Josh Gibson Short Guide

Josh Gibson by John B. Holway

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Overview

Coretta Scott King's introduction to Josh Gibson notes that reading the stories of Gibson and other courageous men and women not only helps us discover the principles that we will use to guide our own lives but also teaches us to know the heroes and heroines of our history and to realize that the price we paid in our struggle for equality in America was dear. But we must also understand that we have gotten as far as we have partly because America's democratic system made it possible.

It is asking much to make a star athlete an example of a people's struggle, but Holway narrows the focus to the realm of athletics and uses Gibson to show the state of affairs for African-American athletes during the Great Depression and World War II.

Further, Holway emphasizes Gibson's humanity, his weaknesses as well as his strengths. An athlete as talented as Gibson could be made to look like a superman, with his titanic home runs making him seem a man of indomitable physical power, but Holway is honest with his audience, presenting Gibson as a remarkable athlete but a fallible man. Thus Josh Gibson is not a story of lifelong triumph but of success on the ball field marred by failure and despair off the field. His obsession with being paid what Babe Ruth was paid, even though he made more money than most people, may have led to the bad habits, anger, and despair that may have contributed to his premature death, just one year before the Cleveland Indians probably would have signed him to a major league contract to be Satchel Paige's catcher.

About the Author

On November 12, 1929, John B. Holway was born to Edward J., an engineer, and Frances (Rimbach) Holway, in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. He eventually attended the University of Iowa, where he received his bachelor of arts degree in 1950. The following year he joined the United States Army, and while in the service he met his future wife, Motoka Mori, marrying her on October 15, 1954. The couple have four children, two boys and two girls. Holway reached the rank of first lieutenant in the army, but he left the service in 1956, whereupon he took a job with the United States Information Service (USIS). This job provided him with his primary source of income while he pursued his literary interests.

Howlay began by writing about sports, publishing Japan Is Big League in Thrills in 1955 and Sumo in 1957. He published articles in several magazines such as Look and American Heritage before beginning to publish the books for which he is best known.

His longtime hobby has been the Negro baseball leagues of the days when African Americans were excluded from the National League and the American League. As part of his hobby, he tracked down and interviewed former Negro league ballplayers and thereby amassed an enormous amount of information on the players, coaches, and owners for these teams. He recalls hunting Josh Gibson 221 down Satchel Paige and being told by a boy working in the front yard that no one named Satchel Paige lived in the house. A call to Paige's agent and a check for $250 changed the situation, and the next time Holway tracked Paige down the boy answered the door and led him to Paige. Holway's job for the USIS probably provided him with the wherewithal to pay for his expensive research.

The first book to result from Holway's investigations is Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues, published in 1975, featuring excerpts from interviews of those who played on Negro league teams. Holway also began to uncover many of the details of player biographies and player performances that now form the basis for information in such reference works as The Baseball Encyclopedia, edited by Rick Wolff and others.

Holway's interest in history as well as baseball led to Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers, a gathering of articles published in magazines and of new profiles of some of the most famous players from the Negro leagues. This book marks the beginning of a string of historical books that have established Holway as one of the most prominent writers of history for general audiences. Holway's historical research has expanded beyond baseball and has resulted in what may be Holway's most popular title yet, Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force, published in 1997.

Setting

Josh Gibson was born on December 31, 1911, in Buena Vista, Georgia, to sharecroppers Mark and Nancy Gibson. Gibson said that one of the best things his father ever did for him was move his family in 1924 to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, because he believed it gave him economic opportunities that he would not have had in the South. He considered his getting a good-paying job in 1927 at a Pittsburgh steel mill, which sponsored an amateur baseball team that he 222 Josh Gibson joined, an example of this. In 1929, the Crawford Colored Giants, a well-known black semipro baseball team, invited him to join their club. It was while playing for the Crawfords that he began to build his reputation as a home run hitter. Holway emphasizes the opportunities Gibson had to excel in Pittsburgh, while noting that Gibson lived in a working-class city where times became hard when the Great Depression began.

