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BREW CITY BLACK BALL:
MILWAUKEE AS MICROCOSM OF THE EARLY-TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK
BASEBALL EXPERIENCE

by

Ken Bartelt

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ABSTRACT
BREW CITY BLACK BALL:
MILWAUKEE AS MICROCOSM OF THE EARLY-TWENTIETH CENTURY BLACK
BASEBALL EXPERIENCE

by

Ken Bartelt

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2020
Under the Supervision of Professor Neal Pease

While historians have learned a great deal about the Black professional baseball played during organized baseball's Jim Crow era, there are many teams whose stories are yet to be told. Two of these teams, the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears, played their home games in Milwaukee, Wisconsin during the 1920s. By exploring the untold histories of the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears, much can be learned about overarching themes in early-twentieth century Black professional baseball. By analyzing newspaper coverage of the McCoy-Nolan Giants, an independent barnstorming team without Negro League affiliation, important truths about the experience of Black baseball on the road come to light. Similarly, examining newspaper coverage of the 1923 Milwaukee Bears, a short-lived franchise in the Negro National League, highlights many of the league's shortcomings, including franchise instability, scheduling inequities, the absence of Black ballpark ownership, and a general lack of cooperation between team owners. This analysis of the reasons behind the Bears' failure to finish a full season in Milwaukee also sheds light on themes in the development of Black Milwaukee in that the city's relatively small and working class Black population made Milwaukee a difficult market in which to attract fans.

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Introduction

During baseball's Jim Crow era, which began in the 1890s and lasted until the signing of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946, white organized baseball systematically barred Black ballplayers from the rosters of the white game's elite professional teams. In response to this drawing of the "color line" in America's national pastime, Black baseball entrepreneurs navigated the nation's segregated social and economic systems, capitalizing on a plenitude of talented African American ballplayers and the American consumer's voracious appetite for high-quality baseball, to establish their own, separate Black baseball enterprises. By the 1920s, Black baseball had established itself as one of the nation's most profitable Black institutions, with teams barnstorming East and West for gate receipts, sometimes even touring internationally to take advantage of Cuba's baseball craze and comparatively tolerant racial climate. The Black game's tenuous rise received its exclamation point when Black baseball magnates, spearheaded by Chicago's Andrew "Rube" Foster, met in Kansas City to establish the Negro National League (NNL) in February 1920. While the establishment of the NNL, Black baseball's first viable organized league, represented a tremendous achievement, many successful Black clubs continued to independently barnstorm the country, drawing huge crowds wherever they went, as Americans, both Black and white, turned over their hard-earned money to be entertained on a hot summer afternoon by some of the Black game's most talented ballplayers.

Although much ink has been spilled by historians who have navigated the labyrinth of primary source evidence left during baseball's Jim Crow period, many stories remain untold. While Black baseball historians like Robert Peterson, Mark Ribowsky, Neil Lanctot, and Michael Lomax, among others, have done tremendous research to illuminate the major themes of

the Black baseball experience, their narratives have tended to prioritize the histories of the Black game's better-known franchises, such as the Chicago American Giants, Kansas City Monarchs, and other clubs that were either comparatively successful on the playing field or operated in larger cities. This emphasis on Black baseball's elite teams, while in some ways justified, has left many franchises in a state of relative historical obscurity, thereby rendering our picture of the Black baseball experience incomplete. Although these comparatively under-analyzed franchises were often less successful or played in smaller markets than their elite counterparts, this was not always the case, and despite these factors, their stories are no less valuable to understanding how Black Americans experienced the national pastime during the years of the color line.

Two of these ball clubs that have largely evaded historical scholarship were based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin and played their games during the 1920s, in the middle of Black baseball's first golden age. One club, the McCoy-Nolan Giants, which at times also went by the names "Cream City Giants" and "Milwaukee Colored Giants," first took the field in 1922. The Milwaukee based McCoy-Nolans established a successful barnstorming network, initially touring the Midwest and eventually expanding their operations as far West as California and as far South as Cuba to play some of the top clubs in both Black and white semiprofessional baseball. While they never joined an organized Black professional league, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' story provides valuable insight into the experience of independent barnstorming, which even during the era of the Negro Leagues, served as the Black game's bread and butter. The Milwaukee Bears, a short-lived franchise in Rube Foster's NNL, represented Milwaukee's other high profile Black professional ball club during the 1920s. Although the Bears only played three months of the 1923 season in the Cream City, their failures are illustrative of the many hurdles that Negro League franchises faced during the 1920s. Together, the untold stories of these two

Milwaukee-based all-Black professional baseball teams, one an independent barnstorming club, and the other a member of an organized Negro League, represent a microcosm of the larger 1920s Black baseball experience. By telling the previously untold story of Milwaukee Black ball, a better understanding of major themes in the history of early-twentieth century Black baseball will be achieved.

As alluded to previously, Milwaukee's contributions to Black baseball history are largely absent from the historiography of the Black game. In his pioneering book, *Only the Ball Was White*, Robert Peterson broadly examines the development of Black baseball as a segregated institution born of necessity because of organized baseball's color line, romanticizing the Black game's biggest stars on the diamond and emphasizing the importance of organized Black leagues in the eventual reintegration of the Major Leagues by Jackie Robinson. Peterson makes casual reference to the existence of a Milwaukee franchise in the 1923 NNL circuit but does not discuss the team or its challenges with any specificity. The McCoy-Nolan Giants are completely absent from Peterson's narrative, and all major histories of Black baseball for that matter. However, Peterson's omission of the McCoy-Nolans is understandable, because his narrative largely prioritizes Negro League franchises over independent barnstormers after the formation of the NNL in 1920, despite the fact that many Black independent clubs continued to barnstorm without joining an organized Black league.

Like Peterson, Mark Ribowsky makes only passing reference to the Negro National League's failed 1923 Milwaukee franchise, using the Bears to illustrate the common theme of franchise instability that plagued Negro League baseball's early years. While Ribowsky provides no specific details on the 1923 Milwaukee Bears, his, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues* offers an admittedly unromanticized view of Black baseball history, analyzing more critically the

businessmen who capitalized on segregation to create a separate Black enterprise, which survived serious leadership flaws, only to be put out of business by the very integration of organized baseball that so many Black baseball stakeholders fought to achieve.

Neil Lanctot's, *Negro League Baseball*, while primarily analyzing the second incarnation of the NNL during the years 1933 to 1948, offers valuable insights into the administrative development of Black baseball. While the Milwaukee Bears and McCoy-Nolan Giants fall outside the chronological scope of Lanctot's narrative, his analysis of the Black game's economic history is of great value to this study. Of particular importance is Lanctot's discussion of the ways that the Great Depression negatively impacted the Black game, which helps to explain the reasons behind the McCoy-Nolan Giants eventual demise in the early 1930s.

In his two-volume series, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs*, Michael E. Lomax, like Neil Lanctot, analyzes Black baseball history through a business-centered lens. However, unlike Lanctot and most historians of Black professional baseball, Lomax does not portray African Americans as passive victims of the color line. Rather, Lomax presents Black baseball entrepreneurs as active participants, who shaped their own destinies through the creation Black-run baseball teams and institutions. While Lomax empowers the Black men that made professional Black baseball possible in novel ways, he concedes that Black baseball differed greatly from other separate Black institutions, like churches, in that baseball did not rely entirely on a Black clientele to operate. In fact, Lomax argues that from the start, until the Great Migration brought larger populations of African Americans to northern cities, Black baseball entrepreneurs targeted white consumers and formed vital business ties with well-connected whites in order to procure the necessary capital assets, especially playing fields, that made Black baseball enterprises viable.

Not only are the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears largely absent from the Black baseball historiography, they also receive similar treatment in existing scholarship on baseball in Milwaukee. Although baseball historians and contemporary fans often overlook Milwaukee, the city has a rich baseball tradition that dates to before the Civil War. For most of the city's history, baseball has occupied an important place in Milwaukee's cultural fabric. While the Cream City has been solidly "major league" since the arrival of the Milwaukee Brewers in 1970, Milwaukee has also been home to numerous successful minor league and semipro clubs, and Milwaukeeans have played the game themselves on countless factory, parochial, and municipal teams.

Both the Milwaukee Bears and the McCoy-Nolan Giants receive brief mention in Bob Buege's, *Borchert Field*, a history of the American Association Milwaukee Brewers' home park, where the Bears and the McCoy-Nolans also played. While Buege deserves credit for including the two Black clubs in the story of Borchert Field, Black baseball receives only a seven-page chapter in his 339-page book, with the McCoy-Nolans only getting a single paragraph in that chapter.

The Milwaukee Bears and McCoy-Nolan Giants are similarly snubbed in Brian Podoll's, *The Minor League Milwaukee Brewers*, which claims to "pay tribute to all levels of the city's professional baseball," before the relocation of the National League's Boston Braves to Milwaukee prior to the start of the 1953 season.¹ In his book, Podoll acknowledges the existence of the Milwaukee Bears in 1923, but does not analyze the team or their season in any substantive way. The McCoy-Nolan Giants are completely absent from Podoll's narrative, which is

¹ Brian Podoll, *The Minor League Milwaukee Brewers, 1859 – 1952* (McFarland & Company, Inc, 2003), 1.

somewhat surprising considering the wealth of evidence left in game reports published in Milwaukee's major newspapers and many smaller newspapers throughout the Midwest. In addition to adding the virtually untold histories of Milwaukee's top Black ball clubs during the 1920s to the existing scholarship on Black baseball, this study will also fill a glaring void in the history of Milwaukee baseball by adding some of its most significant African American contributions to the story.

In chapter one, "Birth of a Black Enterprise," baseball's development from an amateur pastime into a commercialized amusement will be strongly considered alongside the evolution of Black participation in the sport, from pickup games played on Southern plantations, to the first viable Black professional league. This chapter will seek to contextualize the Black baseball industry in which the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears came to operate by highlighting important innovations in the Black game that influenced the experiences of the two Milwaukee clubs. This chapter relies primarily on secondary source material, using the important work of baseball historians to create a foundation from which to analyze primary source evidence documenting the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears.

Chapter two, "Blackball Comes to the Brew City," will document the McCoy-Nolan Giants' inaugural 1922 season, drawing extensively from a wealth of newspaper evidence reporting on the team's games. Using Michael Lomax's essential criteria for a successful early-twentieth century Black baseball enterprise as a model, this chapter will analyze the McCoy-Nolan Giants early steps in their development into one of the country's elite all-Black barnstorming teams. This chapter will also use the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants as a medium through which to explore several overarching themes in the broader history of Black baseball, including the role of the controversial practice known as "clowning," in attracting white fans.

The 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants' season also provides many examples of the important ways that baseball's color line often became blurred outside of organized baseball, as Black teams formed a symbiotic relationship with white semipro clubs.

Chapter three, "Un-Bear-able," tells the story of the 1923 NNL Milwaukee Bears, paying special attention to the various factors that contributed to the team's failure and what those factors can tell us about both the early Negro Leagues and the development of Black Milwaukee. This chapter also draws primarily from newspaper sources to recreate the Milwaukee Bears 1923 season, but also relies heavily on the work of historian, Joe William Trotter Jr., to contextualize the Milwaukee Bears' season within the major themes shaping Milwaukee's Black community during the 1920s. As with Chapter two, this chapter uses the Milwaukee Bears as a vehicle through which to explore wider themes in the Black game, especially as they relate to league-play.

Finally, chapter four, "Back to Barnstorming," will explore the second incarnation of the McCoy-Nolan Giants, who in 1924 returned to the barnstorming trails after not playing in 1923 as the Bears competed in the NNL. This chapter will in many ways pick up where chapter two left off, continuing to trace the McCoy-Nolan Giants rise to the highest levels of independent Black professional baseball. From 1924 to 1932, the McCoy-Nolan Giants used a combination of athletic ability and comedic antics to expand their barnstorming network from their origins in the Midwest to as far away as California and Cuba. Again drawing from widespread newspaper coverage of the McCoy-Nolans' barnstorming tours, this chapter will return to the controversial theme of clowning and its role in the McCoy-Nolan Giants' success. This chapter will also turn to a number of oral histories conducted by historian, John B. Holway, with former Black

ballplayers to provide first-hand accounts of the challenges that the McCoy-Nolan Giants and other Black teams faced while traveling in Jim Crow America.

While certain sources such as business and financial records related to the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears have proven elusive, these deficiencies are more than made up for by the wealth of available newspaper sources documenting each ball club. Relying primarily on digital newspaper archives, this analysis makes use of over 500 separate newspaper clippings related to Milwaukee's two major all-Black ball clubs. Obviously, not every game report and box score made it into the chapters of this thesis, rather this large base of newspapers sources has been mined and analyzed for major themes and patterns in the stories of these two baseball teams. Despite this glut of newspaper evidence, the following analysis also admittedly suffers from the absence of available biographical information on the men who suited up to play ball for the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears. As a result, these men come across as little more than names in a box score. While this analysis focuses primarily on the stories of two baseball *teams*, it must be remembered that teams are made up of *individuals*, and each of these individuals experienced the events documented in this thesis differently. As the ensuing chapters represent the first-step into uncharted waters in telling the story of Black baseball in Milwaukee during the 1920s, my hope is that someday more can be learned about the individuals on these ball clubs, if and when more biographical sources become available.

Chapter 1

The Birth of a Black Enterprise: Early Black Baseball and the Drawing of the Color Line

Introduction

Prior to investigating Milwaukee's primary contributions to Black baseball history, a proper analysis of Black baseball's development before the 1920s must be achieved in order to place the untold stories of the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears in their proper context. First, baseball's evolution from its origins as a fraternal amateur pastime into a commercialized amusement must be considered. The efforts of sports entrepreneurs looking to capitalize on America's baseball craze in the second half of the nineteenth century drastically changed both who played the game and how they played it. While baseball's first businessmen were white, they were quickly followed by African Americans who displayed remarkable entrepreneurial tenacity in navigating America's racist dual economy to build their own baseball enterprises. Equally important are the larger societal forces that shaped Black participation and investment in the game. Although African Americans often played alongside whites in organized baseball's infancy, white America's drift towards Jim Crowism in the final decades of the nineteenth century forced Black baseball's leaders to chart a new path. While the segregation that plagued the nation presented many challenges for Black baseball players and entrepreneurs, this segregation also created an environment in which African Americans grew baseball into one of America's earliest and most successful Black-run businesses. Admittedly, the Black baseball business witnessed many failures before and after the 1920s, but the industry's leaders also pioneered many innovative business practices that influenced both Black and white professional sports for decades to come.

Baseball's Roots as an Amateur Pastime

Despite the persuasive efforts of the seven-man commission appointed by Albert Goodwill Spalding in 1905 to determine the origins of baseball, America's national pastime was not invented by Civil War hero Abner Doubleday at Cooperstown, New York in 1839. The Abner Doubleday creation myth, which has its biased roots in American exceptionalism, has been roundly debunked by legitimate scholars, who hold the consensus that modern baseball derived from various colonial bat-and-ball games, which were likely of English origin, although evidence exists that American Indians engaged in bat-and-ball games as well.¹ While many versions of primitive "base ball" existed throughout the United States as early as the late-eighteenth century, historians have traced the lineage of the modern sport to the game played by the New York Knickerbocker Base Ball Club, a fraternal organization formed in 1845 by young professional white men looking for reprieve after a long day of working in New York City.² Like most early ball clubs, the Knickerbockers came together for both athletic and social purposes. Historian, Benjamin Rader described the Knickerbocker Club's activities by writing:

While providing opportunities for playing baseball, it also scheduled suppers, formal balls, and other festive occasions in the off-season. Individuals could acquire membership only by election; the club conscientiously tried to keep out those who had a "quarrelsome disposition" or who did not fit well into the group for other reasons.³

As this description demonstrates, the Knickerbocker Club and other members of what historians call the "baseball fraternity" were largely defined by exclusivity. When one combines early baseball's exclusive nature with the prevailing racist attitudes of the nineteenth century, it becomes clear to see how baseball's color line was in the offing.

¹ Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (University of Illinois Press, 2018) 7.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

While baseball began as an exclusive, fraternal sport played by white men of the professional class in northeastern cities, some of the earliest African Americans to play baseball did so while enslaved in the South. Multiple interviews with formerly enslaved Blacks conducted in the 1930s as part of the New Deal's Federal Writers' Project contain the reminiscences of African Americans who remembered playing various versions of baseball during their childhoods on the plantation.⁴ Baseball can also be linked to slavery in another important way, as many baseball historians have identified America's Civil War, a conflict primarily fought over whether whites in the Southern Confederate States had the right to legally hold Black people in bondage, as a driving force behind the spread that resulted in baseball truly becoming "America's pastime." While many of the ball clubs playing the "Knickerbocker game" were forced to disband as their members went off to war, these ballplayers brought the game with them, introducing baseball to men serving in their units from different parts of the country.⁵ After the war, veterans from both the Union and the Confederacy returned home, bringing baseball with them and starting new clubs outside of the game's northeastern region of origin.

Although some of the earliest African Americans to play baseball were the enslaved, they certainly were not the only Blacks engaging in America's new pastime. By the 1860s, free Blacks living in major Northern cities like New York and Philadelphia began organizing their own baseball clubs. According to historian, James Overmyer, the first recorded game between two all-Black clubs occurred on November 15, 1859 near New York City and featured the Unknowns of Weeksville and the Henson Base Ball Club of Jamaica.⁶ While the formal and

⁴ James Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball*, ed. Lawrence D. Hogan (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic in coordination with the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, 2006), 5.

⁵ Rader, *Baseball*, 17.

⁶ Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory*, 6.

fraternal nature of early Black ball clubs largely mirrored that of their white counterparts, the African American men who organized baseball clubs were often motivated by issues unique to Black communities. Historian, Michael Lomax, argues that the roots of Black baseball's development as an organized entity are found in the tradition of African American mutual aid societies.⁷ Formed as early as the 1780s, mutual aid societies like Newport, Rhode Island's African Union Society or The Free African Society of Philadelphia, organized to coordinate mutual assistance for their Black members as well as to promote racial uplift through Black self-determination.⁸ In order to increase membership, these Black mutual aid societies often established themselves as centers of religious worship, secular fraternity, and financial aid.⁹ Additionally, the leaders of mutual aid societies sometimes organized baseball clubs in part because of the game's popularity with the white middle class. Lomax summarizes baseball's appeal to nineteenth century Black community organizers by writing:

At a time when black leaders stressed the need for self-improvement and moral respectability, and attempted to establish an elite social status for themselves within the black community, the new national pastime served to advance high moral character and promote good health habits among the Afro-American populace. In other words, baseball would be a catalyst to "elevate the race."¹⁰

For the organizers of early Black ball clubs, baseball's importance transcended that of a simple game. To these Black men, the national pastime represented an opportunity to both improve the Black community from within, as well as a means towards gaining greater acceptance by mainstream white American society.

⁷ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901: Operating by Any Means Necessary* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 10.

⁸ *Ibid*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 13.

The Pythians of Philadelphia

One of the most prominent, and certainly most well-documented, of these early Black baseball clubs were the Pythians of Philadelphia. Organized in the 1860s, the Pythians derived their name from the Black Knights of Pythias lodge, an African American fraternal organization in which multiple Pythians players held membership.¹¹ As with the New York Knickerbockers and most early white clubs, the Pythians were made up of professional men, employed as artisans, small businessmen, or clerks.¹² In fact, most members of the Pythians were able to attain these more desirable professions in part because of the relative privileges they received as people of mixed-race ancestry. Historians believe that as many as 70 percent of Pythians' members were mixed-race, which becomes particularly significant when comparing that figure to America's total Black population at the time, in which only around 25 percent had mixed-race ancestry.¹³ The Pythians undoubtedly benefitted from "colorism," a social force related to racism, in which people of color who possess lighter skin pigmentation receive greater privileges compared to their darker skinned peers.

Perhaps aided by the comparatively lighter skin color and relatively elite occupational status of their ballplayers, the Pythians formed close relationships with Philadelphia's white amateur ball clubs, such as the Philadelphia Athletics. These relationships set the stage for the Pythians to make history on September 3, 1869, when they became the first organized Black team to play against an organized white club.¹⁴ While the Pythians were defeated 44-23 by the all-white Olympic Club in this first recorded interracial baseball game, their exhibition allowed

¹¹ Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory*, 13.

