Oscar Charleston: Was Cobb "The White Charleston"? Short Guide

Oscar Charleston: Was Cobb "The White Charleston"? by John B. Holway

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Overview

Oscar Charleston, to the baseball historian and those with a fascination for the Negro leagues, looms as a powerful, even menacing figure out of baseball's epic past, whose image is yet half-shadowed because of the scarcity of historical records from the era he dominated. Those who played with and against him remember his steelgray eyes that were tinted with blue, eyes said to have been frightening, cold, and determined. Those who have delved into baseball's hidden history say he may have been the best baseball player who ever lived; he was so good that he made the spectacular seem commonplace. He was supremely intelligent, enormously strong, and without fear. His feats seem legendary now: frequent and huge home runs; explosive base running that invites comparison to Ty Cobb, Willie Mays, and Ricky Henderson; superlative allaround hitting skills that produced .400 batting averages in several seasons. As Holway puts it, "Of all the evils of baseball's long segregation policy, one of the worst was denying the vast majority of fans the chance to see Oscar Charleston for themselves."

About the Author

John Holway was born in Glen Ridge, New Jersey, on November 12, 1929 to Edward J. Holway, an engineer, and Frances (nee Rimbach) Holway. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1950 from the University of Iowa. He joined the United States Army in 1951, and while in the service met his future wife Motoka Mori whom he married on October 15, 1954. They have two boys and two girls. Holway reached the rank of first lieutenant in the Army, but he left the service in 1956 and then started to work for the United States Information Service. This job has provided his primary source of income while he has pursued his literary interests.

His first books were the sports volumes Japan Is Big League in Thrills (1955) and Sumo (1957), although his articles appeared in Look, American Heritage, and other general readership magazines before he began to publish the books for which he is best known. His longtime hobby has been studying the Negro leagues of the days when African-Americans were excluded from the National League and the American League (he usually refers to these as the "white leagues," which is a bit of a misnomer because all other ethnic groups, including nonwhite ones, were allowed to have players in the Major Leagues). As part of his hobby, he tracked down and interviewed former Negro league ballplayers, in the process amassing an enormous amount of information on the players, coaches, and owners for Negro league teams. Holway recalls hunting 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 when Holway returned to interview Paige the boy answered the door and then led him to the renowned ex-player.

The first book to result from Holway's diligent digging into the past is Voices of 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 standard reference works as The Baseball Encyclopedia.

Holway's interest in history as well as baseball led to Blackball Stars: Negro League Pioneers, a gathering of profiles of some of the most famous players from the Negro leagues. This volume 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, Red Tails, Black Wings: The Men of America's Black Air Force (1997).

Setting

Oscar Charleston lived much of his life relentlessly playing the sport he loved, so the action depicted in this biography takes place mostly in baseball parks. Some of the American ballparks of Charleston's day were small and offered close outfield fences for home runs, but most ballparks in the Negro leagues were cavernous places where doubles and triples provided most of the excitement. The conditions of the fields varied, but the infields were almost always rocky and hard— as were most major league infields of the time—and it was commonplace to see a fielder scoop up rocks and debris while he was fielding a ground ball.

Charleston was a master bat-handler who knew how to take advantage of the hard dirt and the tall grass. He could lay a bunt down each base line or to either side of the pitcher, and the ball would skitter along the base path or die in the grass depending on the pace and spin he put on the ball. He beat out many of these deft bunts for hits because of his great speed. His Oscar Charleston and Josh Gibson quickness and aggression on the basepaths intimidated middle infielders: he would jump feet forward toward the base on his steal attempts the way Ty Cobb did, with his spikes presented to the fielder covering the bag.

This technique of sliding high also spared his legs some of the grinding abuse that could leave a top base stealer's legs raw by the end of a season.

Charleston had only one significant weakness as a player; despite his powerful build everyone who played with or against him said that he had a weak throwing arm. Since even the fenced outfields of the time tended to be huge and the Latin American ball parks often had no outfield fences at all, this presented the weak-throwing Charleston with a dilemma. Should he play way back to prevent batted balls from going over his head or play close to the infield where most balls would land, leaving him a short distance to throw? Charleston chose to play close to the infield, counting on his speed to allow him to catch up to balls hit over his head. A little past the midpoint of his long career when he had slowed somewhat, he switched from centerfield to first base, where his quick reaction time was an asset and his weak throwing did minimal harm.