In spite of the hard times of the Depression, Gibson flourished. The Great Depression had devastated the Negro leagues almost the instant the crisis started, with many fans no longer able to afford a ticket to a ball game. Gibson became an important box office attraction, bringing in fans to see his enormously long home runs, and in 1930 The Homestead Grays of the National Negro League offered him a contract. He is said to have hit a home run to left centerfield and out of Yankee Stadium on September 27. The centerfield wall was about 480 feet from home plate at that time.

Although fellow players remembered him as a big, happy-go-lucky player, he actually suffered in the early years of fame after his wife Helen died just as he began to make a name for himself in the Negro National League. For most of the rest of Josh Gibson, Holway focuses on Gibson's on-field heroics and the slugger's movements around the United States and Latin America.

In 1932, he jumped to the Pittsburgh Crawfords of the Negro National League, beginning his pattern of chasing the biggest paycheck. It was his desire to be paid what he thought he was worth that may have most darkened his life as his career progressed. Holway hints that it may have had much to do with Gibson's increasing melancholia and eventual abuse of alcohol and other drugs, especially marijuana and perhaps heroine and cocaine. Major leaguers such as Dizzy Dean, would tell Gibson that he belonged in the major leagues, remarking that if Gibson and Satchel Paige would join the St. Louis Cardinals, which featured pitchers Dizzy himself and brother Daffy Dean, the Cards would win the pennant in July and they could go fishing for the rest of the season. Any efforts by major league ball clubs to sign Gibson during the 1930s were squelched by threats of economic sanctions by other ball clubs and the opposition of the commissioner's office.

Increasing Gibson's anger was the difference in how well he was treated in Latin America as opposed to America. In Mexico, he and other African-American ballplayers were treated like heroes, and their ability to socialize with whites contrasted markedly with how they were treated in segregated American states. Throughout the American South, Negro leaguers had trouble finding places to eat and places to use the toilet, and

sometimes they just had to pack themselves into automobiles and race across a state to avoid being shanghaied by police into working in farm fields, harvesting crops. The stories of how Gibson and other players coped with segregation are sometimes funny, as when they send a light-skinned player into a restaurant for hamburgers, but generally sad, rueful tales of coping with abuse because of skin color.

In 1937, Gibson and other African-American baseball stars played for the Dominican Republic's Trujillo Dragons in a season that became notorious—Gibson and other Negro leaguers on the Dragons were given to understand that they could be shot if they did not win the championship for dictator Trujillo's team. They won and then fled the country. It is probably while playing in the Dominican Republic that Gibson was introduced to hard drugs. Other players remembered him sneaking off to public rest rooms and returning groggy, with slurred speech and his once bright and quick sense of humor gone.

From 1940-1941 Gibson played mostly in Latin America, most notably in Mexico, where he was treated like a hero, feasting in private homes almost every night. By then his bitterness had given him a resentful, dark personality. When the United States entered World War II, most of the Negro leagues' stars were drafted, but not Gibson, who joined the Washington Homestead Grays. By then, the old organized Negro leagues had been ruined by the Great Depression, and there were only brief organized schedules, with most of the surviving teams earning enough to stay in business by traveling all over the United States playing any kind of team that was willing, often local semipro or amateur clubs.

During the war years, against teams weakened by the military draft, which took many African American as well as major league stars, Gibson was a bright light of on-field achievement. His hitting skills overwhelmed many pitchers, but Gibson's emotional troubles made him unpalatable to major league baseball owners and general managers, even though his hitting could make winners out their teams. Having been excluded from the major leagues because of his race during the 1930s, Gibson was passed over to become the first African American to officially play in the major leagues in over forty years.