¹² Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 17.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory*, 16.

them to gain greater recognition from the white sporting community.¹⁵ It did not take long after their defeat to the Olympics for the Pythians to make more baseball history; on September 16, 1869, the Pythians defeated the all-white City Items club by a 27-17 score, becoming the first Black team to defeat a white team on the baseball diamond.¹⁶

From the beginning, the Pythians' captain, Octavius Catto, had an ambitious vision for his ball club. Catto intended to integrate his Pythians within the framework of the championship system established by white baseball clubs in the 1860s.¹⁷ In order to become "champion" during this period, the challenging club would have to defeat the reigning champion twice in a best-two-out-of-three series played during the same season.¹⁸ Catto believed that win or lose, if the Pythians were able to compete with white club's for the title of baseball "champion," then the status of Blacks across the country would be elevated.¹⁹

Unfortunately for Catto and the Pythians, their mission to use baseball as a vehicle of racial integration reached a major obstacle in 1867 when they sought membership in the all-white Pennsylvania Association of Amateur Base Ball Players (PAABBP). As baseball's governing body for the state of Pennsylvania, the PAABBP standardized rules, regulated competition, sanctioned championships, and sent delegates to national meetings of the National Association of Base Ball Players (NABBP).²⁰ When the Pythians formally applied for PAABBP membership at the association's 1867 convention, D. D. Domer, the convention's secretary, who knew in advance that a majority of PAABBP delegates planned to vote against admittance of the

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid, 21.

²⁰ Ibid, 22.

Pythians because of their race, advised Pythians' delegate, Raymond Burr, to withdraw the club's application rather than have it formally recorded that the Pythians were blackballed.²¹ Although Burr initially resisted Domer's plea that the Pythians withdraw their application, he eventually caved, sparing the PAABBP's delegates from having to formally reject the Pythian's on account of their racist attitudes.²² Despite their talents, the Pythians of Philadelphia, the first Black ball club to play against and defeat a white baseball team, also became the first victims of a color line in the national pastime.

Just two months after the delegates of the PAABBP Jim Crowed the Pythians, the NABBP drew baseball's first formal color line. Established in 1858 by the New York Knickerbockers and other prominent clubs from the New York area, the NABBP served as baseball's first national governing body.²³ In order to join the NABBP, clubs needed at least eighteen members; they also were required to submit a formal application for membership before the annual convention so that the club's character could be investigated before delegates voted on their admission.²⁴ Each club with membership in the NABBP was granted two delegates and allowed two votes.²⁵ Member clubs were also expected to pay annual dues to the NABBP, which originated at five dollars, but were gradually lowered to fifty cents, as baseball's popularity grew with men in lower socioeconomic classes and the NABBP sought to expand its reach throughout the country.²⁶ Despite efforts to open their organization up to more clubs from different geographic regions and socioeconomic backgrounds, the NABBP chose to embody the segregationist racism of post-Civil War America. In December 1867, the NABBP officially

²¹ Ibid, 23.

²² Ibid, 24.

²³ Rader, *Baseball*, 25.

²⁴ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 22.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

banned Black clubs from attaining membership in the organization, stating, “If colored clubs were admitted, there would be in all probability some division of feeling, whereas, by excluding them no injury could result to anyone.”²⁷

The Commercialization of Baseball

At the same time that the NABBP implemented its ban on Black ballplayers, the amateur organization experienced an even more pressing existential crisis – the commercialization of baseball. The national pastime’s evolution into a commercial amusement was largely spurred by the entrepreneurial efforts of wealthy men looking to capitalize on the nation’s growing baseball craze. On May 15, 1862, William H. Cammeyer opened Union Grounds in Brooklyn, baseball’s first enclosed ballpark. The Union Grounds allowed Cammeyer to charge fans an admission fee in order to see games, sparking a baseball enclosure movement across the country. In the years after the Civil War, baseball entrepreneurs across the United States built their own enclosed ballparks and attracted the most talented teams to play in their venues in exchange for payment.²⁸ According to historian, Benjamin Rader, fans during the early enclosure period paid around ten cents to see a typical game, while sometimes paying as much as twenty-five or fifty cents for admission to premier matchups and championship games.²⁹

The implementation of admission fees at enclosed ballparks fundamentally changed the ways that baseball clubs financed their operations, as top teams began to prioritize the money obtained from ticket sales over the funds brought in via membership dues.³⁰ In order to maximize the amount of money they could earn, top ball clubs began to travel more often and play a

²⁷ Rader, *Baseball*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 20.

²⁹ *Ibid*.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

greater number of games against competition from outside their home city. The desire to be booked for games in enclosed ballparks also altered the ways in which club members participated in games, as top clubs began to prioritize “first nines” made up of the team’s most talented players, emphasizing competitiveness over fraternal leisure. This new focus on competitiveness further pushed baseball towards professionalism, as higher-skilled ballplayers began to receive “subsidies,” often in the form of a paying job from someone connected with a ball club, in exchange for playing for that club’s baseball team.³¹ These subsidies gave rise to a practice known as “revolving,” whereby talented ballplayers began to leave their local ball clubs in order to market their services to the teams that offered the most lucrative subsidies.³² As a result of the revolving brought on by commercialized baseball, the look and feel of the game changed, as it became less common for the rosters of a city’s top teams to include local players. Baseball’s commercialization also sounded the death knell for many of the formal, fraternal traditions that characterized the early game. Such practices as awarding the game ball to the winning club after a game and the home team hosting a feast for the visitors became increasingly rare.³³

Although the NABBP explicitly forbade the paying of any ballplayers and opposed such practices as revolving, the association could not halt the game’s increasingly rapid commercialization and the professionalism that accompanied these changes. In 1869, the Cincinnati Red Stockings became the first baseball team to field an entirely professional lineup, dominating their non-professional competition by going undefeated in their first season. The overwhelming success of the Red Stocking’s 1869 season bestowed national renown upon

³¹ Ibid, 26.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

Cincinnati in a way that filled cities across the United States with envy.³⁴ As rival cities clamored to establish their own representative professional leagues to compete with Cincinnati, the NABBP breathed its final breaths. In 1870, two-thirds of the delegates to the annual NABBP convention voted against a resolution condemning the practice of publicly employing men to play baseball.³⁵ A year later, the amateur NABBP saw itself replaced by a new professional organization called the National Association of Professional Base Ball Players (NAPBBP). Despite serious philosophical differences, the NABBP and NAPBBP certainly agreed on one thing, the exclusion of Black teams and players. According to historian, Robert Peterson, although the NAPBBP never had a written rule against Black membership, “it did not need one, for there existed a ‘gentleman’s agreement’ barring Negroes from this first professional league and from its successor, the National League.”³⁶ From the beginning, operators of professional baseball clubs understood the color line to be an unquestioned fact of their existence so strongly that no written rule was required.

The systematic exclusion of African Americans from baseball, occurring simultaneously alongside the sport’s rapid professionalization, heavily influenced the development of the Black game at the end of the nineteenth century. In describing the impact of excluding Blacks from the newly professionalized game, Michael Lomax wrote, “What the ban meant for black clubs was that instead of growth and commercial development occurring within the mainstream of the baseball world, they would evolve on its outskirts.”³⁷ Despite their exclusion from professional baseball’s earliest organizations, Black baseball clubs continued to operate and adapt to the

³⁴ Ibid, 31.

³⁵ Ibid, 28.

³⁶ Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 17.

³⁷ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 27.

game's new commercial climate. Even the Pythians of Philadelphia embraced commercialized baseball, recruiting talented Black players like John Cannon and George Brown away from their local clubs, seeking competitiveness at the expense of fraternal exclusivity, just as the top white clubs had done.³⁸ As Black ball clubs commercialized and professionalized alongside, but separate from their white counterparts, operators of both Black and white teams sought to capitalize on the white baseball-consuming public's growing intrigue in the ability of Black teams to hold their own in competitions against white clubs. With money to be made in scheduling interracial exhibitions, an important symbiotic relationship formed between white and Black clubs, a relationship that insured the profitability of Black professional baseball during its infancy.

Despite America's history of racism and slavery, the nation's strong belief in private property rights applied even to African Americans, opening the door to Black entrepreneurship. African American rights to property ownership were established in seventeenth century colonial America and were maintained by the founding fathers during the eighteenth century, despite widespread campaigns to suppress these property rights.³⁹ These basic property rights, however tenuous and regionally challenged, allowed African Americans to establish business enterprises before the Civil War in ways that greatly contributed to their ability to invest in professional baseball after the war.

Although Black entrepreneurs, like white entrepreneurs, used their property rights to invest in professional baseball, these African American businessmen faced economic challenges unique to the oppression experienced by Blacks living in an American society built on a history

³⁸ Ibid, 28.

³⁹ Ibid, 33.

of structural white supremacy. Despite the establishment of Black property rights during the colonial period, a litany of laws and customs, which predated the Civil War, worked together to obstruct Black access to the acquisition and development of property, laying the foundation for what many historians consider Black baseball's "Achilles heel," the absence of ballpark ownership. Michael Lomax, explained the effects of structural limits on Black access to wealth and property by writing:

One cannot deny that white sports entrepreneurs had a considerable advantage over blacks in capitalizing upon the baseball craze because the opportunity favored them in gaining access to property. This fact, more than anything else, resulted in black baseball entrepreneurs becoming reliant upon whites to use their ballparks to play games. Throughout history, only a handful of Afro-Americans owned their own ballparks.⁴⁰

As will be demonstrated later in this analysis, the near white monopoly on ownership of enclosed ballparks contributed to many of the struggles that the Negro Leagues faced throughout their history, including the demise of the fledgling Milwaukee Bears during the 1923 season.

By the 1880s, all-Black professional baseball teams began to thrive due to a series of important social and economic changes. As with the amateur Pythians, Black professional baseball largely benefitted from the establishment of an elite class of mixed-race Blacks within the larger African American community. These comparatively privileged light-skinned Blacks often created important relationships with wealthy whites who could provide the necessary capital to finance a Black ball club.⁴¹ The professional Black game also benefitted from dramatic changes in the way that American businesses viewed the national pastime, as corporations began to sponsor teams of employees, expanding working class interest in the game and creating new

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid, 47.

semiprofessional competition for Black teams to play against.⁴² Most importantly, Black baseball entrepreneurs took initiative to make their ventures possible by recruiting talented Black ballplayers and forming business partnerships with well-connected whites to procure necessary capital assets. For most early professional Black baseball clubs, the typical division of principal assets included Black control of the franchise, and the salaried players (workforce), while whites overwhelmingly controlled the playing facilities.⁴³ Although these business relationships between elite mixed-race Blacks and wealthy whites were almost always paternalistic, they were necessary to make professional Black baseball work within America's race-based dual economy.

The Original Cuban Giants

Perhaps the most famous of these early Black professional team was the original Cuban Giants. According to Black baseball's first historian, Sol White, who in 1907 published his *History of Colored Base Ball*, Frank P. Thompson, head-waiter of Babylon, New York's Argyle Hotel, established the ball club that eventually became the Cuban Giants in 1885 by recruiting the best ballplayers from his all-Black waiting staff.⁴⁴ However, later scholarship has shown that Thompson initially assembled his team in his hometown of Philadelphia, first naming the club the Keystone Athletics and then bringing his players with him to Babylon after taking his job at the Argyle Hotel to work under him as waiters.⁴⁵ Thompson primarily hired his players as waiters at the Argyle so that he could use them to stage baseball games as entertainment for the hotel's white guests.⁴⁶

⁴² Ibid, 49.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Sol White in *Sol White's History of Colored Base Ball, with Other Documents on the Early Black Game, 1886 – 1936*, ed. Jerry Malloy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 8.

⁴⁵ Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory*, 22.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

By embracing cooperative enterprise, a business concept that epitomized nineteenth century Black entrepreneurship, Frank P. Thompson established a series of business relationships which set his ballclub on a path towards becoming Black baseball's version of the Cincinnati Red Stockings.⁴⁷ By the end of the summer of 1885, Thompson merged his Athletics with two other prominent Black teams to assemble the most talented players from each into a single super team. First, Thompson joined forces with Stanislaus Kostka "S.K." Govern, who brought himself and three additional top players from his Manhattans club over to Thompson's already talented squad.⁴⁸ Thompson's relationship with Govern began in conjunction with another example of late-nineteenth century Black organizing, when in 1884, Thompson joined Govern's Hotel Brotherhood U.S.A., a union for Black hotel employees seeking to address salary inequities between white and Black waiters and bellhops.⁴⁹ Having established a partnership with S.K. Govern, Thompson next sought to secure a business relationship with a wealthy financial backer who possessed experience as a baseball booking agent and road manager. Thompson and Govern found their man in the form of John F. Lang, a white investor from Philadelphia attracted to the business potential of funding a Black team that included players as talented as those from Thompson's Athletics and Govern's Manhattans.⁵⁰ According to Sol White, Lang helped put the finishing touches on Thompson's emerging super team by signing three of the best players from the Orions of Philadelphia, another top Black club.⁵¹ White called Lang's recruitment of the Orions' players, "one of the most important and valuable acts in the history of colored base ball,"

⁴⁷ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 52.

⁴⁸ Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory*, 23.

⁴⁹ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ White, *Sol White's History of Colored Base Ball, with Other Documents on the Early Black Game, 1886 – 1936*, 8.

adding that, “it made the boys from Babylon the strongest independent team in the East.”⁵²

White also understood that the novelty of an all-Black team as talented as Thompson’s club represented a valuable asset that would attract the interest of white fans.⁵³

In May 1886, Thompson’s club, now known as the Cuban Giants, came under the control of businessmen, Walter Cook and John M. Bright, establishing their home grounds in Trenton, New Jersey.⁵⁴ The club’s greatest contribution to the development of the Black game came in the form of the scheduling method that they pioneered known as the booking system. Cuban Giants’ manager, S.K. Govern, perfected the club’s booking system by attracting top competition with offers of either forty percent of all gate receipts or a guaranteed share that usually totaled around \$250.⁵⁵ Operating year-round, the Cuban Giants were able to book games with a wide array of competition, including major and minor league clubs, semipro teams, and college teams, thereby maximizing their potential for profit. This booking system became the model for many successful independent Black professional clubs to follow, including Milwaukee’s McCoy-Nolan Giants, and it provided a lucrative alternative to logistically challenging league-play.

Black Players in White Leagues

While late-nineteenth century Black baseball entrepreneurs established their own all-Black professional clubs, Black ballplayers also found their way onto the rosters of white professional teams. According to historians, James Overmyer and Lawrence Hogan, at least 33 Black ballplayers played on teams in organized white baseball between 1878 and 1899.⁵⁶

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs 1860 – 1901*, 54.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 55.

⁵⁶ James Overmyer and Lawrence D. Hogan, “Before Jim Crow,” in *Shades of Glory*, 53.

Historian, Robert Peterson, cites another figure, claiming that at least 60 Black players appeared in white leagues before 1900.⁵⁷ However, Overmyer and Hogan also claim that their statistic does not include all-Black teams that were sometimes brought in to represent cities in otherwise all-white leagues, implying that the actual number of Blacks playing games in white leagues during the late-nineteenth century was likely much larger than the 33 uncovered in their research and perhaps falls closer to the 60 cited by Peterson.⁵⁸ Regardless of the exact number of Black ballplayers in white baseball, historians agree that professional baseball's pre-twentieth century color line was far more permeable than its twentieth century scion.

In 1878, John W. "Bud" Fowler became the first Black ballplayer to appear in an otherwise white professional league when he took the field for teams in Lynn and Worcester, Massachusetts.⁵⁹ Born as John Jackson in 1858, Fowler played in 13 different white minor leagues over an 18-year span, also appearing for a number of independent clubs during his lengthy career.⁶⁰ Although Bud Fowler played for many white professional teams, none of these white clubs were considered "major league." The distinction of being the first Black ballplayer to play in a professional major league goes to Moses Fleetwood Walker.⁶¹ A well-rounded scholar, Walker played varsity collegiate baseball as a catcher at Oberlin College and the University of Michigan from 1881 to 1883.⁶² After college, Walker became a professional baseball player for the 1883 season, joining one of his white Oberlin teammates on the roster of the minor league Northwestern League's Toledo club.⁶³ In 1884, Walker became the first Black major-leaguer

⁵⁷ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 18.

⁵⁸ Overmyer and Hogan, "Before Jim Crow," in *Shades of Glory*, 53.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 50.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*.

⁶¹ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 21.

⁶² *Ibid*.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 22.

when his Toledo club joined the American Association.⁶⁴ In July, Welday Walker, Moses Fleetwood Walker's younger brother, joined his older brother on the Toledo club, becoming the second Black ballplayer in a major league.⁶⁵

Although the 1884 season featured two Black players on a major league club, the Walker brothers did not receive their brief stints as major-leaguers because of the owners' desire to integrate the major leagues. Rather, the Toledo club and Moses Fleetwood Walker were absorbed into the American Association as part of baseball's 1884 Union war.⁶⁶ During the 1880s, two competing major leagues were formed to challenge the supremacy of the National League, igniting a series of "baseball wars" over players, fans, and operational territory. The first challenge to the National League's monopoly on big league baseball came in 1882, when a contingent of baseball entrepreneurs led by sportswriters Alfred H. Spink and Oliver P. Caylor along with Christopher Von der Ahe, a German immigrant living in St. Louis, established the American Association of Base Ball Clubs.⁶⁷ Looking to capitalize on America's ballooning industrial working class and growing European immigrant population, the American Association differentiated their product from that offered by the staunchly Victorian National League. Unlike the National League, the American Association proudly sold beer at its ball parks, played games on Sundays, and charged only twenty-five cents for a ticket.⁶⁸ Recognizing the legitimate threat that the American Association posed to the National League's status as the country's only major league, National League president Abraham G. Mills orchestrated a tripartite peace treaty with the American Association and the Northwestern League, a minor league, at the end of the 1882

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Overmyer and Hogan, "Before Jim Crow," in *Shades of Glory*, 55.

⁶⁶ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 45.

⁶⁷ Rader, *Baseball*, 54.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

season.⁶⁹ A core piece of the 1882 tripartite treaty was the mutual recognition of the reserve clause between the three leagues, meaning that club owners would not sign players that were under contract with any club in the other two leagues in order to keep salaries artificially low and prevent player raiding.⁷⁰ The three leagues also agreed to respect each league's exclusive territorial rights, so as not to oversaturate a single city's baseball market.⁷¹

While the National League and American Association achieved relative peace in 1882, another challenger appeared in 1884 to threaten the organized baseball establishment. Founded and financed by St. Louis millionaire, Henry V. Lucas, the Union Association emerged as a third major league, looking to capitalize on the growing resentment of major league players towards the frugal and conspiratorial owners of the National League and American Association.⁷² In order to snuff out the Union Association's threat, the National League directed organized baseball to wage war on the fledgling Union Association through direct market competition and threats of player raids.⁷³ One tactic implemented by organized baseball in their war on the Union Association involved the American Association expanding from eight clubs to twelve, in an effort to expand their share of the major league baseball market.⁷⁴ It was within this context that the American Association added the Northwestern League's Toledo club to their circuit, opening the door for Moses Fleetwood Walker to become baseball's first Black major-leaguer. While the American Association's expansion aided in the quick demise of the Union Association, the ill-advised expansion also resulted in the weakening of the American Association itself, as increased travel expenses, diminished competitive balance, and decreased revenue at the gate

⁶⁹ Ibid, 55.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid, 56.

⁷³ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 43.

⁷⁴ Overmyer and Hogan, "Before Jim Crow," in *Shades of Glory*, 54.

hurt the American Association's profitability.⁷⁵ These challenges brought on by expansion caused the American Association's new clubs, including Toledo, to crumble under mounting economic pressure; by the end of the 1884 season the American Association shrank back to eight teams, ending the brief major league careers of Moses Fleetwood Walker and his brother Welday.⁷⁶

The Page Fence Giants

One of the most important entrepreneurial innovations in the development of Black professional baseball came in the form of the barnstorming model established by the Page Fence Giants in 1894. As this analysis will explore in later chapters, it was the corporate-sponsored barnstorming model pioneered by the Page Fence Giants that Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants followed throughout the 1920s. Prior to exploring the Page Fence Giants' innovations in Black barnstorming, a more concrete understanding of the term "barnstorming" must be achieved. According to historian, Michael Harkness-Roberto, the practice of barnstorming has largely avoided systematic study and scholars lack even a general agreement on the meaning of the term.⁷⁷ Despite the absence of scholarly consensus, in its most basic terms, barnstorming refers to the practice of traveling around a particular area to appear in exhibition sports events.⁷⁸ While barnstorming was far from unique to Black baseball, the practice played a particularly important role in the highest levels of the African American game. Harkness-Roberto describes this significance in the following way:

⁷⁵ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 44.

⁷⁶ Overmyer and Hogan, "Before Jim Crow," in *Shades of Glory*, 55.

⁷⁷ Michael Harkness-Roberto, "Barnstorming: The Monarchs, the House of David, and the Colored House of David," *Black Ball* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 60.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Many teams survived between league games by playing exhibition games against any challengers, black or white, pro or amateur. Some teams never really belonged to any league structure and simply traveled the country looking for chances to play America's pastime. These teams were different from the Kansas City Monarchs or the Indianapolis Clowns who often belonged to one of the Negro Leagues and occasionally barnstormed.⁷⁹

As Harkness-Roberto argues, barnstorming represented an essential part of the operation of most elite professional Black ball clubs whether they belonged to an organized Negro League or operated independently.