Social Sensitivity

Racism confined Charleston's career to Negro league teams and to Latin American clubs; it denied him the salary major league players earned; it restricted his social life. Negro leaguers responded to racism in different ways, depending on their personalities, the particulars of their upbrings, and the circumstances of their adult lives. Satchel Paige, whose anger at segregation would sometimes explode in displays of fiery temper, used humor and a keen sense of how to earn money to ease his pain. Josh Gibson, though, became embittered and buried his misery in drugs and resentment.

Charleston expressed his anger with violence. He would punch people who called him racist names, and he was willing, even eager to take on groups of thugs who tried to intimidate him.

Stories of his career are marked by episodes in which he fought all comers.

This aspect of his career may seem admirable, even heroic to young readers, but they would be well advised to look into the stories further; such violence had its price for Charleston and others like him. In his case it made him seem too risky for a major league club to sign him, even though he had often played against white teams without incident. Readers may find "Jud Wilson: Boojum," another of Holway's short biographies, to be an informative contrast to "Oscar Charleston". In this biography, one can read of another enormously strong man who also responded to racist namecalling with violence; Jud Wilson was beaten on the head so often that he had seizures and bouts of insanity. He spent much of his life in a hospital.

Another point worth making is that Charleston was gifted with a superb body able to absorb massive punishment, the kind that only professional boxers can usually tolerate. He was also smart as well as tough— he could often outwit his tormentors.

The racism itself is likely to engender questions in readers unfamiliar with America's social history. With African-American ballplayers such as Barry Bonds and Frank Thomas leading their teams to numerous victories and being handsomely paid to do so, it may be hard to understand how any team owner or general manager, especially in the era of the reserve clause which kept player salaries down, could be so shortsighted as not to sign a player who could dramatically improve his team. Holway points out seasons in which Charleston and a few other players could have made the difference in a tight pennant race, and he shows that those players' contracts were made available to such team as the Pittsburgh Pirates. Why would a team owner prefer to lose a pennant rather than hire a black athlete? Segregation dominated much of America for about one hundred years after the Civil War, and excluded Charleston from competing with Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb.

It is worth noting that not everyone connected with major league baseball wanted to exclude African-Americans.

Famed player and manager John McGraw, throughout most of his career, tried to sneak African-Americans on his teams, the most infamous instance being a case in which he signed a second baseman and pretended he was an Indian. Charles Comiskey of the Chicago American League club figured out that the player was black and told league headquarters, which removed the player from McGraw's team. This puts the lie to a common claim that baseball's segregation was not official but just something every team went along with. If that were the case, McGraw would have had his second baseman for a long career. It has been said that among McGraw's effects after his death was a list of the African- American ballplayers he had wanted to sign during his career.

Other teams did manage to get lightskinned African-Americans past the segregationists; in the 1920s, the Cincinnati Reds had two players pass as Cubans, including an outfielder who had a ten-year career with the club. The players revealed only after retirement that they were black Americans. There were other incidents, such as the owner of the Washington Senators signing both Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson to major league contracts during the off season in the mid1930s, only to have someone leak the news to other owners who put so much economic pressure on him that he had to let the players go. Details such as these may help explain what Charleston had to contend with, why he was the man he was, and why he did not play for a Major League team.

Literary Qualities

Holway has spent decades interviewing players, managers, and fans; it is not surprising that he lets them tell the story as much as he can. The story of Charleston's career is told by dozens of witnesses, people who observed him from almost every angle, and it is to Holway's credit that this potentially overwhelming conglomeration of views flows smoothly, connected by his own sharp observations.

That Holway tells much of Charleston's story through the voices of many other people keeps Charleston at a distance; his personality remains unfathomable. On the other hand, the numerous quotations gives the narrative an authenticity that makes for compelling, you-are-there reading.