From baseball fields, the setting of Josh Gibson moves to the home of Gibson's mother. He had become very obese by 1946, so fat that he could not drop into a full catcher's crouch, but in 1947, Gibson lost weight alarmingly. He died, probably from a stroke, at home and in the company of his mother, on January 20, 1947. The legend begins that he died of a broken heart because the major leagues seemed to have passed him by. Biographer Holway suggests that Gibson would have been signed by the Cleveland Indians for the 1948 season, catching for Satchel Paige.

Social Sensitivity

Racial prejudice is an issue throughout Josh Gibson. Holway presents Josh Gibson's life as one that was constantly influenced by his race and by the racial relations of the catcher's era. Gibson remarked that the best thing his father did for him was move him out of the South to Pennsylvania, away from the sharecropper's life and institutionalized segregation of the races. This does not mean that Gibson escaped racial discrimination, but it means that he had economic opportunities he probably would not have had if he had remained in Georgia.

In Pennsylvania, he was able to get a job at a local factory. Although this curtailed his education, the job meant a chance to raise himself out of poverty. It also meant a chance to play baseball on an organized amateur club, which in turn meant a chance to show his talent.

Although Holway does not mention it, white baseball scouts seem to have noticed Gibson almost as soon as he joined the Crawford Colored Giants, and major league scouts and managers both chafed under the major leagues' antiblack restrictions that prevented them from signing ballplayers as talented as Gibson. He might have made the difference between second place and a championship for several major league clubs.

The discrimination against African Americans was not written into the rules of the major leagues, and officials denied that there was any formal discrimination. Yet, major league Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis had vowed that no African American would play in either the National League or the American League while he was in charge. The pressure was enough to prevent African Americans from playing (at least openly) on the teams John McGraw managed, even though he made it plain that he wanted to sign and play AfricanAmerican ballplayers. Commissioner Landis's threats prevented team owners who wanted to improve their teams by fielding black stand-outs from signing them to contracts.

It was not until Landis's successor Happy Chandler declared that baseball should not discriminate against any Americans of any background that Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey, who would eventually sign Jackie Robinson, and others saw an opening for signing African Americans without fear of reprisal.

Holway does not go much into this background of racism, instead maintaining a steady focus on Gibson, but he does detail Gibson's own frustrations from playing segregated baseball. Characterized as an overgrown boy, full of fun and mischief, in his first several years in the Negro leagues, the years of being excluded from some hotels and restaurants, of having to drive automobiles pell-mell through Southern states out of fear of the police and out of need to find a bathroom that blacks would be allowed to use, seems to have wearied Gibson. Further, he played exhibition games against white major leaguers, many of whom told him he could play in the major leagues if only he were not black. Eventually, he was discovered by national magazines such as Time,

and he became well-known as the greatest African-American slugger of the 1930s and 1940s. He became a big drawing card for ball games and as a result became one the highest paid Negro leaguers, but he believed he was not as well paid as he would have been in the major leagues and that he was not as well respected as he should have been. In Holway's account, he became bitter and angry, turning to alcohol and drugs to escape his anguish. Strong in body, but weak in spirit, Gibson despaired as he realized that his best years were behind him and that he would not be able to show what he could do in the spotlights of the major leagues.

Holway does not go into depth about what the racial discrimination of Gibson's time represented for American sports, but it is worth noting that team owners that refused to sign a superior athlete because of his race could not have been committed to fielding the best team possible. Racism meant more to them than winning. This means that major league clubs that sold tickets with the promise of trying to win championships were defrauding their customers. Not every owner or team could be accused of this, but those who wanted to sign Gibson and other black players were thwarted by the disapproval of most of the rest of the team owners such as Charles Comiskey, owner of the Chicago White Sox, who early in the twentieth century had moved owners to disbar a black second baseman John McGraw (then managing the Baltimore American League club) was fielding. Holway points out that most Americans, white as well as black, were denied the opportunity to see great ballplayers such as Gibson, because of baseball's color line.