The origins of the Page Fence Giants begin with Bud Fowler, the same man who historians regard as the first Black ballplayer to appear in a professional white league. In 1894, while playing with a white independent league in Findlay, Ohio, Fowler established the blueprints for what would become one of the most influential and profitable innovations in the business of Black baseball. Fowler planned to team up with his only Black teammate, Grant "Homerun" Johnson, to assemble an all-Black team that would travel the country in a private railroad car, giving street parades before each game to attract fan attention.⁸⁰ Fowler and Johnson originally planned to call their club the "Findlay Colored Western Giants," but the two men struggled to find financial backing for the project.⁸¹ However, their situation changed when white businessman, J. Wallace Page, the president of the Page Woven Wire Fence Company in Adrian, Michigan decided to invest in Fowler and Johnson's club.⁸² In exchange for financial backing, Fowler and Johnson agreed to rename their team the Page Fence Giants, providing valuable advertising for Page's company, whose name became emblazoned on the player's uniforms as they traveled the country.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 60-61.

⁸⁰ Michael Lomax and Lawrence D. Hogan, "The Great Independents," in *Shades of Glory*, 73.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

The Page Fence Giants' innovations in market promotion were not limited to their relationship with the Page Woven Wire Fence Company. The club also signed a sponsorship agreement with the Monarch Bicycle Company of Massachusetts, riding Monarch bicycles in the pregame parades that the club organized at each stop in their barnstorming tour in order to drum up fan support and boost ticket sales.⁸³ The Monarch Bicycle deal demonstrated Bud Fowler's entrepreneurial prowess, as he and the other organizers of the Page Fence Giants moved to capitalize on the bicycle boom that swept the nation from 1889 to 1895.⁸⁴ These deals made with the Page Woven Wire Fence Company and Monarch Bicycle were strictly sponsorship deals, and neither company shared in the team's baseball profits.⁸⁵ In describing the significance of the Page Fence Giants to developments in the relationship between product marketing and sports entertainment, Michael Lomax wrote the following:

Fowler's vision combined the national pastime with a wire company and a bicycle firm, developing a marketing plan commonly used by the modern sports industry: brand equity, the value added to product by virtue of name recognition. Moreover, Fowler's scheme also exemplified a crude form of integrated marketing – the culmination of advertising, public relations, and promotion collectively and systematically used to market a product or service. With the Giants playing in middle-size cities – such as Grand Rapid, Michigan, and Oshkosh, Wisconsin – the Page club marketed their sponsors' products to expand their market potential. This integrated marketing scheme of product promotion, entertainment, and competitive baseball was ahead of its time in the sporting world.⁸⁶

As Lomax asserts in this excerpt, the marketing innovations established by the Page Fence Giants at the end of the nineteenth century not only influenced the business of Black baseball, they also served as a model to be followed by the entire professional sports industry, Black and white.

⁸³ Ibid, 73.

⁸⁴ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 135.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 137.

In addition to their innovative market promotion sponsorships, the Page Fence Giants also pioneered in establishing a travel model that transformed the experience of Black professional baseball players while on the road. By traveling in their own private railroad car, complete with a bathroom, kitchen, and a combined dining-sitting-sleeping room, large enough to accommodate twenty people, the Page Fence Giants were able to avoid the difficult task of finding hotel lodgings for Black men in Jim Crow America.⁸⁷ During this period, African Americans often traveled for entire nights without finding a hotel that accommodated Blacks, creating tremendous challenges for Black baseball teams looking to travel into heavily segregated parts of the country. The Page Fence Giants even hired their own porter and cook to travel with the club, caring for both the players and the railroad car.⁸⁸ The Page Fence Giants' many innovations in the business of Black professional baseball profoundly impacted the operating structure of future Black clubs, including Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants.

The Drawing of the Color Line

Despite the fact that prior to 1900 many talented Black ballplayers competed in all-white leagues, and that Black baseball entrepreneurs operated within the framework of America's racist dual economy to build their own viable baseball businesses, organized baseball opted to mirror the rest of the country by drawing the color line. Like most aspects of American life in the final decades of the nineteenth century, the white Americans holding baseball's reins of power steered the game in the direction of Jim Crowism, rather than embrace the possibilities of an interracial democratic society. While racial tensions existed throughout baseball's history, the 1887 season represented a pivotal point in organized baseball's descent into full-on segregation,

⁸⁷ Ibid, 136.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

as a series of incidents occurred which deepened the trenches of racial division in the national pastime. In June, Syracuse Stars pitcher, Douglas Crothers, earned a suspension for refusing to sit in the team picture with Black teammate, Robert Higgins. When Crothers learned of his suspension, he promptly vented his outrage by punching his manager in the face.⁸⁹ While Crothers was to be suspended for a month, his racism-fueled tantrum proved effective, as he only sat out eight days.⁹⁰

A month later, the International League established professional baseball's first *written* color line.⁹¹ The ban followed a July meeting organized by league directors in which players were allowed to voice their grievances over the presence of Black players in the league.⁹² In reporting on the International League's meeting, *Sporting Life* published the following, "Several representatives declared that many of the best players in the League were anxious to leave on account of the colored element, and the board finally directed Secretary White to approve no more contracts with colored men."⁹³ Although the five Black men actively playing in the International League were not removed from their rosters, the league's owners made a commitment not to sign any more Black players to International League contracts in the future.⁹⁴

One of the top clubs in the National League also drew the color line in July 1887, when Adrian Constantine "Cap" Anson, the manager of the Chicago White Stockings, kept his team from taking the field for an exhibition game against the Newark Little Giants, because Newark planned to start the great Black pitcher, George Stovey.⁹⁵ Anson got his way, as the Little Giants

⁸⁹ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 28.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *Sporting Life*, in Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 28.

⁹⁴ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 28.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 29.

replaced Stovey with a white pitcher to prevent the cancellation of the game.⁹⁶ The St. Louis Browns of the American Association followed Anson's segregationist precedent later in the 1887 season when they refused to play in an exhibition game against the all-Black Cuban Giants, disappointing the 7,000 fans that had already filled the ballpark.⁹⁷ The night prior to the game, eight Browns players drafted a telegram for team owner, Christopher Von der Ahe, claiming that they, "do not agree to play against negros tomorrow," and that they would, "cheerfully play against white people at any time."⁹⁸ Of the eight signatories, five grew up North of the Mason-Dixon Line, further indicating that American racism had no borders.⁹⁹ The many instances of racial discrimination during the Summer of 1887 were a sign of Jim Crow's strangle hold on the country and its national pastime; by 1898 there were no more Black ballplayers in white leagues, and there would not be again until 1947.

The Birth of a Viable Black League

In addition to the increasingly common displays of segregationist racism in white baseball, the 1887 season also included Black baseball's first attempt at establishing an organized league made up of Black professional teams. In November 1886, Walter S. Brown, a Black newsstand manager in Pittsburgh, announced that six ball clubs were committed to joining his newly concocted Black professional league.¹⁰⁰ While Brown sought to add the Cuban Giants, Black baseball's top professional team, to his circuit, the club refused to join the league, hurting its credibility.¹⁰¹ In 1887, Brown's league, formally called the National League of Colored Base

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 31.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 63.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Ball Players (NCL), planned to play an experimental season with six cities – New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Louisville – split into two divisions.¹⁰² The NCL ran into financial problems from the get-go; in May, the league’s Boston franchise became stranded in Louisville because rain had washed out eight days of their fifteen-day barnstorming tour, depriving the club of necessary income from ticket-sales.¹⁰³ The NCL’s entire schedule suffered from the incident, as the Boston club’s inability to fulfil travel obligations led to the cancellation of multiple games.

By late May, only three NCL clubs remained in business, forcing Walter Brown to disband the league, thereby ending Black baseball’s first experiment in organizing league-play.¹⁰⁴ While a number of factors contributed to the NCL’s quick demise, Brown cited two primary reasons for his league’s failure. First, the NCL suffered from low fan turnout, especially in markets that also had white league teams, which created competition for the dollars of baseball fans in cities like Baltimore.¹⁰⁵ Second, Brown conceded that the NCL was negatively impacted by President Grover Cleveland’s 1887 Interstate Commerce Act, which made railroad travel too expensive for the fledgling league.¹⁰⁶ Despite its failures, the 1887 NCL represented an important milestone in Black baseball’s development. The NCL brought valuable publicity to the Black baseball world, as newspapers throughout North America sporadically reported on the league.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Ibid, 68.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 69.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 69-70.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 68.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 70.

New attempts at the formation of Black baseball leagues were made in the beginning of the twentieth century with varying levels of success. In 1906, the International League of Independent Professional Base Ball Clubs played a single season with two all-white teams and four all-Black teams.¹⁰⁸ Then in 1910, Black baseball leaders tried and failed to construct a league with a contract system modeled after the white Major Leagues.¹⁰⁹ The first successful Black league finally arrived in 1920, when Chicago's Rube Foster and six other Black baseball entrepreneurs met in Kansas City to form the Negro National League (NNL).¹¹⁰

Conclusion

From the nineteenth to the early-twentieth century, baseball evolved from an amateur pastime played by professional-class white men in northeastern cities into a commercialized amusement worthy of its title as, "America's national pastime." As baseball evolved, so did Black participation in the sport. African American engaged in baseball almost from the beginning, playing both while enslaved in the South and as members of their own baseball fraternities in northern cities like Philadelphia. Some of these Black ballplayers were so talented, that they earned spots on rosters in white organized baseball. Still others continued to play on highly competitive all-Black teams. When organized white baseball drew the color line in the 1890s, Black baseball leaders continued to develop separate baseball enterprises within America's racist dual economy. The Black baseball entrepreneurs behind the Cuban Giants, Page Fence Giants, NNL, and many more all-Black professional baseball organizations implemented innovative business techniques such as the booking system, barnstorming, and league formation

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 62.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 63.

¹¹⁰ Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 116.

that provided a foundation upon which Black baseball could operate when it finally came to Milwaukee in 1922.

Chapter 2

Blackball Comes to the Brew City: Milwaukee's 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants

Introduction

In 1922, Black professional baseball took its first steps towards viability in Milwaukee, a city with a rich baseball tradition dating to before the Civil War. These initial steps were taken by the McCoy-Nolan Giants, a team of all-Black ballplayers that moved to the Cream City after two successful years barnstorming out of Canada as the “Calgary Black Sox.” The McCoy-Nolans were known briefly as the “Cream City Giants,” adopting the name “Cream City,” as a nod to Milwaukee’s nineteenth century nickname, which derived its meaning from the cream colored bricks with which many early Milwaukee buildings were constructed. The team’s adoption of the “Giants” nickname followed a common trend in early-twentieth century Black baseball, where many all-Black clubs looked to identify themselves with the success of some of the Black game’s best known teams, including, the Cuban Giants, Page Fence Giants, Philadelphia Giants, and Leland Giants.¹ The McCoy-Nolan Giants played their home games at Milwaukee’s Athletic Park, the home of the American Association Milwaukee Brewers. When playing at Athletic Park, the McCoy-Nolan Giants entertained Milwaukee baseball fans while competing primarily against white and Black semipro teams from Milwaukee and other midwestern cities.²

During their first season in Milwaukee, the McCoy-Nolan Giants began a process whereby they gradually established themselves as one of the nation’s elite all-Black traveling teams. Although a wealth of newspaper evidence published between 1922 and 1932 presents the

¹ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931: The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 167.

² Athletic park officially became known as Borchert Field in 1928.

McCoy-Nolan Giants as a competitively successful and hugely popular barnstorming club, the team's story is largely absent from existing scholarship on Black professional baseball, as well as from the historiography of baseball in the city of Milwaukee. The following chapter will use existing newspaper sources to explore the previously untold story of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants. In doing so, this chapter will also explore major themes in the history of the Black professional game, using historian, Michael Lomax's, three essential criteria for a successful early-twentieth century Black baseball enterprise as a model by which to analyze the McCoy-Nolans' rise to prominence during their inaugural 1922 season.

According to Michael Lomax, three major factors contributed to the success of elite early-twentieth century Black baseball teams. First, elite Black clubs succeeded in organizing a roster of talented Black players who could compete with other top-rated ball clubs.³ In addition to assembling a team of talented ballplayers, successful Black clubs also managed to secure adequate playing facilities that were located within a large urban area and easily accessible by city transit.⁴ Finally, the nation's top all-Black clubs mastered the scheduling process known as barnstorming, by booking lucrative road games against white semipro, Black, and Cuban teams.⁵ Lomax described the apogee of early-twentieth century Black clubs like the McCoy-Nolan Giants by writing the following:

When a club developed a reputation as a good gate attraction, black teams would expand their scheduling commitments to other regions of the country, particularly the Midwest. Ideally a black club would seek to expand its barnstorming tours internationally to Cuba. They would play there during the winter months, return to the US, and barnstorm their way to their home base prior to the beginning of the

³ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 7.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*

regular season. Successful black clubs scheduled from approximately 120 to 144 games per year.⁶

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants' ability to achieve Lomax's markers of success directly determined the future of their business venture, reporting in the *Milwaukee Journal* indicates that the McCoy-Nolans' 1922 season also informed Rube Foster's decision to grant Milwaukee a franchise in his NNL circuit for 1923. On May 26, 1922, the *Milwaukee Journal* reported the following stipulation in an article announcing the formation of the Cream City Giants, Milwaukee's new all-Black ball club, "If the venture proves a success, Milwaukee will be given a place in the Colored National league in 1923."⁷ As the *Journal's* reporting reveals, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were not only playing for their own success in 1922, they were also playing to elevate Milwaukee's status in the Black baseball industry by earning a spot for the city in the Black game's first viable league.

During their inaugural season, the McCoy-Nolan Giants primarily followed what Michael Lomax calls a local or "stay-at-home" scheduling system. According to Lomax, teams playing a local schedule typically played games within close proximity to their "home base," developing relationships with other semipro clubs that played within a roughly hundred-mile radius, to manage travel and overhead expenses.⁸ In fitting with Lomax's definition, a review of newspaper coverage of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' 1922 season reveals that during May and June, their first two months of existence, the club played all their games at Milwaukee's Athletic Park, their "home base." When the calendar turned to July, the McCoy-Nolans began to travel outside of

⁶ Ibid, 8-9.

⁷ *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 26, 1922. This and all citations of *The Milwaukee Journal* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>. This and all direct quotes appear exactly as they did in the original document, reflecting original spelling and grammar.

⁸ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901: Operating by Any Means Necessary* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 47.

Milwaukee, staying within their local region to play in Wisconsin cities like Sheboygan and Green Bay. In August, September, and October, the McCoy-Nolan Giants continued to practice a local schedule, playing games in their home base of Milwaukee as well as in towns throughout the Midwest. Although the McCoy-Nolans eventually joined other elite all-Black ball clubs in expanding their barnstorming network to the West Coast and Cuba in future seasons, evidence suggests that the McCoy-Nolan Giants did not leave the Midwest in their inaugural 1922 schedule.

Baseball in Milwaukee Prior to the Arrival of the McCoy-Nolan Giants

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants' 1922 season represented Milwaukee's first viable all-Black professional baseball venture, the city possessed a rich baseball tradition which baseball historians and contemporary fans often overlook. In order to better understand the baseball market in which the McCoy-Nolan Giants operated, a basic understanding of the game's evolution in Milwaukee must be achieved. According to historian, Dennis Pajot, the earliest recorded game of baseball played in Milwaukee dates to 1836, when E.W. Edgerton and others played with a handmade ball on a field at what today serves as the corner of North Milwaukee and East Mason Streets.⁹ However, the primitive game of "baseball" played in 1836 probably looked nothing like the baseball which eventually grew into America's national pastime. Oddly enough, Pajot traces Milwaukee's earliest example of "modern" baseball to December 1859, when the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* reported on groups of locals playing the game "so popular at the East," despite winter snow flurries.¹⁰ Even with Milwaukee's modern-day domed stadium,

⁹ Dennis Pajot, *The Rise of Milwaukee Baseball: The Cream City from Midwestern Outpost to the Major Leagues, 1859 – 1901* (McFarland & Company, 2009), 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Miller Park, baseball being played in the Milwaukee winter seems difficult to imagine, but nineteenth century newspaper records suggest this to have been the case.

Thankfully, Milwaukeeans quickly adjusted their baseball calendars to the proper season when the Milwaukee Base Ball Club formed in April 1860, becoming the city's first formally organized team.¹¹ Like the New York Knickerbockers and other early baseball clubs, the Milwaukee Base Ball Club comprised itself of white men in the city's professional class. Led by the editor of the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, Rufus King, the ball club included the chief of police, eight lawyers, a land agent, a salesman, a book store owner, two clerks, a cattle broker, a grocer, a U.S. Marshall, a soldier, four men in produce, and a music store operator.¹² Also like the Knickerbockers, the Milwaukee Base Ball Club existed as a strictly amateur fraternity and played baseball by the rules established by the NABBP, baseball's first nationally organized administrative body.

Like many of the nation's early baseball clubs, the Milwaukee Base Ball Club disbanded during the Civil War, as ballplayers traded in their bats for guns to serve as soldiers in the Union Army.¹³ Although the Milwaukee Base Ball Club disbanded by 1862, organized baseball returned to Milwaukee in October 1865 with the formation of the Cream City Base Ball Club of Milwaukee.¹⁴ Like their predecessor, the Milwaukee Base Ball Club, the Cream City Club operated as an amateur organization of professional-class white men who primarily played baseball for fraternal leisure, not intense competition. Despite this emphasis on exclusive fraternity, the Cream City Club played competitively against lesser teams in Milwaukee as well

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Ibid, 5.

¹³ Ibid, 6.

¹⁴ Ibid, 8.

as against clubs from other cities in the region, such as Madison, Rockford, and Chicago. Despite their success against amateur competition, the Cream City Club could not hold their own against the professional teams that formed as baseball commercialized in the late 1860s. On June 22, 1868, the Cream City Club suffered an embarrassing 67-13 defeat at the hands of the Atlantics Club of Brooklyn, a team which included professional players.¹⁵ The Cream City Club fared no better in 1869, when they hosted the famous Cincinnati Red Stockings, baseball's first publicly all-salaried team. Playing in front of an estimated crowd of 2,000 Milwaukee baseball fans, the Red Stockings routed the Cream City Club 85-7, only playing seven innings.¹⁶

These embarrassing defeats to professional teams spurred the Cream City Club to make Milwaukee baseball's first steps towards professionalization. In 1870, team officials enclosed the Cream City Club's playing grounds at Cream City Park, charging a fifty-cent admission fee intended to go towards improving the quality of the Milwaukee team.¹⁷ Despite efforts at professionalizing, the Cream City Club continued to lose games and the team disbanded in 1871, with Cream City Park being demolished and divided into city lots.¹⁸ In the words of Dennis Pajot, "just as national interest was growing in professional baseball, interest in Milwaukee hit rock bottom."¹⁹

Despite Milwaukee's early negative association with professional baseball, sports entrepreneurs in the city eventually adapted and made Milwaukee into a fruitful market for the professional game. Following the National League's disastrous 1877 season, in which even the pennant winning Boston Red Stockings lost over \$2,000, the St. Louis, Louisville, and Hartford

¹⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹⁶ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷ Ibid, 28.

¹⁸ Ibid, 32.

¹⁹ Ibid, 33.

franchises all folded, creating three vacancies in the six-team circuit.²⁰ To fill the voids left by the three departing ball clubs, the National League added teams in Indianapolis, Providence, and Milwaukee prior to the start of the 1878 season.²¹ Playing under the nickname “Milwaukee Grays,” the Cream City’s first big league club struggled mightily, finishing the season with a paltry 15-45 win-loss record, good for last place in the league.²² After Milwaukee’s 1878 National League experiment ended in failure, the city endured another period without organized professional baseball until 1884, when the Milwaukee Brewers were founded. The original Milwaukee Brewers represented the Cream City’s first stable professional baseball franchise, competing in multiple minor and major leagues from 1884 to 1953.

Milwaukee’s relationship with the national pastime included much more than the city’s representative professional teams. By the early-twentieth century, Milwaukee developed a vivacious sandlot baseball scene, with teams representing all areas of social life, including schools, churches, and workplaces. According to former Milwaukee sportswriter, George Reimann, sandlot games played at Milwaukee’s Mitchell Park in the 1920s and 1930s sometimes attracted as many as 23,000 fans.²³

While many of these sandlot nines were strictly amateur, others, like the South Side’s Kosciuszko Reds, were “semiprofessional” clubs, playing for pay part time, primarily on weekends.²⁴ Historian, Neal Pease, articulated the major differences between semiprofessional

²⁰ Ibid, 53.

²¹ Ibid, 54.

²² Ibid, 71.

²³ George Reimann, *Sandlot Baseball in Milwaukee’s South Side* (Robert Wiesian & Associates, 1968), 5.