Themes and Characters

Holway calls Charleston "a roundfaced, barrel-chested Hercules with smoldering leonine eyes." The players he interviews comment on those eyes, with Ted Page summing up their views: "Vicious eyes. Steel-gray, like a cat. Greenish-gray. And they were steel." According to those Holway quotes, Charleston was funny and knew how to joke around and have a good time, but that always behind the fun were his cold, deadly eyes. Holway says that "there were three things Oscar Charleston excelled at on the baseball field: hitting, fielding, and fighting"; behind those eyes was someone who brooked no insult, who would fight rather than give an inchhe was "fearless enough to snatch the hood off a Ku Klux Klansman."

Charleston's youth in Indianapolis and his career in the army were fundamental to his development into a tough, resilient, and courageous man.

He was born in 1896 and, according to Holway, grew up on the streets of Indianapolis in an environment dominated by turf wars and gangs; even baseball games had their gang elements and could erupt into violence.

He joined the United States Army at the age of fifteen and served in the Philippines, leaving in 1915 as a hard, tough, fearless man with great selfdiscipline. The army apparently gave him the training he needed to face down his enemies and to become a leader. Charleston entered the Negro leagues when very young, but he was an intimidating man from his first game.

His career was filled with tough adventures and punctuated by the need to make split-second decisions involving criminals, Latin American dictators, and his fellow ballplayers who came from widely varied backgrounds. His life on the streets and in the army may have given him both the courage and the adaptability to survive a long professional playing career that lasted from 1915 to 1944. The leadership skills learned in the army served him well in his work as a manager; he was one of the best motivators around, could lick any tough guy on the team in a fight, and was a fine strategist.

"Whether at bat, in the field, or on the bases, Charleston played with savage determination," says Holway.

It was this implacable play that earned him the nickname "the black Ty Cobb," although, Holway points out, "knowledgeable writers scoffed. Cobb, they said, should be called 'the white Oscar Charleston.'" Charleston could hit as well as his white counterpart, could run the bases with the same explosive ferocity, play the outfield better, and slug with much more power. Yet, how were fans of major league clubs to understand Charleston's greatness if not through comparisons to players they had seen? How are readers today to understand the achievements of a man who is little understood save by comparisons to players we know better? Players of Charleston's day compared him to Cobb and to Ruth—better than both they said.

It is Charleston's greatness as an athlete that is the theme of "Oscar Charleston." His strength is attested to by numerous ballplayers. Pitchers would toss the ball to him when he played first base so that he would rub it between hands so strong that he would loosen the cover on the ball, making curve balls dip farther, sliders drop sharper, and other off speed pitches such as knuckle balls move more. It was also harder to hit a ball far if it had a loose cover. Charleston's strength was also apparent in his hitting: "He hit so hard, he'd knock gloves off you," says infielder Newt Allen. Holway documents his numerous home runs, but also points out that Charleston was more than a slugger. He was a skilled batsman who took advantage of an opposing team's weaknesses in the field, and—unlike Cobb— he was a selfless player who was willing to win a game with a bunt rather than insisting on trying to hit a home run.

He had strength combined with quickness; fast reflexes and a fast mind. He could, as a baserunner, dart quickly with the pitch and steal a base or advance an extra base on a hit. In the field, he reacted the moment a ball was hit, either charging in to snatch softly hit balls before they could plop to the grass or running away from the plate on balls hit over his head to make stretching catches in full flight.

One player remembers him racing across the outfield and slapping his gloved hand down on a line drive ball to snap it out of the air. Tris Speaker, the Major League star, was the only contemporary player thought to compare with Charleston as a center fielder. Charleston's tremendous reflexes were augmented by an alert and cunning mind. He knew that he hit the ball hard enough to frighten some infielders back to the shallow outfield, and he sometimes bunted for base hits against them. The infielders thus had a cruel quandary: if they played deep he bunted, and if they played close to home plate to pick up his bunts and have a better chance of throwing him out he might easily rocket a ball off their heads. It was Charleston's combination of cunning play, heady gamesmanship, relentless hitting, and savage base running that invited comparisons to Ty Cobb, who presented similar problems to opposing defenses.

Yet, Charleston was ahead of Cobb in important ways, and not just as a better fielder. He knew how to handle men, unlike the brutally intolerant Cobb. Cobb was known to deliberately injure a teammate if that teammate was receiving more press coverage than he; Cobb wanted to be number one. Charleston, every bit as driven as Cobb, wanted to win first and achieve individual honor second. He was a manager who excelled in getting out of his players what he wanted, and he taught them his intricate tricks of batting, baserunning, and fielding.