Literary Qualities

Holway brings passion and compassion to his account of Josh Gibson's life. It is hard for a baseball fan not to be passionate about a ballplayer who could have set records and raised the earned-run averages of major league pitchers, but who was denied his chance to showcase his skills in major league ballparks because of his skin's color. Holway is a classic fan who has devoted much of his life to the lore and history of baseball.

Holway is plainly partisan in his account of Gibson, noting Gibson's athletic feats and comparing them to other, less gifted players, yet he is also honest about the uglier sides of Gibson's life.

In this honesty lies Holway's artistic achievement. His presentation of Gibson as a man among men is compassionate without being cloying; he reveals Gibson's humanity even while noting his exceptional ability. In part, this means that Gibson is not a role model for young adults. His almost desperate desire for money, his bitterness, his alcoholism, and his abuse of drugs are all presented plainly, all as aspects of an immature personality that never quite grew up. Yet, although Gibson is not a role model, Holway's presentation of him is a fine example of how a person may honestly appreciate an athlete. Instead of idolatry, sincere recognition of what Gibson managed to do, with firsthand accounts of Gibson's performances, is tempered with the recognition that Gibson's private behavior was self-destructive. The result is a portrait of an athlete to be admired for his determination and hard work, as well as his feats of strength and skill, yet to be regarded with dismay and sorrow because of his failure to cope with disappointments.

Themes and Characters

"Some people say Josh Gibson died of a brain hemorrhage. I say he died of a broken heart," claims Ted Page in Josh Gibson. Page had been an outfielder and teammate of Gibson, and the two had palled around for many years. Page reports Gibson's ill health, but remarks that the last he saw of Gibson, the big man still joked with him as he had when they played together. Holway gives to Page the chance to express what Satchel Paige and other players said of Gibson's death: He died of a broken heart.

Page is one of many colorful characters who populate Josh Gibson, as may reasonably be expected of an account of Gibson's flamboyant life. While these figures are not developed in depth, their interaction with Gibson is recounted in enough detail to make clear their importance in Gibson's life. For instance, there is Willie Wells, a brilliant shortstop and a dangerous power hitter in his own right, who invented the batting helmet by knocking the lamp off of a miner's helmet after pitchers kept throwing at his head.

Spoken of more often are the pitchers who had to face Gibson in ball games.

There is Connie Rector, a "crafty" pitcher with a "tantalizing slow ball"; Joe Williams, "strictly a fireballer" who may have been the best pitcher of all; Chet Brewer, a "'sandpaper' artist," who made his pitches dance. (Pitchers often doctored baseballs in the Negro leagues.) Roosevelt Davis "was a wily cut-ball artist," and Bill Byrd was a "spitball specialist." Throwing fast balls to Gibson seems to have been a waste of effort, and pitchers threw off-speed pitches and "junk" pitches to him. In the book, Holway talks of Ted Trent who "had a legendary curve"; Ray Brown, who "had a dancing knuckleball to complement his fastball and curve"; Luis Tiant, Sr., who "was mainly a 'junkball' pitcher relying on slow curves, change-ups, and the like"; and Leroy Matlock, who "had almost perfect control."

These were the men charged with the task of getting Gibson out, a difficult task given that Gibson tended to hit balls to where no one could catch them. Indeed, Holway notes that Gibson hit more home runs than he had strike outs, an impressive feat for a free-swinging power hitter in any era. But among the pitchers Holway mentions, one stands out. As with other significant figures in Josh Gibson, he was interviewed by Holway, and he is allowed to tell about his relationship in his own words. He is Satchel Paige, the foremost celebrity of the Negro leagues, a man who drew fans of all ethnic groups by the tens of thousands to the games he pitched.

The sometime teammate and frequent antagonist of Gibson, Paige wanted every bit as much as Gibson did to be the first African American to officially cross the color line in major league baseball since the nineteenth century. Like Gibson, Paige expected to be paid well, and like Gibson, he was careless with his money, but he learned from his mistakes and learned how to profit from his celebrity. It is interesting to read Paige's remarks and to wonder about how Gibson might be remembered if he, too, had lived as long as Paige, being able to comment on his experiences as a ballplayer.