²⁴ Neal Pease, “The Kosciuszko Reds, 1909 – 1919: Kings of the Milwaukee Sandlots,” *Polish American Studies* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 13.

ball clubs and the franchises that made up the organized major and minor leagues by writing the following:

In the pecking order of the sport, the semipros operated outside and below the tightly knit realm of “organized baseball,” the fully professional major and minor league franchises that respected the inviolability of each other’s contracts, denied players the right to choose to leave one team to play for another, and attempted to monopolize the baseball industry of their chosen markets. By way of contrast, the semipros were independent, anarchic, and freewheeling.²⁵

As Pease explains, semiprofessional teams and leagues operated outside the rigid control of organized baseball, allowing for a grassroots autonomy that did not exist in the sport’s higher levels. This freedom from the written and unwritten policies of organized baseball allowed for a greater blurring of the color line at the semiprofessional level, as semipros frequently scheduled games with top-rated all-Black clubs. In fact, many baseball historians have described the relationship between elite all-Black teams and white semipros as symbiotic, each side relying on the other for the scheduling of lucrative interracial exhibition games.²⁶ Milwaukee’s McCoy-Nolan Giants certainly exemplified this symbiotic relationship, playing many games against white semipro competition both inside and outside of the Cream City.

The Arrival of the McCoy-Nolan Giants

Despite Milwaukee’s longstanding relationship with America’s pastimes, Black professional baseball did not find a stable home in the Cream City until the arrival of the McCoy-Nolan Giants in 1922. Milwaukee’s slow development as a Black baseball market may be explained by the city’s relatively small and impoverished Black population during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The situation changed on May 26, 1922, when the

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 29.

Milwaukee Journal reported that the Cream City Giants, “a baseball team composed of local colored players,” were scheduled to play their first game at Milwaukee’s Athletic Park the upcoming Sunday at three o’clock against the Chicago Progressives, a white team in the semipro Midwest league.²⁷ According to the *Journal’s* reporting, the city’s new all-Black team held the rights to use Athletic Park every Sunday that the American Association Milwaukee Brewers were on the road and that the Giants were scheduled to “meet some of the best lineups in the middle west.”²⁸

The Cream City Giants made a strong impression in their opening game with the Progressives. According to the May 29, edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the Giants jumped out to an early three-run lead in the first-inning and never looked back, handily defeating the Chicago club by an 11-5 score.²⁹ Milwaukee fans attending the Giants’ Athletic Park debut witnessed an impressive offensive display, as the new Cream City club tallied fifteen base-hits, punctuated by the homeruns struck by centerfielder, Thompson and first baseman, Myers.³⁰ With their impressive 11-5 first-game victory over the Chicago Progressives, Milwaukee’s new all-Black baseball enterprise began their hasty ascent towards becoming one of the Midwest’s top independent barnstorming teams.

Just weeks into their inaugural season, the Cream City Giants underwent a number of significant changes. According to an article published in the June 6 edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the Giants came under the ownership of white Milwaukee businessman, John R.

²⁷ *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 26, 1922.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 29, 1922. This and all citations of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

McCoy, and changed their name to the “McCoy-Nolan Giants.”³¹ John R. McCoy made his name in Milwaukee as the co-founder of the McCoy-Nolan Heater and Supply Company. Incorporated in the city of Milwaukee on January 10, 1910, the McCoy-Nolan Heater and Supply Company specialized in the manufacture and sale of heating, plumbing, gas, electric, and automobile supplies and fixtures.³² Like J. Wallace Page had done with the pioneering Page Fence Giants back in 1895, John R. McCoy sought to use an all-Black professional baseball team as a tool for market promotion by advertising his company’s name on the club’s uniforms and train car. Although corroborating financial research must be done, it can be assumed that the Cream City Giants mutually benefitted from their new partnership with McCoy, through the important financial backing that he provided for the club.

John R. McCoy’s relationship with baseball began long before his ownership of the McCoy-Nolan Giants. In his youth, McCoy established himself as a talented ballplayer, serving as the captain of the St. John’s Military academy baseball team in 1905.³³ After his amateur playing days, McCoy continued to involve himself and his growing Milwaukee-based plumbing supply business in local baseball. Prior to investing in Black baseball, McCoy operated a semiprofessional team made up of employees from his company, winning the city’s amateur championship in 1919.³⁴ In addition to managing his own semipro club, McCoy also established a strong relationship with the American Association Milwaukee Brewers, the Cream City’s top professional club prior to the arrival of the major league Milwaukee Braves in 1953. On April 15, 1920, McCoy took out an ad in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* to promote his semipro company

³¹ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 6, 1922.

³² “Articles of Incorporation of the McCoy-Nolan Heater and Supply Company.” Milwaukee County Historical Society, Articles Volume 29, 298.

³³ *The Sunday Sentinel*, February 23, 1919. This and all citations of *The Sunday Sentinel* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

³⁴ *The Sunday Sentinel*, October 5, 1919.

team, beginning his message with the following words of support for the Brewers, “With Great Pride I wish to state that the M’COY-NOLAN CO. and its employes are great boosters of the BREWERS.”³⁵ The significance of John R. McCoy’s public support for the Brewers and his connections with Milwaukee’s baseball fraternity cannot be overstated, because these relationships likely contributed to McCoy’s ability to secure rentals of Athletic Park for McCoy-Nolan Giants home games, allowing the team to achieve one of Lomax’s three criteria for a successful Black baseball enterprise. McCoy’s prior experience running his company-sponsored semipro team also contributed to the achievement of another one of Michael Lomax’s three-essential criteria, the mastering of the barnstorming scheduling method, because McCoy’s experience scheduling games for his semipro McCoy-Nolan Supply Co. team provided him with a valuable preexisting booking network from which to draw when scheduling games for the McCoy-Nolan Giants.

John R. McCoy’s past experience managing his semipro McCoy-Nolan Supply Co. team also allowed him to build a relationship with the most influential man in Black professional baseball, Rube Foster. According to the June 11, 1920 edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, Foster’s Chicago American Giants made their first appearance in Milwaukee to play an exhibition game at Athletic Park against the McCoy-Nolan Supply Co. team on Saturday, June 12, 1920.³⁶ The *Sentinel* generated a great deal of hype over the American Giants’ Milwaukee debut, publishing the following preview of the upcoming exhibition:

The greatest battle of the year is on the boards for the local fans Saturday afternoon, when the American colored Giants, Rube Foster’s high class club, comes to Athletic Park, to struggle for supremacy with the McCoy-Nolans... The Giants, with one of the finest collection of colored players that has visited the city

³⁵ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 15, 1920.

³⁶ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 11, 1920.

in a number of years, will invade Milwaukee with a remarkable record, and seeking more honors.³⁷

Despite the hype surrounding Foster's American Giants, John R. McCoy's semipro ball club managed to cop a 6-4 victory from the visiting all-Black team.³⁸ In addition to the Chicago American Giants, McCoy's semipro company team also scheduled a game against the NNL's Cuban Stars for August 1920, but records of the game's results are yet to be uncovered.³⁹

The *Milwaukee Sentinel's* coverage of these games between the city's semipro teams and visiting all-Black clubs were characterized by an overt effort to racialize Black players and teams. This heavy-handed effort to racialize Black teams and ballplayers represents a common trend observed in the coverage of Black baseball by white midwestern dailies during the early-twentieth century. In reporting on the American Giants' 1920 exhibition against John R. McCoy's white semipro club, the *Sentinel* commonly referred to Foster's club as the "darkies," or the "dark boys," in addition to a number of other racialized adjectives.⁴⁰ This consistent use of racist language can also be observed in the ways that white midwestern newspapers covered the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants. For example, an article in the July 31 edition of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* referred to a McCoy-Nolans player by the name of Wesley as "Sambo," a derogatory term dating back to slavery which represented Blacks as slothful, childlike, and accepting of their subordinate position in the Jim Crow social order.⁴¹ The *Press-Gazette* also published the following racist trope to describe the jubilant reaction of Black fans following a McCoy-Nolan Giants' homerun, "Then up steps Mr. Wesley and he ballooned one over the

³⁷ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 12, 1920.

³⁸ *The Sunday Sentinel*, June 13, 1920.

³⁹ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 4, 1920.

⁴⁰ *The Sunday Sentinel*, June 13, 1920.

⁴¹ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, July 31, 1922. This and all citations of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

fence. Three runs and the dark town population grinned in watermelon style.”⁴² By evoking the racist “watermelon trope” in this excerpt, the *Press-Gazette* extended the theme of racist reporting to include Black fans, as well as Black teams and players.

Since these white midwestern newspapers never implemented racialized language to describe whites, the overt racialization of Black teams, athletes, and fans may be interpreted as an effort to “other” African Americans from the white norm constructed by a fundamentally racist American society. This “othering” relied on the dehumanizing effect of racist descriptors like “darky” to construct an image of Black inferiority in the minds of white readers. The theme of overtly racist language in newspaper reporting may also be explained as an effort to capitalize on the novelty of Blackness in small white towns where Black teams often barnstormed. Since many of these communities rarely, if ever, interacted with African Americans, the chance to see a team like the McCoy-Nolan Giants play may have represented the only opportunity for white people in a given town to witness Black people in person. By explicitly racializing these Black ball clubs in their reporting, white midwestern newspapers may have been attempting to promote these games to their readers, by making sure that readers were well aware of the team’s Blackness.

From Canada to the Cream City

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants were new to Milwaukee in 1922, evidence suggests that John R. McCoy’s ball club played together before making their move to the Cream City as members of an all-Black Calgary-based team known as the Black Sox. Although they were officially named the Black Sox, some white newspapers often used the nickname “Giants,”

⁴² Ibid.

which became a generic blanket term for all-Black clubs, when referring to the Calgary team.

The *Sheboygan Press* explained the link between the Calgary Black Sox and McCoy-Nolan Giants on July 26, 1922 while advertising the McCoy-Nolans' upcoming appearance in Sheboygan:

It will be remembered that the Nolans traveled out of Calgary last year. They went as the Calgary Giants and for two seasons captured the Canadian league pennant. This year they are heading out of Milwaukee, but they are under the same management and are drawing big wherever they play. They have been exhibiting twice weekly in this state and Illinois.⁴³

As this excerpt from the *Sheboygan Press* reveals, the McCoy-Nolan Giants once operated as a successful all-Black Canadian team prior to their arrival in Milwaukee for the 1922 season. The McCoy-Nolan Giants' previous existence as the Calgary Black Sox contributed greatly to the club's ability to build a team of talented all-Black players, one of Michael Lomax's three criteria for a successful Black baseball enterprise. Since the McCoy-Nolans' management team inherited a preexisting roster of players, they did not need to build their ball club from scratch.

The *Sheboygan Press*'s claim that the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants were under the same management as the 1921 Calgary Black Sox can be corroborated by the *Milwaukee Sentinel*'s reporting that Lieutenant S.S. Gordon served as the McCoy-Nolans' on-field manager.⁴⁴ Gordon, who possessed strong ties to Rube Foster from his days playing with the Chicago Leland and Union Giants, also managed the 1921 Calgary Black Sox, according to an article published in the *Chicago Defender*.⁴⁵ In S.S. Gordon, the McCoy-Nolan Giants had another experienced baseball administrator, whose expertise as a former player, booking agent, and manager went a long way

⁴³ *The Sheboygan Press*, July 26, 1922. This and all citations of *The Sheboygan Press* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁴ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 6, 1922.

⁴⁵ *The Chicago Defender*, April 9, 1921. This and all citations of *The Chicago Defender* accessed at ProQuest, <https://about.proquest.com/>.

towards insuring the McCoy-Nolan Giants' success in Milwaukee. The *Chicago Defender* highlighted Gordon's impressive baseball resumé by publishing the following while reporting on his appointment as the on-field manager of the 1921 Calgary Black Sox:

Gordon has for many years held the position of booking agent for the Black Sox and has traveled all through the United States and northwest Canada as booking agent and road manager of the Union Giants, French Lick Plutos, and Winnipeg Giants. He was the first manager to take a club into Canada, piloting the Winnipeg Giants and having a successful season, losing five games in three months, and covering over 22,000 miles during the trip.⁴⁶

As the *Defender's* reporting makes clear, S.S. Gordon had a long track-record of success leading Black barnstorming teams before arriving in Milwaukee. Undoubtedly, Gordon's veteran leadership contributed greatly to the McCoy-Nolan Giants' immediate success in the Cream City.

In addition to being an accomplished booking agent, S.S. Gordon had a knack for developing talented Black ballplayers into successful professional athletes. The *Defender* elaborated on Gordon's proven coaching prowess by writing:

Manager Gordon's specialty is developing the young player. Some of his products are: Scotty Boaman, of long ago; Jones, Pat Dougherty, Pierce, Jimmie Lyons, Jenkins, Jackson, Pryor, Dick Johnson, DeMoss, Johnnie Cunningham, Hutchinson and many others who would not have gone very far had it not been for the early schooling they received.⁴⁷

As the *Defender's* published list of ballplayers that S.S. Gordon developed reveals, the McCoy-Nolan Giants likely also benefitted from Gordon's demonstrated ability to get the most out of the players that he managed and coached.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Although detailed records about the Calgary Black Sox have proven elusive, references to the ball club appear in both American and Canadian newspapers. The commonalities between the 1921 Calgary Black Sox and 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants' rosters become clear when box scores and projected lineups published in newspapers covering each ball club are compared. At least four names are observed on both teams' rosters, including: first baseman, Myers; right fielder and third baseman, Reed (sometimes spelled as "Reid"); catcher, Gray (sometimes spelled as "Bray"); and pitcher and occasional first baseman, Walters.⁴⁸ These commonalities between the Calgary Black Sox and McCoy-Nolan Giants' rosters further cement the connection between the two clubs, because at least four players made the move from Calgary to Milwaukee with their manager, S.S. Gordon.

Newspaper coverage also makes clear that the players who made the move to Milwaukee were members of a 1921 Calgary Black Sox team that the white press held in high-regard. Recognizing the club's impressive accomplishments on the baseball diamond, the *Kenosha News* appropriately labeled the Calgary Black Sox as the, "colored champions of Canada."⁴⁹ The Calgary club also received high praise in an article published by the *Calgary Herald* on August 3, 1921; the *Herald* invoked organized baseball's color line by printing the following:

The colored Giants are a team comprising a galaxy of stars who are denied playing in the major leagues through a ruling which has been in vogue since organized ball started. But the ability of these players is recognized by those who know the game from its many angles.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Rosters were compared using articles in the following newspapers: *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 11, 1922; *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 3, 1922; *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, September 5, 1922; *Kenosha News*, May 2, 1921; *Calgary Herald*, August 3, 1921.

⁴⁹ *Kenosha News*, May 2, 1921. This and all citations of the *Kenosha News* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁰ *Calgary Herald*, August 3, 1921. This and all citations of the *Calgary Herald* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

As this excerpt demonstrates, some white sportswriters were so impressed by the Calgary Black Sox' playing ability, that they believed the club's players were talented enough to compete in the Major Leagues if not for Jim Crow's chokehold on organized baseball. As newspaper reports like those published in the *Kenosha News* and the *Calgary Herald* reveal, the 1921 Calgary Black Sox possessed an elite reputation among white sportswriters, a reputation that quickly followed the club to Milwaukee.

The 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants' roster not only benefited from carrying at least four members of the 1921 Calgary Black Sox, but newspapers also describe the McCoy-Nolans as an overall experienced, veteran ball club. In describing the McCoy-Nolans' veteran status, the *Sheboygan Press* published the following:

The men in the McCoy-Nolan combination have been playing together so long that many of the fellows are getting grey hair but age has not interfered with their fielding and hitting ability, according to newspaper accounts following games in which they have participated.⁵¹

This experience described in the *Sheboygan Press* likely went a long way in ensuring the McCoy-Nolans' early success as a Milwaukee-based club because the players were able to hone their individual skill-sets over multiple years as baseball professionals. Also, by playing together for multiple seasons, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' players likely benefitted from the team chemistry that comes with familiarity between teammates.

Newspaper evidence also reveals that the Calgary Black Sox had a working relationship with Chicago American Giants owner and NNL president, Rube Foster, the season before they moved to Milwaukee, providing a hypothetical rationale behind the club's decision to relocate. When the Calgary Black Sox made a stop in Kenosha, Wisconsin early in their 1921

⁵¹ *The Sheboygan Press*, July 26, 1922.

barnstorming tour, the *Kenosha News* printed the following while previewing the upcoming exhibition, “The visitors have been training with the American Giants in Chicago and have been giving these famous players a run for the big end of the score in the practice games.”⁵² Practicing with the American Giants in the offseason provided Rube Foster the opportunity to see first-hand just how talented the Black Sox were. This familiarity with the Calgary Black Sox’ talent-level along with the fact that S.S. Gordon, one of Foster’s former players, managed both ball clubs, and that the McCoy-Nolans played Foster’s club in one of their first Milwaukee games, may help explain the Calgary Black Sox’ relocation. While more corroborating evidence is needed to confirm this theory, Foster likely urged the Black Sox to move their operations to nearby Milwaukee in order to make playing against his American Giants easier, with the hope that a successful Milwaukee-based Black club would eventually join his NNL.

As previously mentioned, it did not take long for Milwaukee’s McCoy-Nolan Giants to establish the same elite reputation that the club possessed while traveling out of Calgary. On July 25, 1922, the Neenah, Wisconsin, *News-Record*, recognized the Milwaukee club’s impressive victories by publishing the following:

The McCoy-Nolans are by far the best colored team in this quarter of sportdom. Their record includes victories over ball clubs of the best calibre, having defeated Lancaster, with Jimmy Dodge pitching, and the Milwaukee Red Sox, with Earl Howard present Appleton pitcher, in the box.⁵³

Whether the McCoy-Nolan Giants actually were “the best colored club” in their “quarter of sportdom” is certainly debatable, considering the talented teams that played in the NNL’s midwestern cities, as well as the other all-Black independent clubs frequently barnstorming the

⁵² *Kenosha News*, April 27, 1921.

⁵³ *News-Record*, July 25, 1922. This and all citations of the *News-Record* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

region. Regardless, the fact that the *New-Record's* sportswriters felt confident in bestowing such a strong label upon the McCoy-Nolans, indicates that the club at least belonged in the conversation.

The 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants also received tremendous praise in the pages of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, which described the McCoy-Nolan Giants as, “one of the strongest colored teams in the country.”⁵⁴ The *Press-Gazette* further lauded the McCoy-Nolans by labeling the club a “guaranteed attraction,” that played winning ball all season against some of the top clubs in the state.⁵⁵ To conclude their praise-filled preview of the McCoy-Nolan Giants, the *Press Gazette* relayed the following story about a game the McCoy-Nolans played with the Wausau, Wisconsin Lumberjacks that bordered on mythic proportions:

As an illustration of the kind of ball they put up, they played the Wausau Lumberjacks, rated one of the fastest independent teams in the state, and after running up a high score in the fourth inning, they pulled the outfielders to the bench and played with six men, defeating the Lumberjacks by an overwhelming score with that handicap.⁵⁶

As this excerpt demonstrates, the McCoy-Nolan Giants not only carried the reputation of being world-class ballplayers, they also established themselves as entertainers by finding ways to make games with lopsided scores more interesting for the fans that paid to see them.

The Complexities of “Clowning”

The McCoy-Nolan Giants’ efforts at making lopsided games more interesting for ticket-buying fans by engaging in on-field theatrics, as they did against the Wausau Lumberjacks, represents an important theme in the history of Black baseball known as “clowning.” While

⁵⁴ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, July 28, 1922.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Black traveling teams often engaged in clowning, not everyone in the Black game felt the same way about the controversial tactic. Oftentimes the comedic antics that made up a Black ball club's clowning routine resembled the heavily racist tradition of Black minstrelsy. Historian, James Overmyer, explained the connection between baseball clowning and the minstrel tradition by writing:

In the minstrel shows, white performers in blackface, and subsequently some blacks themselves, put on broad parodies of Negro life. Minstrel music was succeeded late in the 19th century by the even more demeaning coon song, which added monetary greed and violence to "minstrel images of watermelon, chicken and possum that supposedly typified the race"...The clowning of the best black baseball teams fit right in with this racist societal influence on entertainment. Making a fool of oneself on the diamond was part and parcel of taking admission money from as many white folks as possible.⁵⁷

As Overmyer makes clear, clowning on the baseball diamond served as a double-edge sword for Black baseball's many comedians, just as it had for Black performers engaging in blackface minstrelsy. On one hand, clowning provided white fans an added incentive to buy a ticket to see a Black barnstorming team play, thereby boosting ticket sales, which in turn increased the dollar amount of each player's share of the game's gate receipts. On the other hand, clowning perpetuated negative stereotypes about Black people. Since many Black clubs barnstormed in small towns with miniscule or non-existent Black populations, these games often represented a white fan's only exposure to African Americans. If Black ballplayers were exhibiting harmful Black stereotypes on the field while clowning, then one can see how such behavior served to reinforce the racist perceptions that many white fans had about Blacks.

⁵⁷ James Overmyer, "Early Days," in *Shades of Glory: The Negro Leagues and the Story of African-American Baseball*, ed. Lawrence D. Hogan (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic in coordination with the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, 2006), 35.