He was remembered by younger players as someone who would take the time to show them how to be better ballplayers, even after his days in the Negro leagues. He even urged major league teams to sign his players, and it was probably he who brought Hall of Fame catcher Roy Campanella to the attention of the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was a firm disciplinarian who expected his players to conduct themselves well, and even in his last years of life it was a foolish player who would challenge him. Holway notes with a tone of sadness that even though sportswriters and players knew of him most fans did not, and that his death of a heart attack and a fall down some stairs in 1954 went virtually unnoticed at the time.

Topics for Discussion

1. At one point, Charleston fights a player in the showers for having cursed him. Was this the right thing to do?

2. Was Charleston a good man? Do we learn enough about him to able to tell?

3. How does Charleston handle racism? Are his ways of dealing with racism good ones? Would they work today?

4. What does Charleston do that is courageous?

5. Holway makes a point of describing how Charleston performed against major leaguers. How well does Charleston do? What do we learn about him from the accounts of his performances against major leaguers?

6. Just how "major" is a league that will not let Charleston play in it because of his skin color?

7. Charleston played on Latin American teams as well as Negro league teams. Why did he play on Latin American teams? How was he treated in Latin America?

8. Why does Holway focus on the details and statistics of baseball games?

9. How did pitchers try to get Charleston out? Were any of their strategies successful?

10. What opportunities would Charleston have today that he did not have during his life?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. "Oscar Charleston" is filled with references to players and others involved in the Negro leagues. Choose one of these individuals, research his or her life, and then write a short biography of that person. You may wish to imitate Holway's style which emphasizes quotations from firsthand observers.

2. 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?

3. Major league players and Negro league players often played each other in exhibition games and during offseason barnstorming tours. Write an account of these meetings between the players and of their effect on the sport of baseball.

4. In Charleston's day, there were major league ballplayers such as Ty Cobb who wanted nothing to do with Negro players. Who were some of the other players? What were their reasons for not wanting to play against African-Americans?

5. Some major league managers and players in Charleston's era wanted to include African-Americans in the major leagues. Who were they? What did they try to do to open the major leagues to African-Americans?

6. Who are the best centerfielders ever? Explain why each player belongs among the best. How do they compare to Charleston? (Don't forget the Negro league players!)

7. Who was Ty Cobb? What sort of player was he? What about him invites comparison to Charleston?

8. Service in the United States Army seems to have been crucial in shaping the man Charleston became. Ballplayer George Scales said Charleston emerged from the army "tough as a wolf." What was army life like in the early 1910s? What would service in the Philippines in those days have been like? What would the service have taught Charleston? Do not forget that he served in a segregated regiment.

9. When the major leagues opened up for African-Americans, there were several fine African-American managers available, including Oscar Charleston. Why were none hired as major league managers? What work did they find in baseball, if any, including the minor leagues?

10. Charleston seems to have been in quite a few fights. How violent were the Negro leagues? What were the sources of the violence? How does the violence in the Negro leagues compare with violence in the National and American leagues during the same period?

For Further Reference

"Holway, John." In Contemporary Authors. Ed. Cynthia R. Fadool. Detroit: Gale Research, 1976. A brief summary of Holway's life and career.

"Negro Leagues Register." In The Baseball Encyclopedia. Rick Wolff, et al., ed. New York: Macmillan, ninth edition, 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

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 (1975), a collection of interviews.

Young readers as well as adults are likely to enjoy the down-to-earth stories told by players and others associated with the leagues. Blackball Stars (1988) and Josh and Satch (1991; see separate entry, Vol. 9) are Holway's other major books on the Negro leagues. Blackball Stars is a gathering of numerous rewritten articles Holway had published about Negro leaguers. It has short biographies of many of the players, owners, and executives involved in both the creation of the leagues and those involved in the playing of league games. Blackball Stars is somewhat earthier than Josh and Satch, featuring some off-color stories of ballplayers' romantic adventures. Josh and Satch focuses on the lives of Josh Gibson and Satchel Paige, two of baseball's most famous players.

It details how both men dealt with the indignities of segregation and racism, and how one declined into drug abuse and bitterness while the other overcame racial prejudice to become one of America's most beloved folk heroes.

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