As it is, Paige is remembered as a sage, as a man who intelligently worked his way through racism and discrimination to become important to the American community far beyond the boundaries of race and of baseball. In his playing days, he turned his confrontations into great shows, to the profit of not only Gibson and himself but of their teammates, as well.

Even though Paige is just about as colorful a sports figure as any America has ever had, Holway does not allow him to steal attention away from Gibson. In developing Gibson, Holway tries to paint a full picture of his development as a ballplayer. The common image of a tall, heavily muscled but somewhat clumsy man is belied by Holway's research. Yes, Gibson was tall and well built, and he hit tremendous home runs, but "Gibson could also run," and his high batting averages suggest that he had quick wrists and superior hand-eye coordination. Holway asserts that at his best, Gibson was a fast runner and a good defensive catcher who threw "light" balls that were easy for infielders to catch.

"He realized that he was just as good as Ruth. He changed from the Josh I knew— an overgrown kid who did nothing but play ball, eat ice cream, or go to the movies.

He changed to a man who was kind of bitter with somebody, or mad with somebody," observes Ted Page. It dawned on Gibson that segregation was depriving him of the income a major leaguer with his talent would earn. Gibson's feeling that he was underpaid is emphasized in Josh Gibson, but curiously the fact that racism denied him the respect that was his due is not touched on. Money woes alone do not seem to adequately account for his changing from the ail-American ideal of an athlete to a heavy drinker and drug abuser.

To his credit, Holway does not gloss over Gibson's decline and the role alcohol and other drugs had in it. Gibson seems to abuse drugs to dampen anguish, a belief that he was not being treated fairly. He seems to have released his frustrations on baseballs, which he hit with rare fierceness during the last several years of his life. He became famous beyond Negro league fans at the time he was passing his peak. Page thinks Gibson knew that his skills were declining, that he was not going to be able to show what he could do in the major leagues and make the money he should.

Hard drinks and drugs hastened his decline: He became a very slow runner; his defense became weak, with poor throws.

Josh Gibson 225 Yet at the end, believing he had a brain tumor, unable to properly crouch behind home plate, and convinced that racists had defeated him and denied him his rightful place in baseball, he played his games with great vigor, making pitchers fear him until his sudden death from causes yet to be fully explained.

Topics for Discussion

1. Does Holway satisfactorily explain why Gibson abused drugs? What more would you like to know?

2. How does Holway show Gibson's decline from happy-go-lucky to bitter?

How well does Holway trace the decline?

3. How well does Holway mix Gibson's exploits on the ball field with his life off the field?

4. Why does Holway emphasize Gibson's home runs?

5. Is Gibson an admirable man? What does Holway say about this?

6. Is Gibson an appropriate subject for a series on "Black Americans of Achievement"? Might young readers receive a false impression of what is considered admirable in a person?

7. What is the purpose of Josh Gibson? Does it fulfill its purpose?

8. Does Holway make it clear why Gibson was distressed over how much money he earned, even though he was very well paid during the Great Depression when compared to most Americans?

9. What factors, other than money, about being excluded from the National and American Leagues would have dismayed Gibson?

10. A man who became a bitter drug abuser would seem to have little to offer readers of his biography. What lessons, if any, can be drawn from Gibson's behavior?

11. What are some of the funniest passages in Josh Gibson?

12. Why did Paige earn more money than Gibson?

13. What were the hardest parts about playing in the Negro leagues? Why would players endure such hardships rather than quitting and finding another job?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Josh Gibson refers to players and others involved in the Negro leagues besides Gibson. Choose one of them and research his or her life and then write a short biography of him or her. You may wish to imitate Holway's style, which emphasizes quotations from first handobservers.