However, as historians, Yuval Taylor, and Jake Austen, point out, a deeper understanding of the Black minstrel tradition requires a more critical and uncomfortable examination of the practice.⁵⁸ While clowning and other Black comedic offshoots of the minstrel tradition undoubtedly perpetuated harmful stereotypes about Black people, the African Americans who engaged in these practices often did so as a display of agency, using the behavior for their personal benefit. According to Taylor and Austen, enslaved Blacks often engaged in clowning, intentionally acting stupid rather than clever, to flatter the master and earn greater approbation as a way of marginally improving their lived experience.⁵⁹ Appeals to the minstrel tradition also made possible the career of Bert Williams, who Taylor and Austen label as, “the most successful black comedian of the first two decades of the twentieth century.”⁶⁰ While many contemporary scholars have pointed to Williams’ embrace of blackface minstrelsy as “forced and unnatural,” Taylor and Austen argue that these scholars are erroneously projecting their own beliefs about minstrelsy onto Williams and other Black performers, thereby robbing them of their agency.⁶¹ Williams, like many other Black comedians, used the minstrel tradition to both reach positions of fame and fortune, as well as to liberate themselves from the true pain of white supremacy by embracing the carefree nature of the minstrel character.⁶²

Like Bert Williams and other twentieth century Black comedians, Black ballplayers on the barnstorming trail often engaged in performances that simultaneously perpetuated racist stereotypes and advanced their economic fortunes. In addition to the economic incentive, many of these Black performers found these comedic performances therapeutic and sometimes even

⁵⁸ Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip-Hop* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 19.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 130-131.

⁶² *Ibid*, 4.

fun, allowing them to let go of the struggles that characterized their daily lives and become, even if for only a superficial moment, care-free. These complexities that define the Black minstrel tradition are evident in the 1896 poem by famed Black author, and close Bert Williams associate, Paul Laurence Dunbar, titled, “We Wear the Mask:”

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes –
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties,

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but oh great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!⁶³

While Black ballplayers “wore the mask,” by clowning in front of laughing white crowds with the McCoy-Nolan Giants and other Black barnstorming teams, just as the Black minstrels had done before them, contemporary scholars must remember not to oversimplify such behavior with outright condemnation. Rather, historians must restore the agency of these individual ballplayers,

⁶³ Paul Laurence Dunbar in Taylor and Austen, *Darkest America*, 120.

however limited, by recognizing the complex rationale that inspired the Black baseball “clown” to “wear the mask.”

Early Games at Athletic Park

Despite the fact that the McCoy-Nolan Giants eventually developed into an elite barnstorming club, the team played most of their games early in the 1922 season at Milwaukee’s Athletic Park, their home base. Competing in their first games under their new name on June 11, 1922, the McCoy-Nolan Giants scored impressive victories in both ends of a Sunday doubleheader against the Chicago Normals at Athletic Park. After clubbing their way to a 15-6 victory in game one, the McCoy-Nolans returned to shut-out the Normals in the second game by a 7-0 score.⁶⁴ In reporting on the victories, the *Milwaukee Journal* wrote that, “The auspicious entrance of the colored team into the Windy City Wheel was due to the excellent twirling of Jackson and Boggs, who held the visitors at all times in both encounters.”⁶⁵ While certainly a small sample size, the doubleheader sweep over the Chicago Normals showed Milwaukee fans that the McCoy-Nolan Giants could win games with both lights-out pitching and overpowering offense.

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants had early success against white semiprofessional competition, they faced their toughest challenge of the young 1922 season on Saturday, June 17, when they crossed bats with Rube Foster’s mighty NNL Chicago American Giants at Athletic Park. According to the reporting in Milwaukee’s *Sunday Sentinel*, Boggs, who pitched masterful ball a week earlier against the Normals, fared poorly against the American Giants’ superior

⁶⁴ *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 12, 1922.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

lineup, allowing seven runs to score in less than five innings of work.⁶⁶ While the McCoy-Nolans' starting pitcher struggled to tame the big bats in Foster's lineup, reliever, Walters, managed to put out the fire after replacing Boggs in the fifth, only allowing one more American Giants' run to score, and keeping the Milwaukee club in the game.⁶⁷ Despite Walters' commendable relief effort, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' comeback fell one run short, as they stranded the tying run on base in the ninth, losing to Foster's club 8-7.⁶⁸ Although the game ended in defeat, the McCoy-Nolan Giants held their own against one of the elite teams in Black professional baseball, an important accomplishment for a Milwaukee club looking to attain a franchise in the NNL for 1923.

Coming off their hard-fought one-run loss to the Chicago American Giants, the McCoy-Nolans next played Walter Lange's Red Sox, another local semipro team, in the inauguration of twilight baseball at Athletic Park.⁶⁹ According to the *Sentinel's* reporting, 1,000 fans attended Milwaukee's first twilight contest, approving of the innovation despite the fact that the scoreless game had to be called off after the ninth inning because of a cloudy sky.⁷⁰ Poor visibility in the twilight hours clearly impacted the hitters on each team, as the two clubs managed only seven base-hits between them, failing to scratch a single run across the plate.⁷¹ While they were unable to gain a victory, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' June 20 matchup with Walter Lange's Red Sox in the first twilight game ever played at Athletic Park represents one of the McCoy-Nolans' most significant early contributions to Milwaukee baseball history.

⁶⁶ *The Sunday Sentinel*, June 18, 1922.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 21, 1922.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

It did not take long for the McCoy-Nolan Giants and the Milwaukee Red Sox to renew acquaintances after their pioneering twilight tilt at Athletic Park, as the two clubs engaged in another early evening contest on Thursday, June 22. This time around, the McCoy-Nolans bested the local semipro squad, defeating them by a 13-6 score.⁷² Poor visibility clearly did not impact each team's hitters to the same degree in this second twilight game, as they scored a combined nineteen runs in the Thursday night contest, a tremendous improvement over the goose eggs each club laid just two nights prior. Continuing their trend of using racist language in their reporting, the *Milwaukee Journal* described the McCoy-Nolans' prowess on the playing field that Thursday night in the following way:

The fleet-footed darkies, playing baseball as it should be played, with remarkable infield work and terrific bat-wielding; waltzed and fox-trotted their way around the sacks almost to their own choosing.⁷³

Although the white newspaper's coverage was heavily racialized, the *Journal's* reporting provides important details that aid historians in constructing a profile of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' playing ability. As the *Journal's* reporting makes clear, the McCoy-Nolans were regarded as an incredibly talented team that impressed white sportswriters with both their strong defense and fast-paced offensive attack.

The McCoy-Nolan Giants were not the only highly talented ballplayers to take the field at Athletic Park that Thursday night in late-June; previews for the matchup printed in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reveal that each club bolstered their rosters with well-known professional players ahead of the contest. Walter Lange's Red Sox added a pair of American Association stars to their roster, including former Milwaukee Brewer, Art Bues, and former Louisville Colonel,

⁷² *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 23, 1922.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Artie Koros.⁷⁴ The McCoy-Nolans also added some star-power by bringing in J. Walker, a pitcher with Rube Foster's American Giants, to start the game for them on the mound.⁷⁵ These roster additions shed light on the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants' impressive level of competitiveness in two important ways. First, the club's ability to handily defeat white semiprofessional teams that included ballplayers who played in organized baseball indicates that these Black players could compete with and win against their white counterparts despite the racist belief held by many early-twentieth century Americans that Black ballplayers were in some way inferior. Second, the fact that a pitcher who formerly played for Foster's American Giants, arguably Black baseball's most talented team in the early 1920s, decided to take the field with Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants, demonstrates that said pitcher viewed the McCoy-Nolans as worthy of his services, a tremendous compliment for Milwaukee's new all-Black team.

The McCoy-Nolan Giants played another top all-Black club on Saturday, June 24, when they met the NNL's Cuban Stars at Athletic Park. Like their last matchup with NNL competition, the McCoy-Nolan Giants engaged the Cuban Stars in a hard-fought one-run game. Only this time around the Milwaukee club prevailed, riding a ninth inning rally to a 9-8 victory over the Cubans.⁷⁶ According to the *Sentinel's* reporting, the McCoy-Nolans were originally scheduled to play the semipro Flambeau Indians, but they were replaced last minute when they notified the McCoy-Nolan Giants' management team that they would not be able to keep their commitment.⁷⁷ However, the late switch of opponents proved somewhat auspicious for the

⁷⁴ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 22, 1922.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *The Sunday Sentinel*, June 25, 1922.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

McCoy-Nolans, because their matchup with the Cuban Stars allowed the Milwaukee club to further demonstrate their ability to compete with NNL competition, thereby bolstering their case for bringing a NNL franchise to Milwaukee in 1923.

A day after their impressive walk-off victory over the Cuban Stars, the McCoy-Nolan Giants met the local semipro South Side Malleables in a Sunday matinee at Athletic Park. While the Malleables defeated the McCoy-Nolans 7-4 a few days prior, the results of the Sunday rematch between the two clubs are unclear. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that the Malleables again bested the McCoy-Nolan Giants, earning their victory by a 4-2 score.⁷⁸ However, Milwaukee's other major newspaper, the *Milwaukee Journal*, printed a game report which corroborated the 4-2 final score, but claimed that the McCoy-Nolan Giants, not the Malleables, ended up on the game's winning end.⁷⁹ Whatever the actual results, the conflicting reports on the McCoy-Nolan Giants' June 25 matchup with the South Side Malleables reinforce the unfortunate reality that reporting on semiprofessional and Negro League games did not always achieve the same level of reliability as reporting on white organized baseball. Therefore, historians must proceed with caution when evaluating scores and statistics contained in early-twentieth century reporting on baseball played outside of the organized major and minor leagues.

One of the highlights of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' inaugural 1922 season involved their central role in a fundraiser tournament organized by Milwaukee's semiprofessional Cream City league and the McCoy-Nolan Giants' management team. The *Milwaukee Journal* published the following preview of the tournament on August 25, 1922:

Starting on Labor day, a two weeks series has been arranged between the McCoy-Nolan Giants, the crack local colored team, and the teams of the Cream City

⁷⁸ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 26, 1922.

⁷⁹ *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 27, 1922.

league. On Labor day, two of the Cream City teams will meet the McCoys at Athletic Park in a doubleheader. Each day of the week following, another team will clash with the Giants...After the McCoys have played through the league, a return series will be played the following week.⁸⁰

The *Journal's* reporting added that funds raised from the McCoy-Nolans' series with the Cream City league clubs would go towards paying the expenses of Milwaukee's representatives in the upcoming national semiprofessional championships.⁸¹ The McCoy-Nolan Giants' central role in organizing and hosting a fundraiser for Milwaukee's white semipro Cream City league represents an important example of the symbiotic relationship that existed between all-Black teams and white semipro clubs. While the highest levels of the white game wanted nothing to do with African Americans outside of maybe their hard-earned dollars as ticket-buying fans, semipro baseball played closer to the grassroots level often exhibited a more cooperative interracial dynamic.

Building a Local Barnstorming Network

While the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants played the majority of their early season games in Milwaukee, the team eventually built a reputation as an elite traveling act by barnstorming in towns throughout the Midwest, especially during the season's later months. Barnstorming represented an essential part of any Black baseball enterprise. Even teams in the organized Negro Leagues played a large number of barnstorming games outside of their league schedule.⁸² Michael Lomax called barnstorming, "the fundamental mode of operation for black baseball clubs," adding that, "Attempting to develop a local-to-regional, and ideally a national-to-

⁸⁰ *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 25, 1922.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 146.

international, format became the most successful way black baseball clubs functioned.”⁸³

Although the McCoy-Nolan Giants eventually achieved the coveted national-to-international barnstorming format in later seasons, the ball club first had to master a local-to-regional schedule during their inaugural season.

As part of the regional barnstorming format that the McCoy-Nolan Giants established during their first season, the team traveled to Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to engage the local semipro club on Wednesday, August 9. According to the *Milwaukee Journal*, the two clubs battled each other to a scoreless tie through twelve innings when the umpiring crew called the game so that the McCoy-Nolans could make their train connection.⁸⁴ Unfortunately for the Lansing, Iowa team, the McCoy-Nolan Giants made their connection in time, as the Cream City club arrived in Lansing with their hitting shoes on, walloping the local Lansing club by an impressive 17-1 score.⁸⁵ These two games played by the McCoy-Nolan Giants in Iowa represent the day-to-day variation that characterized semipro baseball, where large disparities in the skill-level of the competition often led to wildly divergent score outcomes from one game to another. One day, the McCoy-Nolans were locked in a twelve-inning scoreless pitchers’ duel, and the next day, the same club busted out for seventeen runs, highlighted by four homers, all after a long night of traveling on the road.

During their inaugural season, the McCoy-Nolan Giants quickly developed a regional rivalry with Green Bay, Wisconsin’s entry in the Wisconsin State league. On Saturday, September 2, the McCoy-Nolan Giants traveled north and played the Green Bay semipros in

⁸³ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901*, 174.

⁸⁴ *The Milwaukee Journal*, August 10, 1922.

⁸⁵ *Green Bay Press Gazette*, August 12, 1922.

what the *Milwaukee Journal* called, “the best played game of the season here.”⁸⁶ An estimated crowd of between 800 to 1,200 fans poured into Green Bay’s League Park to see the highly anticipated rematch between the Green Bay club and Milwaukee’s renowned all-Black team.⁸⁷ The McCoy-Nolans were out to exact revenge for the defeat that Green Bay dealt them back in July, when 900 fans witnessed the Milwaukee team drop a 4-3 nail-biter to the local club.⁸⁸ Unfortunately for the McCoy-Nolan Giants, Green Bay once again proved to be a difficult place to earn a victory, as they once again found themselves on the short-end of the score after the dust settled.

Despite losing to Green Bay for the second time in the season, the McCoy-Nolan Giants played a strong game, keeping the score close through all nine innings. Using racist language, the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* published the following to describe the McCoy-Nolans’ play that Saturday afternoon in early September:

The colored team played corking good ball. They were on their toes every minute fighting for everything that was in them. The dusky Walters can thank his lucky stars for the brilliant support. Although nicked for eleven hits, Walters was kept out of trouble by super fielding. The Giants made five double killings, one of these being the feature play of the day.⁸⁹

As the reporting in the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* reveals, the McCoy-Nolan Giants put on an impressive defensive display, turning five of the seven double plays in the game to keep their pitcher from allowing any big innings. The “feature play of the day” alluded to in the previous excerpt refers to an impressive outfield assist by the McCoy-Nolan Giants’ left-fielder,

⁸⁶ *The Milwaukee Journal*, September 3, 1922.

⁸⁷ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, September 5, 1922.

⁸⁸ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, July 31, 1922.

⁸⁹ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, September 5, 1922.

Thompson, whereby Thompson cut down the would-be go ahead run at the plate in the third inning. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* described the play in the following way:

Reik ballooned to Thompson who caught the ball up against the left field fence near the score board. Smithson scooted for home but Thompson's throw to Huff caught him at the plate. The left fielder's throw carried like a bullet and landed kerplunk in the backstop's mit without even touching the ground.⁹⁰

Despite Thompson's defense heroics, the Green Bay club got the last laugh, when center fielder, Bill Harley, belted a walk-off homerun with two-outs in the bottom of the ninth inning to seal the McCoy-Nolans' fate.⁹¹

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants enjoyed a great deal of success in their first season, even when competing against other top Black teams, the ball club suffered one of the worst losses of their barnstorming schedule on Wednesday, September 6, when they clashed with the Chicago Union Giants as part of Black Earth, Wisconsin's annual American Legion day celebration. The Union Giants, another talented all-Black barnstorming outfit, dominated the Milwaukee club's pitching that hot September day, scoring 24 runs on 22 base-hits on their way to a 24-8 victory over the McCoy-Nolans.⁹² The McCoy-Nolan Giants' game against the Union Giants as part of an American Legion Day celebration exemplifies a common theme in Black barnstorming, whereby popular Black traveling teams were often booked as headline entertainment for a town's annual festival or community celebration.

Although Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants did not venture outside the Midwest in 1922, their success in scheduling games with teams throughout the region helped them build a local-to-regional barnstorming network from which to build upon in future seasons. By

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 12, 1922. This and all citations of the *Wisconsin State Journal* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

competing and winning in these small midwestern towns and cities, the McCoy-Nolans built important name-recognition that helped the team pick up where they left off when they returned to the barnstorming trails in 1924.

Conclusion

During the 1922 season, Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants, a Black barnstorming baseball team that moved to the Cream City from Canada, began their climb toward becoming one of the elite independent Black teams in the country. Establishing their home base at Milwaukee's Athletic Park in a city with a rich baseball history and vibrant semipro scene, the McCoy-Nolans played a local, "stay-at-home" barnstorming schedule, meeting and beating some of the best competition in the Midwest. Led by their white team owner, John R. McCoy, and their experienced on-field manager, S.S. Gordon, the McCoy-Nolans achieved each of the three factors that historian, Michael Lomax, named as critical to the success of early-twentieth century Black baseball enterprises. They built a roster of talented all-Black players, benefitting from the experienced players that moved with the team from Calgary to Milwaukee before the 1922 season; They used John R. McCoy's preexisting connections to Milwaukee's baseball network to secure playing facilities at Athletic Park; and they began to master the barnstorming scheduling model by using both McCoy and Gordon's prior experience with booking games against midwestern competition.

This analysis of newspaper coverage of the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants also provides insight into some overarching themes in the history of the Black game. The McCoy-Nolan Giants, while competing and winning in front of white crowds were typically described in midwestern white newspapers with heavily racist language designed to dehumanize Black people and separate them from white society. Like many Black barnstorming teams, the McCoy-Nolans

also engaged in the controversial practice known as clowning, pairing their baseball skills with comedic antics to attract white fans and keep the crowd entertained when scores became lopsided. While clowning served an economic purpose, the tactic's resemblance of the minstrel tradition also perpetuated negative Black stereotypes, an especially damaging outcome when considering the limited exposure to Black people that white fans had in many of the small towns where the McCoy-Nolans traveled. Despite all these experiences with racism, the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants also demonstrated how the color line often became blurred outside of organized baseball by playing most of their games against white competition, as well as by displaying interracial cooperation through their involvement in organizing a fundraiser tournament for Milwaukee's semipro league. The McCoy-Nolan Giants were so successful playing out of Milwaukee in 1922, that Rube Foster awarded the Cream City a franchise in his NNL for the 1923 season. While the McCoy-Nolans took a one-year hiatus in 1923, as some of their players left to join Milwaukee's new NNL team, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were just getting started on their ascent towards becoming one of the elite independent teams in Black professional baseball.

Chapter 3

Un-Bear-able: The Story of the 1923 Milwaukee Bears

Introduction

As a result of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' successful 1922 campaign, Rube Foster granted Milwaukee a franchise in his NNL for the 1923 season. Like the McCoy-Nolan Giants, the "Milwaukee Bears," as the NNL team became known, played their home games at Milwaukee's Athletic Park. However, unlike the McCoy-Nolan Giants, the Bears failed to find success in the Cream City, only lasting four months in Milwaukee before a variety of factors forced the club to relocate to Toledo, Ohio in the middle of the season. The reasons that the Milwaukee Bears failed in 1923 can be divided into two general categories. First, there were reasons typical of the fledgling NNL, such as the scheduling imbalances that often resulted from the fact that the overwhelming majority of NNL clubs did not own their home ballparks. Second, there were reasons unique to the Milwaukee context, like the difficulties the Bears had attracting fans because of the city's relatively small and socioeconomically fragmented Black population. The following chapter will explore these various reasons for the Bears' failure and in the process uncover important truths about both the nature of Black professional baseball in the 1920s and the development of Black Milwaukee during this period. As with Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants, the history of the 1923 Milwaukee Bears has largely avoided serious scholarship. In further tracing Black professional baseball's history in Milwaukee, this chapter will fill important historiographical voids in the scholarship on both Milwaukee baseball and the Black game more broadly by adding the untold story of the NNL Milwaukee Bears, a story that includes multiple connections to some of Black baseball's most significant figures and events.

Multiple factors indicate that the NNL Milwaukee Bears replaced the McCoy-Nolan Giants as Milwaukee's representative all-Black team for the 1923 season and that the two ball clubs never operated simultaneously. Firstly, there are no records of the McCoy-Nolan Giants playing games during the 1923 season found in any of the newspapers that covered the club in 1922 or in any paper that covered them when they returned to operation in 1924. Secondly, an analysis of box scores and projected lineups reveals that at least four players appeared on both the rosters of the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants and the 1923 Milwaukee Bears, indicating that these players were likely transferred over to the new NNL franchise upon its formation. These four players included outfielders, Thompson and Boggs; third baseman, Redd; and pitcher, Walters.¹ Newspaper records also indicate that outfielder, Frank Duncan, the captain of the 1921 Calgary Black Sox, played some games for the Milwaukee Bears as well. Both the total absence of newspaper reporting on the McCoy-Nolan Giants during the 1923 season and the fact that the Milwaukee Bears featured some McCoy-Nolan Giants' players on their roster, suggests that the McCoy-Nolans did not operate during the 1923 season, leaving the Bears as the Cream City's only all-Black professional ball club that year.

