillo.

Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use it. You can keep up with the show on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Just search for *Bullseye*

with Jesse Thorn. And I think that's about it. Just remember, all great radio hosts have a signature sign off.

And by the way, rest in peace to Bay Area sports radio legend, Ralph "Razor Voice" Barbieri, whose own signature sign off was the inspiration for my somewhat glib one. He always ended his shows by saying, with a little bit of a wink, "Remember that angels fly because they take themselves lightly."

00:57:06 Promo Promo

Speaker: *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of MaximumFun.org and is distributed by NPR.

[Music fades out.]