2. In what other books besides Josh Gibson and in what journalistic articles does Holway write about Gibson? How do his views grow and change over the years as he discusses Josh Gibson? Where does Holway come closest to capturing the real man behind the famous image?

3. African-American ball players had trouble finding service stations that would let them use their bathrooms. How widespread was this problem in those days? Was it exclusively a Southern problem, or were African Americans refused service because of their race in other regions of the United States?

4. Gibson played in many different ballparks for Negro league teams. Describe one of these ball parks as it would have looked when Gibson played in it and explain how a baseball player would have experienced the grounds.

5. Many African-American baseball players preferred to play in Latin American leagues. What was the appeal of Latin American baseball? How were the players from the United States treated in Latin American countries?

6. Josh Gibson had his start in organized baseball by playing for a factory team. Such teams were once common. What were they like? Who owned them? Who ran them? Why would many of them be integrated even though the major leagues were not?

7. What reasons did the executives of major league teams give for not hiring the likes of Gibson? Why would a team in contention for a pennant not want to hire a slugger who could hit any pitch 500 feet with great regularity?

8. In Gibson's day, there were major leagueball players such as Ty Cobb who wanted nothing to do with African-American 228 Josh Gibson players. Who were some of these players? What were their reasons for not wanting to play against African Americans?

9. Some major league managers and players wanted to include African Americans in the major leagues. Holway cites Dizzy Dean often as an outspoken exponent for admitting African Americans to the major leagues. Who were some of the other white players who wanted to include African American players? What did they try to do to open the major leagues to African Americans?

10. Some historians think that Gibson was done in by drug abuse. How prevalent were illicit drugs in baseball in the 1940s?

Did they harm any other players?

11. How did Gibson make his way from factory worker to the Negro National League? Was this typical in his day, even for major leaguers?

12. There is more than one possibility for what killed Gibson. What are the possibilities? Which most likely is the reason he died? Could there be more than one reason?

For Further Reference

Holway, John B. "Not All Stars Were White."

Sporting News (July 4, 1983): S14. Holway talks about the Negro leagues' 1933 All-Star Game, played in Chicago in August, in which Gibson represented the Pittsburgh Crawfords.

"Negro Leagues Register." In The Baseball Encyclopedia. Ninth edition. Edited by Rick Wolff, et al. New York: Macmillan, 1993, pp. 2609-2680. Although far from a complete listing of all Negro leaguers, this has the most authoritative statistics for many of the stars of the Negro leagues.

Related Titles

Josh Gibson is the unusual instance of a biography by the same author being the best source for additional information.

Holway's Josh and Satch: The Life and Times of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige (1991) goes into more detail about Gibson's love life and paints a fuller picture of his times in Latin America than does Josh Gibson. Josh and Satch is a dual biography in which the lives of Gibson and Satchel Paige are interconnected. In it, Paige learns to cope with racism, and with a sense of humor and a keen eye for business, he turns himself into a folk hero who was admired and sought after for public appearances long after his playing days were over. In Josh and Satch, Gibson fails to cope with the same pressures that Paige handled well; he is an example of how the pressures of racism and celebrity could destroy a man, whereas Paige is an example of how good sense and a positive outlook can help someone overcome injustice. In it, personality determines fate.

Holway began his research of Negro league baseball by interviewing those who had been involved in the various Negro leagues. These interviews continued for many years before resulting in Voices from the Great Blackball Leagues, a 1975 collection of interviews. Young readers as well as grownups are likely to enjoy the down-toearth stories told by players and others associated with the leagues. Blackball Stars (1988) is another major book by Holway on the Negro leagues. It is a gathering and rewriting of numerous articles Holway had published about Negro leaguers. It has short biographies of many of the players, owners, and executives involved in the creation of the leagues as well as involved in the playing of league games. Blackball Stars is somewhat earthier than Josh Gibson, featuring some off-color stories of ballplayers' romantic adventures. It is an excellent book and is suitable reading for teenagers.

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