Management On and Off the Field

While detailed business and financial records for the 1923 Milwaukee Bears have proven elusive, John McCoy, owner of the McCoy-Nolan Giants in 1922, appeared not to have had any involvement in the administration of the NNL Bears. Instead, multiple newspaper references imply that famed Black sportswriter, Dave Wyatt, orchestrated the business side of Milwaukee's

¹ Rosters were compared using articles in the following newspapers: *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 11, 1922; *Wisconsin State Journal*, September 3, 1922; *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, September 5, 1922; *The Chicago Defender* April 28, 1923; *The Chicago Defender*, August 4, 1923; *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, April 29, 1923; *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 11, 1923; *The St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, August 12, 1923.

NNL franchise. The *Milwaukee Journal* alluded to Wyatt's involvement with the Bears when it published the following solicitation on March 3, 1923:

The Milwaukee club, as well as the seven other clubs of the colored league will have many open midweek dates during May and June, and clubs throughout the states who desire these clubs as attractions should write Dave Wyatt, 309 Fourth St. Milwaukee.²

As this excerpt reveals, Dave Wyatt received mail at a Milwaukee address in 1923 and had responsibility for booking games between the Bears and semipro clubs in Wisconsin, suggesting that Wyatt managed the Milwaukee Bears' scheduling in some capacity. In addition to the solicitation printed in the *Milwaukee Journal*, an article published in the July 7, 1923 edition of the *Chicago Defender* informed readers that, "Dave Wyatt, another popular baseball man in this city," would travel with the Milwaukee club for their upcoming game in Chicago.³ As these two newspaper references suggest, Dave Wyatt possessed some form of administrative role with the Milwaukee Bears during the 1923 season.

Further support for the theory that Dave Wyatt served as the Milwaukee Bears' business manager can be derived from Wyatt's close relationship with NNL president, Rube Foster. According to historian, Geri Strecker, it was Dave Wyatt who first brought Rube Foster to Chicago in 1902, urging Chicago Unions' owner, Frank Leland, to sign Foster after seeing him pitch in Texas for the Waco Yellow Jackets.⁴ Not only did Wyatt set-in-motion Rube Foster's move to Chicago, an event that led directly to the creation of the NNL in 1920, but Wyatt also remained Foster's closest friend for the next two decades.⁵ In 1910, Wyatt further solidified his

² *The Milwaukee Journal*, March 3, 1923. This and all citations of *The Milwaukee Journal* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

³ *The Chicago Defender*, July 7, 1923. This and all citations of *The Chicago Defender* accessed at ProQuest, <https://about.proquest.com/>.

⁴ Geri Strecker, "Dave Wyatt: The First Great Black Sportswriter," *Black Ball* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 8.

⁵ *Ibid.*

professional relationship with Rube Foster by becoming the on-field manager for the Illinois Giants, a Chicago-based club that served as a farm team for Foster's Chicago American Giants.⁶ After successfully using his newspaper columns to publicly urge Rube Foster to join C.I. Taylor in forming the NNL, Wyatt drafted the league's first constitution and served as its first secretary during the league's inaugural 1920 season.⁷ Prior to the 1921 season, Foster again displayed his trust in Wyatt by naming him the NNL's publicity agent, tasking Wyatt with using his press connections to grow the Black game by offering guidance on fan behavior, team management, bookkeeping, and other important aspects of team administration.⁸ As these examples of Wyatt's influential relationship with Rube Foster and the NNL make clear, Foster trusted Wyatt strongly and did not fear placing him in positions of authority within the league.

The fact that Dave Wyatt's columns virtually disappeared from sports sections after 1922 contributes further to the probability that Wyatt worked with the Milwaukee Bears, because his responsibilities running the Bears likely kept Wyatt from being able to continue his work as a sportswriter during the 1923 season. Given the trust that Wyatt built with Foster over their longstanding relationship, the references to Wyatt's involvement with the Bears published in multiple newspapers, and Wyatt's sudden disappearance from sports columns in 1923, it becomes plausible to assume that Foster installed Wyatt as the head of the NNL's Milwaukee franchise when the league scrambled to replace the vacancies left by the Pittsburgh Keystones and Cleveland Tate Stars after the 1922 season.

Dave Wyatt's administrative role with the 1923 Milwaukee Bears represents the first of many connections that the short-lived Milwaukee franchise had with significant figures and

⁶ *Ibid*, 10.

⁷ *Ibid*, 12.

⁸ *Ibid*.

events in Black baseball history. Although the Milwaukee club over which he briefly presided realized little success, Dave Wyatt's importance to the development of Black professional baseball cannot be understated. Geri Strecker called Wyatt, "the most important sportswriter of the early Negro Leagues," adding that, "Without Wyatt, later black sportswriters might have had nothing to write about."⁹

Whereas the determination that Dave Wyatt managed the business side of the Milwaukee Bears derives primarily from a speculative interpretation of various pieces of indirect evidence, the identification of Baseball Hall of Famer, John Preston "Pete" Hill, as the Bears' on-field player-manager can be achieved with much more clarity. The *Chicago Defender* first made Hill's hiring as player-manager of the Milwaukee Bears public on March 24, 1923 by publishing the following:

The Milwaukee club, which will represent this city in the National Negro league race this year, will be piloted by the veteran, Pete Hill, who last year managed the Madison Stars of Philadelphia. Prior to Bruce Petway's assuming the reins of the Detroit club as manager, Pete Hill filled that capacity, after serving for a number of years as one of the leading outfielders of Rube Foster's American Giants. Western fans are glad to see the old veteran back in this territory again.¹⁰

As this excerpt in the *Defender* reveals, Pete Hill, like Dave Wyatt, had a close relationship with Rube Foster, spending many seasons as the captain of the Chicago teams that Foster managed in the 1910s.¹¹ Foster's decision to install Hill as manager of the NNL's new Milwaukee franchise in 1923 further adds credibility to the theory that Foster placed Dave Wyatt in charge of the Bears, because both men were close, highly trusted associates of the NNL president.

⁹ Ibid, 5.

¹⁰ *The Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1923.

¹¹ "Pete Hill," Seamheads Negro Leagues Data Base, accessed June 28, 2020, <http://www.seamheads.com/NegroLgs/player.php?playerID=hill-01pet>.

With Pete Hill as their player-manager, the Milwaukee Bears had yet another connection to one of the most widely respected figures in Black baseball history. Hill, a native of Culpeper County, Virginia, earned induction into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 2006.¹² The text on Hill's Hall of Fame plaque reads:

The catalyst and captain of the great Chicago American Giants clubs of the 1910s. Left-handed line drive hitter with exceptional bat control, who hit to all fields. Gracefully roamed center field with combination of speed, range, and a rifle arm. Rattled opposing pitchers, catchers, and infielders with his constant motion on the base paths. Respected leader who served as player-manager of the Detroit Stars (1919-1921) and Baltimore Black Sox (1924-1925). Also starred in Cuban Winter League.¹³

Curiously absent from Hill's Hall of Fame plaque is any mention of his role as player-manager of the 1923 Milwaukee Bears, despite the inclusion of references to Hill fulfilling the same roles in Detroit and Baltimore, perhaps indicating how little baseball historians know about Hill's job with Milwaukee's short-lived NNL franchise.

The 1923 Milwaukee Bears Season

At two o'clock in the afternoon on Wednesday April 4, the Milwaukee Bears held their first practice in Chicago.¹⁴ According to the *Chicago Defender*, manager, Pete Hill, arrived in Chicago "looking like a three-year-old colt," as he sought to fill out his roster for the upcoming season.¹⁵ The *Defender* reported that some men working out with Rube Foster's American Giants were shifted over to the Milwaukee club, although the names of these players were not specified.¹⁶ In addition to the players from Foster's club, four players from the 1922 New

¹² "Pete Hill," National Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/hill-pete>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *The Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1923.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Orleans Crescent Stars, a Black independent team, arrived to work out for Hill in Chicago.¹⁷ These players included, catcher, Herman Roth; first baseman, Percy Wilson; as well as outfielders, George Collins and Andrew Wilson.¹⁸ Both Herman Roth and Percy Wilson proved to be key acquisitions for Milwaukee; Roth produced a .274 batting average and caught 44 games for the Bears, while Percy Wilson led the club in runs-batted-in, doubles, triples, and OPS (On-Base-Percentage plus Slugging-Percentage).¹⁹

According to the *Chicago Defender*, “Pete Hill’s Milwaukee Stars,” were scheduled to play their first exhibition game on April 14, 1923 against the Cermacks, a Windy City semipro team, at Cermack Park on Chicago’s west side.²⁰ However, whether the Bears’ exhibition game with the Cermacks ever took place cannot be determined because no records of a score exist from the contest. Instead, the Milwaukee Bears’ first game likely took place on Saturday, April 21 and featured Hill’s young Milwaukee club shutting out the top-rated Logan Squares, another Chicago-based semipro team, by an impressive 7-0 score.²¹ The *Defender*’s reporting on the game carried the headline, “MILWAUKEE STARTS BY WINNING,” further suggesting that the Bears’ contest with the Logan Squares served as their inaugural exhibition.²²

The auspicious start to the Milwaukee Bears’ season continued in the opening game of the club’s NNL schedule. Playing their first game in front of Milwaukee fans at Athletic Park on April 28, the Bears earned an 8-5 victory over the NNL’s Cuban Stars.²³ The *Chicago Defender*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ “1923 Milwaukee Bears” Seamheads Negro Leagues Data Base, accessed June 28, 2020, <http://www.seamheads.com/NegroLgs/team.php?yearID=1923&teamID=MB>.

²⁰ *The Chicago Defender*, April 14, 1923.

²¹ *The Chicago Defender*, April 28, 1923.

²² Ibid.

²³ *The Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1923.

described the Milwaukee club's upset victory in the following way, "Pete Hill's Milwaukee club surprised even their own folks and pried off the lid opening there last Saturday, copping from the Cuban Stars."²⁴ By expressing surprise at Milwaukee's opening day victory over the Cuban Stars, the *Defender* conveyed to its readers the low expectations surrounding Milwaukee's new NNL franchise. Despite the Milwaukee Bears' impressive early victories over the Logan Squares and the Cuban Stars, these low expectations proved appropriate as the season progressed.

The Milwaukee Bears' 8-5 home-opener victory over the Cuban Stars also received coverage in the local white press. Applying the racist label, "Local Darkies," to the Bears' players, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* printed the following description of the Milwaukee club's victory on April 29, 1923:

Milwaukee's colored team in the Negro National league won its first game of the season at Athletic Park on Saturday, defeating the Cuban Stars of Havana by a score of 8 to 5. Thompson, local lad, displayed good form, especially at bat, and Roth unfurled a mighty throwing arm. Pryor put up a corking good game at short.²⁵

This brief account of the Bears' home opener published in the *Milwaukee Sentinel* provides valuable insight into the 1923 Milwaukee Bears and some of the themes surrounding white press coverage of Black ball clubs during the 1920s. First, the *Sentinel's* use of racialized language in describing the Milwaukee Bears follows an observable pattern in the reporting practices of white midwestern newspapers, whereby explicit efforts are made to racialize Black players by implementing such descriptive vocabulary as, "colored," "darkie," or "dusky," among other similar racialized words. By contrast, the nation's leading Black newspapers, like the *Chicago Defender* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, largely refrained from racialized descriptors in their

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *The Sunday Sentinel*, April 29, 1923. This and all citations of *The Sunday Sentinel* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

reporting on Black baseball. Since these white newspapers almost never implemented racialized language when describing white ballplayers, the racialization of Black players may be interpreted as an effort to present African Americans as dehumanized “other” relative to a white “norm” within American society.

The *Milwaukee Sentinel's* coverage of the Bears' first NNL victory also further confirms the existence of links between the 1922 McCoy-Nolan Giants and the 1923 Milwaukee Bears. The *Sentinel's* description of Sandy Thompson as a “local lad,” suggests that Thompson was the same Thompson who appeared on the McCoy-Nolan Giants' roster in 1922. By calling Thompson a “local lad,” the *Sentinel* informed its readers that Sandy Thompson played in Milwaukee the year prior and therefore could be considered a “local.”

The Bears' first game at Milwaukee's Athletic Park also featured an important new development in the NNL for 1923, the use of Black umpires. When the NNL began, it had no staff of umpires, instead relying on the home club to provide umpires for each game.²⁶ Most team operators, including Rube Foster, controversially hired white umpires to officiate their games, bringing into question the NNL's status as a “race” institution.²⁷ After the Black press, led most notably by the *Chicago Defender's* Fay Young, spent multiple years lobbying Rube Foster to hire Black men to umpire Black baseball, the NNL president finally capitulated prior to the start of the 1923 season.²⁸ The *Defender* published the following on April 21, 1923 to triumphantly announce Foster's decision to employ Black men as NNL umpires to its readers:

²⁶ Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 90.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931: The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 293.

Six umpires have been signed by the Negro National league for the season of 1923 which starts on April 28. The signing of these men is the result of a long waged propaganda led by the Chicago Defender dating back some three years.²⁹

The *Defender's* reporting also went on to announce that Leon Augustine and Lucian Snaer, two Black men from New Orleans, were scheduled to umpire their first NNL game in Milwaukee as part of the Bears' opener against the Cuban Stars.³⁰ With Augustine and Snaer serving as two of the NNL's first Black umpires, Milwaukee's Athletic Park became the site of baseball history when the Bears met the Cuban Stars on opening day.

In assessing the umpiring of Augustine and Snaer in Milwaukee's home opener, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* published the following:

Two colored umpires, sent here by the president of the league, handled the game in faultless fashion, giving the fans an innovation that is bound to make a favorable impression along the dusky circuit.³¹

Although the *Sentinel* again made use of heavily racialized language to describe the Black men who umpired their first NNL game at Milwaukee's Athletic Park, the paper's white sportswriters clearly viewed the use of Black umpires favorably.

The Milwaukee Bears were also present for the first game ever umpired by Black men at Chicago's historic Schorling Park, the home of Rube Foster's Chicago American Giants. To preview the contest, The *Chicago Defender* printed the following:

The first glimpse of brown-skin umpires here will be given the fans Sunday. Jamison of New York will work behind the plate, while Embry of Vincennes, Ind. will officiate on the bases. The fans are reminded that all humans sometimes make mistakes. These men have been given fine support in other cities by both fans, ball players, and the white press. Let us give them a rousing reception in the

²⁹ *The Chicago Defender*, April 21, 1923.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *The Sunday Sentinel*, April 29, 1923.

Windy City. It is something that we have all looked forward to and something that is here to stay, according to the president of the league.³²

Unfortunately, Foster's assurance that Black umpires were "here to stay" proved insincere, for in 1925, Foster fired four of the NNL's six Black umpires.³³ Despite the setback in 1925, Black umpires predominated the NNL in the league's later years.

For many of the NNL's stakeholders, especially those within the Black press, the hiring of Black men to officiate Black baseball represented an important innovation in Black baseball's maturation as a "race" institution, as evidenced by the following assessment published in the May 12, 1923 edition of the *Chicago Defender*:

IT IS REASONABLE to suppose that a white umpire in this country where prejudice is rife who tenders his services to judge a Colored game, isn't up to the standard, is indifferent and is only after the dollars and most of the time does not know the rules or fails to interpret them correctly. While on the other hand, a Colored umpire takes a pardonable pride in fostering the game and giving the best there is in him. The league is to be congratulated for seeing the light. And the *Defender* in fighting this battle has won the praise of baseball fans of both races all over the country, and has made an opening for all time for baseball players with brains and ability, when retired from active service, to fill these profitable positions.³⁴

As this piece from the *Defender* demonstrates, the hiring of Black umpires served both symbolic and practical purposes. Symbolically, Black men officiating Black games were more likely than white men to take pride in their jobs, thereby improving the quality of NNL games as well as the league's professional image. Practically, paying Black men to umpire NNL games kept money in the Black community, allowing more opportunities for African American men to find and keep employment in the Black baseball industry. Although the Milwaukee Bears struggled to find

³² *The Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1923.

³³ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 90.

³⁴ *The Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1923.

success in 1923, the club participated in some of the NNL's first games to feature Black umpires, linking the team to one of the most significant developments in the Black game's history.

After their opening day victory over the Cuban Stars, the Milwaukee Bears' luck quickly began to turn. On April 29, the Bears matched up in the second game of their series with the Cubans, dropping the tilt by a keenly contested 4-3 score.³⁵ According to the reporting of the *Milwaukee Journal*, the Bears committed critical errors in crucial moments during the game's early innings and failed to recover despite the impressive home run belted by shortstop, Anderson Pryor, which put the Milwaukee club on the board in the sixth inning.³⁶

The Bears' schedule did not get any easier after splitting their first two NNL games with the Cuban Stars. Next up for the young Milwaukee franchise were Rube Foster's mighty Chicago American Giants, who were scheduled to engage the Bears in a three-game weekend series beginning on Saturday, May 5. According to the *Chicago Defender*, Saturday's series opener was scheduled to be played at Milwaukee's Athletic Park, with the two clubs returning to the Windy City to conclude the series with a Sunday doubleheader at Schorling Park.³⁷ The Bears' May 5 contest with the American Giants provided for one of the biggest highlights of the club's short stay in the Cream City, when a large contingent of prominent Chicagoans invaded Athletic Park for the series opener. Similar to the modern-day tradition where fans of Major League Baseball's Chicago Cubs make the short drive north on I-94 to invade Miller Park when the Cubs play the Brewers, the *Defender* printed the following announcement to alert Chicago fans who might be interested in joining their planned pilgrimage to the Cream City:

³⁵ *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 30, 1923.

³⁶ *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 30, 1923.

³⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, May 5, 1923.

Chicago fans are planning to make the trip by automobile. They will gather in front of the Chicago Defender office, leaving together at 9 o'clock or shortly after.³⁸

The *Defender* also included in their reporting, the following list of distinguished Chicago fans who committed themselves as drivers:

Phd A. Jones (Hudson). A. L. Jackson (Packard). Tony Langston (Haynes). M.C.B. Mason (Cadillac). William Bottoms (Marmon). Luther Thompson (Marmon Special). Tucker Brothera (Packard). Lewie Block (Cadillac). Walter Bell (McFarland). Trevey Woods (Cadillac). Packey McFarland (Paige). Rube Foster (Apperson). John Schorling (Oldsmobile). Edward Jones (Stutz). Pop Lewis (Packard) and others.³⁹

The list, which contains the make of each driver's automobile in parenthesis, reflects the growth of American car culture during the 1920s, a decade that saw annual automobile production triple from 1.5 million to 4.8 million.⁴⁰ The Windy City baseball fans that made the drive to Milwaukee included men from various areas of acclaim: M.C.B. Mason served as a leading figure in the Methodist Church, Packey McFarland made his name as a well-known lightweight boxer, Edward Jones operated as a prominent Chicago "numbers" kingpin who feuded with the Capone brothers, and Tony Langston wrote for the *Chicago Defender*.⁴¹

The invaders from Chicago had their patronage rewarded, as the American Giants toppled Milwaukee by a score of 8-3.⁴² The two clubs played to a stiff 3-3 tie heading into the ninth inning, when a clutch bases-loaded double off the bat of Chicago's Lyons brought in three runs and spelled Milwaukee's defeat.⁴³ The Bears' struggles continued the following day when

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty!: An American History*, Fifth edition, vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2017), 764.

⁴¹ Bob Buege, *Borchert Field: Stories from Milwaukee's Legendary Ballpark* (Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2017), 117.

⁴² *The Chicago Defender*, May 12, 1923.

⁴³ Ibid.

Milwaukee traveled to Chicago's Schorling Park and dropped both ends of the Sunday doubleheader, completing a disappointing three-game sweep at the hands of Foster's club.⁴⁴

After losing three straight games to the American Giants, the Bears were confronted with yet another challenge the following weekend when the powerhouse Kansas City Monarchs traveled to Milwaukee. The Monarchs, winners of the 1922 NNL pennant, were one of Black baseball's biggest drawing cards, as evidenced by the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* reporting in the days leading up to the club's stop in the Cream City. An article printed in the May 10 edition of the *Sentinel* reads:

The Monarchs, crack Kansas City entry in the Negro National League and victors over the Kansas City American Association team in a post-season series last fall, will meet the Milwaukee negro team in a three game series here next Saturday, Sunday, and Monday.⁴⁵

The report further enticed Milwaukee baseball fans by mentioning that the Monarchs have played against a number of white major and minor league teams and that they have "more than held their own against them."⁴⁶ As the *Sentinel's* preview of the Bears' upcoming series with the Kansas City Monarchs reveals, the white press measured the quality of an all-Black team by assessing their ability to compete with top white clubs. Since the Monarchs had played with and defeated teams in the white major and minor leagues, they were clearly worth the price of admission.

As with their three-game slide against the American Giants, the ball did not bounce Milwaukee's way in their weekend series with the Kansas City Monarchs. The Bears dropped all three contests to the Monarchs and were swept in three games for the second consecutive

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, May 10, 1923.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

weekend.⁴⁷ In the series, Kansas City scored a combined 26 runs, while the Bears only mustered 9.⁴⁸ Although the Bears felt great optimism after winning their first NNL game against the Cuban Stars, these positive feelings were quickly dashed by Milwaukee's ensuing seven-game losing streak. Unfortunately for the NNL's fledgling Milwaukee franchise, the team's performance on the field gave fans in the Cream City few reasons to be interested in the young ball club.

After struggling mightily at home in the early portion of their NNL schedule, the Milwaukee Bears embarked on a long road trip, first stopping in Indianapolis for a series with the league-leading A.B.C.'s. In previewing the Bears' series in Indianapolis, the *Chicago Defender* provided the following insights into Milwaukee's slow start as well as some reasons why manager, Pete Hill, remained confident in his ball club:

Milwaukee, on the other hand, enters the cellar berth, although Pete Hill says his team will stack-up with any of the rest when they hit their stride. It is a known fact that he has in Roth, A. Wilson, P. Wilson, and Strong, good, seasoned men. The club has been handicapped by the lack of practice owing to the cold, rainy days.⁴⁹

As the *Defender's* reporting reveals, poor spring weather represented a major barrier to the Bears' success, because the club missed out on many early opportunities to practice together, an especially important exercise for a newly formed team without preexisting team chemistry.

After dropping games one and two of their series with the A.B.C.'s, Milwaukee appeared to "hit their stride," as Pete Hill predicted, in the first game of a Sunday doubleheader, snapping Indianapolis' ten-game winning streak with an impressive 7-1 victory on the back of Joe

⁴⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, May 19, 1923.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

Strong's dominant pitching performance.⁵⁰ However, the Bears quickly reverted back to their losing ways, falling in game two of the doubleheader by a 4-2 score.⁵¹

Like most Negro League clubs, the Milwaukee Bears sought to maximize their profitability through supplementing their league schedule by booking barnstorming exhibitions with amateur and semipro teams. Prior to their arrival in Indianapolis, the Bears arranged such an exhibition game with the Tipton, Indiana American Legion team for Thursday, May 17.⁵² Despite Milwaukee's poor win-loss record, Tipton's local paper, the *Tipton Daily Tribune*, expressed great excitement at having an all-Black team as talented as the Bears play in their town by printing the following:

The Milwaukee Bears have one of the best teams in the negro league. The team has three players who could easily be in the major league, it is said, if the color line did not keep them out.⁵³

Although the Bears were far from being "one of the best teams in the negro league," the *Daily Tribune* further demonstrated the importance of the Milwaukee club's appearance in Tipton by reporting that local officials had considered the declaration of a half-holiday, where businesses would close early to allow townspeople to attend the ballgame.⁵⁴ The hosting Tipton American Legion team further expressed their strong desire to book the Milwaukee Bears by guaranteeing a minimum of \$250 to the Bears if the game were played.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ *The Chicago Defender*, May 26, 1923.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² *The Tipton Daily Tribune*, May 14, 1923. This and all citations of *The Tipton Daily Tribune* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Just two days before the Bears were scheduled to play in Tipton, the *Tipton Daily Tribune* made the speculation regarding the declaration of a half-holiday official, printing:

Most of the local merchants have agreed to close their places of business on Thursday afternoon from 2 till 5 o'clock in order that those who want to attend the ball game may be able to do so.⁵⁶

Apparently, the people of Tipton were not the only ones interested in catching a glimpse of the Milwaukee Bears, as the *Daily Tribune* reported that large contingents of fans from nearby Indiana towns like Elwood, Noblesville, and Kokomo planned to descend upon Tipton for the exhibition as well.⁵⁷

Unfortunately for the excited Indiana baseball fans, the Milwaukee Bears were once again victimized by inclement weather, as unseasonably winter-like conditions forced the manager of the Tipton American Legion club to cancel their highly-anticipated game with the Bears.⁵⁸ Making an already bad situation worse, Milwaukee manager, Pete Hill, never received word of the game's cancellation, causing the Bears to make the originally planned voyage to Tipton, only to receive the bad news too late.⁵⁹ Fortunately, the Bears were able to reschedule their cancelled exhibition in Tipton for the following week, playing the game after their weekend series in Indianapolis, rather than before.⁶⁰ In the rescheduled exhibition, finally played on Thursday, May 24, the Bears defeated the Tipton club 8-3, jumping on Tipton's starting pitcher early by scoring five runs in the first two innings.⁶¹ Although the Tipton American Legion

⁵⁶ *The Tipton Daily Tribune*, May 15, 1923.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ *The Tipton Daily Tribune*, May 16, 1923.

⁵⁹ *The Tipton Daily Tribune*, May 17, 1923.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 25, 1923.

players were amateurs, the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that the Tipton club won the “semi-pro championship of Indiana,” making the Bears’ victory slightly more impressive.⁶²

After their swing through Indiana, a trip which produced mixed results, the Bears headed to Ohio to take on the NNL’s other new franchise in 1923, the Toledo Tigers. On Saturday, May 27, the Bears blew an early four-run-lead, losing to Toledo by a 6-5 score.⁶³ Despite the heartbreaking one-run loss on Saturday, Milwaukee bounced back to cop a well-played 5-3 victory over the homestanding Tigers on Sunday, earning a split in the two-game set with Toledo.⁶⁴ When the Bears next traveled to St. Louis, they were unable to bring the success they displayed in their final Toledo tilt with them, dropping another one-run ball game to the NNL’s St. Louis franchise by a 7-6 score.⁶⁵

The Bears made the final stop of their road trip in Kansas City, where the club earned one of their more impressive victories of the season in the first game of a doubleheader on June 3. According to the reporting of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the visiting Milwaukee club scored the go-ahead run in their half of the ninth inning then proceeded to end Kansas City’s bid at a game-tying rally in the bottom of the frame to earn a 6-5 victory over the top-rated Monarchs.⁶⁶ Curiously, the *Sentinel* referred to the Milwaukee club as the “Giants,” not the Bears, perhaps indicating the white paper’s recognition of the Bears as a continuation of Milwaukee’s McCoy-Nolan Giants from 1922. Despite their impressive late-innings victory in their series opener with the Monarchs, the Bears failed to generate any momentum in the league standings, dropping

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 2, 1923. This and all citations of *The Pittsburgh Courier* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 1, 1923.

⁶⁶ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 4, 1923.

game two of the doubleheader to the Monarchs by a disappointing 10-3 score.⁶⁷ The *Chicago Defender* estimated the crowd for each game of the Kansas City twin bill at 8,000 fans.⁶⁸ After splitting the Sunday doubleheader, the Bears looked to earn their first series victory of the season with a win in game three on Monday. Unfortunately, Milwaukee's inconsistent play continued, as the Bears' pitchers surrendered four homeruns en route to a 15-7 series finale loss to the Monarchs.⁶⁹ With the Bears' four-city NNL road trip coming to a close, the club continued to struggle, failing to win consecutive games a single time since the season started on April 28.

The Milwaukee Bears limped home from their difficult road trip through the NNL circuit to begin a weekend series with the Toledo Tigers at Athletic Park on Saturday, June 9. According to an article published in the June 8 edition of the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the Bears' had reason to be optimistic that they could still salvage their season because of a major roster shakeup that took place before the club returned to Milwaukee:

The local league representatives return home with almost an entire new team, many players being annexed en route, and they are reputed to now boast of the fastest infield and hardest hitting outfield in the league. Stratten, the new shortstop is said to be the best looking infielder among the colored leaguers, while Redd, the new third sacker, has added a decided punch to the offense of the locals.⁷⁰

The Bears quickly reaped the benefits of their revamped lineup, riding a seventh inning two-out rally in which they scored three runs to a 7-4 series opening victory over Toledo.⁷¹ Highly regarded newcomer, Felton Stratton, made a strong Athletic Park debut for the Bears, collecting two base-hits and scoring one of the club's seven runs.⁷²

⁶⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, June 9, 1923.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 8, 1923.

⁷¹ *The Milwaukee Journal*, June 10, 1923.

⁷² *Ibid.*

On Sunday, June 10, the Milwaukee Bears again defeated the visiting Toledo Tigers by a 3-2 score, marking the first time the Bears won consecutive NNL games all season.⁷³ The Bears earned the one-run victory by flexing their offensive muscles, slugging three clutch extra base hits at key moments in the ballgame.⁷⁴ According to the *Sentinel's* reporting, Bears' newcomers, Stratton and Finner, each "pulled Babe Ruths for the locals," while Redd legged-out an impressive triple.⁷⁵ Although the 37-year-old veteran, John Finner, also shined at the plate in the game, the *Sentinel* did not overlook his crafty pitching, mentioning that he wiggled out of multiple jams to maintain Milwaukee's narrow lead.⁷⁶

Despite their first consecutive league victories and improved roster, the Milwaukee Bears continued to have difficulty attracting fans to Athletic Park. Although they did not know it at the time, the Bears series finale with the Toledo Tigers, played on June 11, 1923, represented their final game in Milwaukee. In the contest, Milwaukee's starter, George Boggs, lost a 2-0 pitchers' duel to Toledo Tigers' hurler Dicta Johnson.⁷⁷ Coincidentally, Dicta Johnson would soon be pitching on the Bears' roster, and the Bears would be playing their home games in Toledo. On July 7, the *Pittsburgh Courier* announced to its readers the following major change affecting the remainder of the 1923 NNL season:

The Milwaukee club will be transferred in toto to Toledo because of the lack of interest in the Cream City displayed by the fans of that city. Milwaukee will play out its own schedule and keep the same percentages and standing in the league race but as the Toledo club. The present Toledo club will be disbanded and in the place of the vacancy left by the Milwaukee club the Tate Stars of Cleveland will be admitted into the league, playing out the schedule of the Toledo club and accepting their percentage and standing in the league race... This change will take place on July 15th. The members of the now playing Toledo club will be

⁷³ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, June 11, 1923.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *The Chicago Defender*, June 16, 1923.

distributed throughout the league and where they can be used to the best advantage.⁷⁸

To summarize the *Courier's* reporting, on July 15, 1923 the Bears ceased operations in Milwaukee, moving the franchise to Toledo, where the struggling Tigers were to disband, their players being allowed to sign on with other teams in the league. The Bears (now Toledo) kept the same record and remaining league schedule that they had as the Milwaukee club. The dissolution of the Tigers and the Milwaukee Bears' move to Toledo left a vacancy in the NNL for the remainder of the 1923 season. To fill the void, the NNL planned to add the Cleveland Tate Stars, a team in the unaffiliated Negro minor leagues, to the circuit. The Tate Stars were to inherit the record and remaining schedule of the disbanded Toledo Tigers franchise. Milwaukee's short tenure as a Negro League city had officially come to an inglorious end.

While the NNL planned to maintain an eight-team circuit for the remainder of the 1923 season, the Cleveland Tate Stars failed to produce the thousand-dollar deposit required to obtain a franchise.⁷⁹ Although Cleveland businessman, George Hooper, paid off the Tate Stars' preexisting debts, his inability to cover the NNL's mandatory deposit kept the NNL's 1923 contingency plan from being realized.⁸⁰ The NNL appeared to have two final chances at maintaining an eight-team circuit when rumors surfaced that the Birmingham Black Barons and Memphis Red Sox, both of the Negro Southern league, had filed applications for league entry, but these rumors never materialized into anything beyond rumors and the NNL finished the 1923 season with only seven teams.⁸¹

⁷⁸ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 7, 1923.

⁷⁹ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 292.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

Although the Bears did not play another home game in Milwaukee after June 11, the club continued to play baseball, competing both in official NNL games as well as in a variety of barnstorming contests. One of the highlights of the Bears' post-Milwaukee existence came when the team traveled below the Mason-Dixon line in July to barnstorm against the top teams of the Negro Southern league. While the Birmingham Black Barons of the Negro Southern League did not officially enter the NNL circuit in 1923, the club's owner, Joe Rush, did purchase a franchise in the Negro Professional Baseball Association, the organization which governed the NNL and its associated non-league clubs. According to the July 15, 1923 edition of the *Birmingham News*, Rush paid \$10,000 to acquire the Negro Professional Baseball Association's Reading, Pennsylvania franchise, relocating their operations to Birmingham so that his club could schedule games with Black baseball's top drawing cards, the teams in the NNL.⁸²

Shortly after Rush affiliated his club with the Negro Professional Baseball Association, the Milwaukee Bears became the first NNL team to engage the upstart Black Barons in an exhibition series, journeying South for a four game set beginning on July 19.⁸³ In the first game of the series, the two clubs played to a 4-4, ten-inning tie.⁸⁴ Even with the constant threat of rain, the Bears proved to be a strong drawing-card, attracting 8,000 fans for the exhibition.⁸⁵ According to the *Chicago Defender*, the people of Birmingham treated the Black Barons' first game against a club with "big talent" like Milwaukee's as a "society event," with the exhibition even enticing 500 white fans to populate the Southern ballpark's segregated seating sections.⁸⁶

⁸² *The Birmingham News*, July 15, 1923. This and all citations of *The Birmingham News* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 20, 1923.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *The Chicago Defender*, July 28, 1923.

The Bears and Black Barons renewed acquaintances the next day for game two of their four-game series, only this time Birmingham bested Milwaukee by a 4-3 score.⁸⁷ According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* reporting, several thousand fans packed themselves into the park to witness the Barons' game two victory.⁸⁸ The spectators got their money's worth; not only did they witness a closely-contested ballgame, but they received the added entertainment of a managerial ejection, after Milwaukee's Pete Hill let his temper get the best of him while arguing a disputed call.⁸⁹ On Saturday, July 21, the two clubs wrapped up their four game set with a doubleheader. Each game produced a one-sided score, with the Bears banging out fifteen base-hits on their way to an impressive 9-1 victory in game one.⁹⁰ The large home crowd had more to cheer about in game two, with the Black Barons toppling Milwaukee by a 12-3 score.⁹¹ Although the Bears clearly had their hitting shoes on for the Saturday doubleheader, tallying 24 hits between the two ballgames, the club struggled in the field, committing five errors in the second game, which allowed Birmingham to run up the score.⁹²

After their four games in Birmingham, the Milwaukee Bears continued their southern tour with a stop in Memphis, where they met another up-and-coming ball club in the Negro Southern League, the Memphis Red Sox. According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, a "huge throng" of Memphis fans witnessed the Milwaukee Bears drop a 5-1 exhibition to the local Red Sox on Sunday, July 21.⁹³ The Milwaukee Bears' barnstorming exhibitions with the Negro Southern League's Birmingham Black Barons and Memphis Red Sox represented a significant

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 21, 1923.

⁸⁹ *The Chicago Defender*, July 28, 1923.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 23, 1923.

achievement for any all-Black traveling team, because these clubs took great risks to travel through the Jim Crow South, where Blacks frequently became the victims of racial violence.

While the Milwaukee Bears objectively failed to achieve competitive and economic success in 1923, the NNL succeeded as a whole. The *Pittsburgh Courier* even went so far as to label the 1923 season as, “the best year since the organizing of the league.”⁹⁴ According to the *Courier’s* reporting, only the Toledo Tigers club that disbanded in mid-July failed to turn a profit, implying, somewhat surprisingly, that even the Milwaukee Bears were profitable.⁹⁵ Conveniently for this analysis, the only existing published NNL financial data comes from the 1923 season. According to the NNL’s data on the 1923 season, league games attracted a total of 402,436 fans, or an average of 1,650 fans per game.⁹⁶ Total receipts that year were \$197,218.⁹⁷ The NNL’s expenses totaled \$162, 425, including \$101,000 for player salaries, \$25,212 for train fares, \$9,136 for board and streetcar fares, \$7,965 for baseballs, \$7,448 for umpires, \$7,500 for advertising, and \$4,164 for “other expenses.”⁹⁸ The league split the remaining \$34,793 in profits between the seven clubs still operating at the end of the season.⁹⁹ While the NNL’s published financial data depicts the 1923 season as a fairly profitable one, it can be assumed that the struggling Milwaukee and Toledo franchises contributed little to these profits.

Challenges Common to the Negro National League

Many of the factors that contributed to the 1923 Bears’ inability to complete a full season in Milwaukee were rooted in challenges common to Rube Foster’s NNL. Such issues as

⁹⁴ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 24, 1923.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 89.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

franchise instability, schedule imbalance, antagonism between owners, and the absence of ballpark ownership, plagued the NNL throughout much of its history. In addition to these challenges, the NNL also suffered from the absence of white privilege and the important economic and political networking that came with it. While the Milwaukee Bears were far from the only ball club to fall victim to these challenges, an analysis of the ways in which these factors impacted the Bears in 1923 provides greater insight into the larger NNL experience during the 1920s.

When the Milwaukee Bears were added to the NNL in 1923, they entered a league already characterized by shaky franchises. After the NNL's inaugural 1920 season, the Dayton franchise relocated to Columbus in the first of many such changes.¹⁰⁰ In fact, over the twelve-year existence of the first NNL, only Foster's own Chicago American Giants were members continuously.¹⁰¹ While Black professional baseball faced many unique challenges caused by the systemic oppression of Black people in the United States, Black leagues were not alone in experiencing early instability. As historian, Michael Lomax, explains:

It should be noted that Organized Baseball's early years were marred by constant franchise shifting and unbalanced consumer markets, and it would take from 1876 to 1903 before the white majors reached some semblance of economic stability. Black baseball was experiencing the same kinds of growing pains, and black club owners confronted obstacles their white counterparts never had to endure.¹⁰²

As Lomax argues, the NNL's early issues with franchise instability were not based exclusively in challenges presented by racial inequality, rather, some hurdles were common to all fledgling professional baseball leagues, Black or white.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 86.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 265.

While the NNL faced many of the same growing pains as their white counterparts, the causes of the franchise instability that plagued Foster's league were primarily rooted in the fact that only a small minority of team owners ever controlled their own ballparks, an issue with which white leagues never had to contend. Baseball historians tend to agree that the NNL's problem with ballpark ownership directly influenced many of the schedule imbalances that characterized the NNL throughout its existence. Since the NNL lacked consistent and reliable field arrangements, the league struggled to make a fair and balanced schedule, jeopardizing the circuit's credibility. Unlike the major and minor leagues of organized baseball, where white owners did not face the barriers to property ownership that Black Americans faced, the NNL rarely finished a season with all teams playing the same number of games.¹⁰³ Difficulties scheduling games at white-owned ballparks, where games played by white clubs took precedent, spurred many NNL clubs to book more barnstorming exhibitions with non-league teams, sometimes even cancelling NNL games for more lucrative barnstorming matchups.¹⁰⁴ In fact, only about a third of the more than 200 games typically played by Black teams each season were league games.¹⁰⁵ Robert Peterson explained this relationship between ballpark access and scheduling inequities by writing:

The scheduling problem was paramount during the early years of Negro organized baseball and would remain troublesome as long as there were leagues. It was due in large part to the fact that few Negro clubs owned parks. In 1921, for example, when the Negro National League was in its second season, no club owned a park and grounds outright.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 87.

¹⁰⁴ Benjamin G. Rader, *Baseball: A History of America's Game* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 159.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 86.

Historian, Benjamin Rader, also highlighted the ballpark problem's role in causing the NNL's scheduling dilemma by writing:

Because of the allure of nonleague games and problems with finding playing fields, the black clubs never played the same number of league games in a season, a fact that greatly reduced the potential excitement of pennant races.¹⁰⁷

Echoing both Peterson and Rader's belief in the centrality of the NNL's ballpark problem to the league's scheduling woes, Michael Lomax declared Black baseball's lack of ballpark ownership the "Achilles heel" of the Black game's business and economic development.¹⁰⁸

As with most NNL seasons, the 1923 season in which the Milwaukee Bears' played featured tremendous schedule discrepancies. All eight league teams played a different number of games that year, with the Kansas City Monarchs playing as many as 90, and the Toledo Tigers playing as few as 26.¹⁰⁹ The Bears likely played between 46 and 66 games in 1923, but that number varies depending on the source. Like most Black clubs, the Milwaukee Bears did not control their own ballpark, instead renting access to Athletic park from the white-owned Milwaukee Brewers. The Bears' reliance on the Brewers for field rentals proved problematic, especially when inclement weather caused the Brewers to reschedule their games, forcing the Bears to alter their NNL schedule to accommodate the white club. This absence of autonomy that resulted from the Bears' reliance on renting field use from the Brewers contributed greatly to the club's inability to complete a full season in Milwaukee.

The Milwaukee Bears reliance on the white Milwaukee Brewers for access to playing facilities represented just one barrier to the team's autonomy during the 1923 season. The Bears also had to contend with another challenge common to the NNL, Rube Foster's autocratic

¹⁰⁷ Rader, *Baseball*, 159.

¹⁰⁸ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 421.

¹⁰⁹ Peterson, *Only the Ball was White*, 258.

control of his league and the conflicts which often resulted from his self-serving agenda. The NNL's constitution placed tremendous power in Foster's hands, giving him complete authority over the creation of the league schedule as well as mandating that member clubs purchase all equipment directly from Foster.¹¹⁰ While Foster reassured club owners that bulk equipment purchases produced savings for all, he did not inform them that he received discounts from sporting goods dealers, allowing him to personally profit from the equipment mandate.¹¹¹ The NNL's constitution further enriched Foster by requiring that owners pay five percent of the gate for each NNL game to the league office in Chicago as "operating expenses."¹¹² Historian, Mark Ribowsky, brought into question Rube Foster's true intentions in leading the NNL by writing, "Indeed, a strong case can be made that the ulterior motive behind Foster's league was not racial hegemony but the economic hegemony of Foster's booking office."¹¹³ In order to address the criticism that he was using the NNL to benefit his own club, Foster attempted to create an image of parity by moving top players such as Oscar Charleston, Jose Mendez, and Sam Crawford to different teams, but these actions only reinforced the negative perception that Foster had his fingerprints all over the league.¹¹⁴

While Rube Foster earned a reputation for putting the interests of his own club before those of the league, he was far from the only NNL owner to do so. Whereas the owners in white organized baseball structured themselves along what Michael Lomax called the "competitor-partner model" by embracing the idea that they were both competitors on the field but partners in business who needed to collaborate more than competitors in other industries, the owners of the

¹¹⁰ Mark Ribowsky, *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884 to 1955* (Carol Publishing Group, 1997), 105.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

NNL failed to achieve this same understanding.¹¹⁵ Instead, the NNL followed what Lomax labeled as the “business alliance model,” forming loose associations among themselves to guarantee that their clubs secured the best playing dates and facilities, while also allowing each club the option of playing either a league game or an exhibition contest in the pursuit of the most lucrative gate receipts.¹¹⁶ This tendency among NNL owners to act in the best interest of their individual ball clubs, even if it came at the expense of what most benefitted the league as a whole, caused tremendous inequities in the NNL, including the scheduling imbalances that hurt the league’s credibility. Lomax articulated the business-alliance model’s negative impact on the NNL by writing:

Rube Foster, Ed Bolden, and Nat Strong believed it was not in their best economic interests to pattern their leagues after the white Major Leagues. They refused to acknowledge that their leagues’ overall economic interests and their interests were one and the same. These men were satisfied so long as they minimized player jumping and maintained hegemony over their respective consumer markets...More importantly, this approach made it difficult for both [Negro] leagues to expand into new markets like, Washington, D.C.; Cleveland; and Milwaukee.¹¹⁷

Clearly, the NNL’s inability to adopt the competitor-partner model that made white organized baseball so successful contributed to the league’s instability. The 1923 Milwaukee Bears were especially harmed by the NNL’s lack of cooperation, because the franchise did not control their own playing facilities and operated in a relatively small market without a sizable Black middle class, meaning that they did not have nearly the same profit potential as other NNL franchises in more suitable markets. Without a balanced league structure that adhered more closely to a competitor-partner model, the Milwaukee Bears did not stand a chance in 1923.

¹¹⁵ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 419.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 420.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid*, 421-422.

Challenges Unique to the Cream City Context

While many of the reasons for the Bears' failure in 1923 were common to the NNL, others were unique to the Milwaukee context. In order to better understand these factors, one must consider the historical development of Milwaukee's Black community. Although Black settlers were present in the Wisconsin territory prior to the Revolutionary War, by 1910 Milwaukee's Black population numbered just 980 persons, accounting for a minuscule 0.2 percent of the City's total population.¹¹⁸ During this period, Milwaukee Blacks struggled to find even menial employment, facing strong competition from Milwaukee's sizable number of job-seeking European immigrants.¹¹⁹ Even the Plankinton House, which had been Milwaukee's largest employer of African Americans since the 1860s began to replace these workers with Greeks and other foreign-born employees by 1906.¹²⁰ Milwaukee Blacks also struggled to find employment in factory positions; historian, Joe William Trotter Jr., observed that such positions only became open to Blacks through personal connections to influential whites or as strikebreakers.¹²¹ These relatively privileged few who secured factory work were often forced to contend with the tenuousness of their employment, because white capitalists typically fired their African American strikebreakers as soon as the white laborers ended their strike.¹²² As these factors indicate, for the relatively small number of Blacks who migrated to Milwaukee in the decades prior to the 1923 Bears season, achieving middle-class status represented a seemingly herculean task.

¹¹⁸ Joe William Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945*, Second edition (University of Illinois Press, 2007), 5.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² *Ibid.*, 14.

Despite overwhelming economic challenges, African Americans continued to migrate to Milwaukee in search of a better life than the one offered by the South. The outbreak of World War I fueled this migration, as demand for manufactured goods to supply the war effort in the industrial North spurred Milwaukee industrialists to recruit both Black and white laborers from the rural South. From 1910 to 1920, Milwaukee's Black population grew by 127.4 percent, but still sat at only 2,229 persons, or just 0.4 percent of the city's total population.¹²³ Despite continued growth, by 1930, African Americans still only made up 1.2 percent of the total Milwaukee population.¹²⁴ This relatively small number of Black people living in Milwaukee helps to explain the Bears' difficulties establishing a stable fanbase in the Cream City during the 1923 season. Unlike the all-Black barnstorming teams of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, the franchises of the NNL relied more on Black patronage to generate profits. By comparison, Chicago, where the American Giants operated as one of the NNL's most stable franchises, possessed a Black population in 1930 nearing 234,000 people, just under 7 percent of the Windy City's total population.¹²⁵ Likewise, Detroit, home to the NNL's Detroit Stars, had an African American population over 120,000 people by 1930, dwarfing Milwaukee's 7,501.¹²⁶ In considering the factors that contributed to the Bears' inability to play a full season in Milwaukee in 1923, one can assume that Milwaukee's small Black population played a major role.

While Milwaukee possessed a relatively small Black population in 1923, a trend that continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the situation changed during what historians have labeled, the "Second Great Migration." Historian, James N. Gregory, accurately

¹²³ *Ibid*, 41.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, 46.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, 44.

points out that scholars prematurely bestowed the label, “Great Migration,” upon the first wave of Black migration from the rural South to the urban North during World War I and the 1920s.¹²⁷ As Gregory points out, starting with World War II and running through the Vietnam era, a second wave of close to five million people left the rural South for the urban North, creating a migration even greater in size than the “Great Migration.”¹²⁸ The growth of Milwaukee’s Black population occurred much more rapidly during this Second Great Migration; by 1960 Milwaukee’s Black population reached 62,458 persons.¹²⁹ When combined with “white flight” to Milwaukee’s expanding suburbs, African Americans made up 8.4 percent of the city’s 1960 population.¹³⁰ While still smaller than other large Black population centers, like New York and Philadelphia, these population statistics were more akin to the Black populations of Detroit and Chicago in 1930, cities which supported more stable NNL franchises during the 1920s. When looking at population factors one might imagine that Black baseball would have been a more lucrative business venture in Milwaukee during the late 1950s and early 1960s, but by that time Jackie Robinson had broken organize baseball’s color barrier and the Negro Leagues were on the verge of collapse, as Black fans began flocking to Major League ballparks to see the new Black stars compete at baseball’s highest level for the first time since the 1890s.

In addition to the relatively small size of Milwaukee’s Black population in 1923, socioeconomic fragmentation within the city’s Black community further contributed to the Bears’ inability to find success in Milwaukee. As previously mentioned, most African Americans

¹²⁷ James N. Gregory, “The Second Great Migration: A Historical Overview,” in *African American Urban History Since World War II*, ed. Kenneth L. Kusmer and Joe W. Trotter (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 19.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹²⁹ “1960 United States Census, Milwaukee, Wis.,” accessed May 13, 2019, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1960/population-and-housing-phc-1/41953654v6ch4.pdf>.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

arriving to Milwaukee in the early-twentieth century were relegated to the lowest sectors of the city's economy. While Blacks gained a small foothold in industrial labor during World War I, the "New Middle Class" of African Americans that developed in places like Chicago did not yet exist in Milwaukee.¹³¹ The Cream City's nonexistent Black middle class in 1923 indicates that even amongst the Bears' small potential Black customer base, few possessed the leisure time or disposable income to spend on attending Negro League baseball games.

Although Black Milwaukee lacked a sizable middle class in 1923, some African Americans managed to reach an elevated status within the city's Black population, fragmenting the African American community along socioeconomic lines. This class-divide within Milwaukee's Black community became exacerbated by both the influx of new Black migrants from the South during the first wave of the Great Migration and the exclusion of these Black people from white institutions upon their arrival to the city. The conflict within the Black community pitted an old elite, reliant on connections with whites, against an emerging elite that catered to a primarily Black clientele.¹³² Joe William Trotter, Jr. explained the conflict in the following way:

Blacks intensified their efforts toward building self-sufficient, indigenous social, economic, political, and religious institutions. These activities, however, were not conducted without deep internal conflicts among blacks themselves. Friction slowly developed between an old elite dependent on white patronage and an emerging new elite based upon black support. The old elite, for example, viewed black institutions as only temporary expedients along the road to full integration.¹³³

The old elite's aversion to separate Black institutions added another layer of difficulty to the Bears' attempts to establish a strong Black fanbase in Milwaukee. While no evidence explicitly

¹³¹ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 28.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Trotter, *Black Milwaukee*, 28-29.

suggests that Milwaukee's old Black elite definitively opposed the Milwaukee Bears, a franchise that operated as part of a prominent separate Black institution, one can see how members of this group may have been more inclined to patronize the games of the Milwaukee Brewers, a team that played in white Organized Baseball. At the very least, the lack of racial cohesion within Milwaukee's small Black population in 1923 complicated the Black community's ability to rally around the Bears on a unified front, further interfering with the team's ability to attract Black fans.

With Milwaukee's relatively small and working-class Black population in 1923, the Bears were more reliant on white patronage than other Negro League cities. According to Dennis Biddle, a former Negro League baseball player and the founder of Yesterday's Negro League Baseball Players Inc., a Negro League alumni advocacy group, the crowds that came to watch the Bears play at Athletic Park were predominantly white.¹³⁴ While Biddle, born in 1935, did not witness these white crowds first-hand, he received this information from former Bears catcher, Herman Roth, with whom he had developed a relationship later in life. Roth's claim may be corroborated by the relatively consistent coverage the Bears received in the city's white press, especially early in the season. Such local coverage in the white press represented an important means of advertising for the Milwaukee Bears, because in 1923 no major Black newspaper operated in the city of Milwaukee, representing yet another challenge that the Bears faced in the Cream City.

¹³⁴ Interview with Dennis Biddle, conducted by Ken Bartelt on April 9, 2019. Audio and transcripts located at Milwaukee County Historical Society.

Conclusion

Although the 1923 Milwaukee Bears failed to find success during their brief stay in Milwaukee, an analysis of the many factors that contributed to their failure exposes important themes in the developments of both Black Milwaukee and the Negro Leagues. Brought into existence in large part because of the success of the 1922 Milwaukee-based McCoy-Nolan Giants, the Bears were tasked with competing in an NNL plagued by franchise instability, scheduling imbalances, and poor cooperation between team owners. Like most Black ball clubs the Bears did not control their own playing facilities, instead relying on rentals of Athletic Park from the American Association Milwaukee Brewers. However, unlike many of the NNL's more stable franchises, the Milwaukee Bears operated in a market not well-suited for Negro League baseball. With a small and overwhelmingly working class Black population, the Cream City proved to be a difficult place to attract Black fans, forcing the Bears to rely disproportionately on white patronage. When white fans did not show up and spend their hard earned dollars on Bears baseball, largely because of the team's poor product on the field, the Bears were forced to leave Milwaukee in search of greener pastures.

Despite the team's lack of success, the Milwaukee Bears story deserves to be included in the story of Milwaukee baseball. In the city's short time as a Negro League city, Milwaukee became home to some of the Black game's most revered figures, with Hall of Famer, Pete Hill piloting the young Milwaukee ball club and the great Black sportswriter, Dave Wyatt, working in an administrative role for the team. The Milwaukee Bears also provided Milwaukee baseball fans, both Black and white, with an opportunity to see some of the greatest all-Black teams in baseball history, when Rube Foster's Chicago American Giants and the renowned Kansas City Monarchs visited Milwaukee to play the Bears at Athletic Park. Because of the Bears,

Milwaukee also provided the setting for one of the most important developments in baseball history, the use of Black umpires in an NNL game. While the Bears did not stay in Milwaukee long, the city continues to honor them each baseball season, when the Major League Milwaukee Brewers wear replicas of the Bears' uniforms as part of their annual "Negro Leagues Tribute game."

Chapter 4

Back to Barnstorming: The Return, Rise, & Fall of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants

Introduction

Following the Milwaukee Bears' disastrous 1923 season, Birmingham Black Barons owner, Joe Rush, purchased the Milwaukee franchise for \$2,000, opening up a spot for his Black Barons to join the NNL in 1924.¹ Although Milwaukee's brief stint as an NNL city came to a disappointing end, the Black professional baseball void created by the Bears' demise allowed Milwaukee Black ball to return to its winning formula, independent barnstorming. Back in 1922, the McCoy-Nolan Giants emerged as a highly competitive Milwaukee-based Black traveling team that attracted large crowds throughout the Midwest while adhering to a local barnstorming model. The McCoy-Nolan Giants were so successful in the Cream City during the 1922 season, that Rube Foster awarded Milwaukee a franchise in his NNL for the 1923 campaign. Although the 1923 season, in which the McCoy-Nolans did not operate, represented a detour on the clubs' path towards becoming one of the nation's elite all-Black traveling teams, the ball club returned to the barnstorming trails in 1924 to resume their ascendancy. From 1924 to 1932, Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants expanded their barnstorming network from its initial Midwestern territory to the west coast as well as overseas to Cuba, cultivating a reputation as one of the Black game's top traveling attractions. Despite their success, the sudden disappearance of the McCoy-Nolan Giants from sports pages after the 1932 season indicates that the club likely suffered the same fate as countless other Black and white semipro teams during the Great Depression, as the nation's severe economic downturn left Americans without disposable income to spend on

¹ *The Chicago Defender*, December 15, 1923. This and all citations of *The Chicago Defender* accessed at ProQuest, <https://about.proquest.com/>.

entertainment like baseball. The following chapter will trace the return, rise, and fall of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants, using the club's story to explore major themes in the Black barnstorming experience during the mid-late 1920s.

As with chapter two, this chapter will use historian, Michael Lomax's, essential criteria for a successful early-twentieth century Black baseball enterprise as a model by which to assess the McCoy-Nolan Giants' development. As Lomax explains, when an all-Black club playing a local barnstorming schedule developed a reputation as a good gate attraction, they often sought to expand their scheduling commitments to other regions of the country.² The most elite all-Black clubs also managed to expand their barnstorming tours internationally to Cuba, taking advantage of the island's baseball craze and relatively tolerant racial climate.³ As this chapter will demonstrate, Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants were able to achieve these markers of success, growing their barnstorming schedule after reorganizing in 1924, then reaching their peak in 1929 and 1930, when the club made trips to both Cuba and California.

The Return and Rise of the McCoy-Nolan Giants

The earliest mention of the reorganized McCoy-Nolan Giants appears in a solicitation printed in the April 15, 1924 edition of the *Milwaukee Journal*. The solicitation involves a Milwaukee semipro team looking to schedule a game with "the Colored Giants of this city," and asks that "C.L. Gooch" contact the semipro club's manager in order to arrange an exhibition.⁴ While the April 15 solicitation did not explicitly label Gooch's club as the McCoy-Nolan Giants,

² Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931: The Negro National and Eastern Colored Leagues* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 8.

³ *Ibid*, 9.

⁴ *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 15, 1924. This and all citations of *The Milwaukee Journal* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

an article printed in the April 18, 1925 edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* erased any mystery surrounding the true identity of Gooch's club, by listing "C.L. Gooch" as the manager of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants.⁵

During the 1924 season, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' first year back in operation, the team barnstormed exclusively within the Midwest, playing games in Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois. Unlike in 1922, newspaper records suggest that the new McCoy-Nolan Giants did not play home games at Athletic Park. The NNL Milwaukee Bears' difficulties attracting fans to Athletic Park in 1923 represents one possible explanation for the McCoy-Nolans' inability to secure games at Milwaukee's premier ballpark in 1924, as the stadium's ownership group likely lost confidence in Black baseball's ability to draw a large gate in the Cream City. Instead, the McCoy-Nolan Giants played their earliest recorded games of the 1924 season at Pulaski Park, located on Milwaukee's south side. On Saturday, April 19, the McCoy-Nolans dropped a closely played 3-2 ballgame at Pulaski Park to Charles Stock's Colts, a young Milwaukee semipro team.⁶ The McCoy-Nolans were also scheduled to meet the fraternal Moose Lodge 49 club at Pulaski Park on Sunday, April 27, but no evidence of the game's score exists.⁷

Following their early season games in Milwaukee, the McCoy-Nolan Giants spent the majority of the 1924 season on the road, barnstorming in towns throughout Wisconsin, in addition to brief stops in Michigan and Illinois. By the end of the decade, the McCoy-Nolan Giants had combined their tremendous on-field success with hugely popular clowning routines to

⁵ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1925. This and all citations of *The Pittsburgh Courier* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁶ *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 21, 1924.

⁷ *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 27, 1924.

greatly expand their barnstorming network. The *Pasadena Post* documented the McCoy-Nolans' extensive travels in 1929 by publishing the following on November 23, 1929:

The McCoy-Noland Colored Giants started on the road on Easter Sunday and have played in Mississippi, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Minnesota, Canada, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico and are now stationed at El Centro for the winter.⁸

As the *Pasadena Post*'s reporting demonstrates, by 1929, the McCoy-Nolan Giants succeeded in becoming one of Black baseball's top traveling teams, booking games in at least thirteen states and two countries. Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants further added to their travel itinerary in 1930. According to the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, *Argus-Leader*, the McCoy-Nolans spent their winter in Cuba and Florida, after winning the California midwinter tournament.⁹

Establishing a Winning Reputation

The most compelling evidence of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' on-field success during their run from 1924 to 1932 comes in the form of win-loss records printed in newspapers that followed the club. While no formal records or statistics were kept for the McCoy-Nolans and most other Black independent teams, town newspapers often conducted their own research into a barnstorming team's record in order to provide readers with a preview of the team prior to that team's arrival in their town. While these scattered reports do not tell a complete story, when put together, they illustrate observable trends in the McCoy-Nolan Giants' on-field success. Looking first at 1924, the McCoy-Nolans' first season back in operation, an article printed in the August 4, 1924 edition of the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* reported that the McCoy-Nolan Giants had won 59 games and lost 20, giving them an impressive .747 winning percentage up to that point in the

⁸ *The Pasadena Post*, November 23, 1929. This and all citations of *The Pasadena Post* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁹ *Argus-Leader*, August 10, 1930.

season.¹⁰ Since the *Press-Gazette's* report came late in the season, one can assume that the McCoy-Nolans' final 1924 winning percentage would not have changed too drastically from its position on August 4, although anything is possible in baseball.

According to the July 15, 1925 edition of the Eau Claire, Wisconsin, *Leader-Telegram*, the McCoy-Nolan Giants carried their winning ways from 1924 with them into the 1925 season. Although the article in the *Leader-Telegram* appeared in mid-July, suggesting a smaller sample size of games played than the *Green Bay Press-Gazette's* August report on the McCoy-Nolans' win-loss record in 1924, the article lists the McCoy-Nolans' record to that point in the 1925 season at 22 wins and only five losses.¹¹ Again, a small sample size, but this win-loss record gave the McCoy-Nolan Giants an outstanding .815 winning percentage in mid-July. Despite the smaller number of games from which to calculate the McCoy-Nolans' winning percentage in July 1925, the *Leader-Telegram* further articulated the Milwaukee club's winning reputation by describing them in the following way, "They go into every game with the expectation of winning, and it is with the hope of upsetting dope that the local team will meet them."¹² As the *Leader-Telegram's* reporting indicates, the McCoy-Nolan Giants carried such a strong reputation for winning with them wherever they barnstormed, that all the local clubs could do was hope for an upset.

The 1926 season proved to be an extremely successful campaign for Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants as well, according to a report published in Winona, Minnesota's *Winona Daily News* on September 25, 1926. The *Daily News* listed the McCoy-Nolans' record to that

¹⁰ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, August 4, 1924.

¹¹ *Leader-Telegram*, July 15, 1925. This and all citations of the *Leader-Telegram* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹² *Ibid.*

point in the season at 72 wins and only 14 losses, good for an .837 winning percentage, their highest rate of winning yet.¹³ With the *Daily News*'s publication of the McCoy-Nolans' win-loss record coming in late September, typically the final month of a traditional summer baseball season, the club's final 1926 winning percentage likely did not change much.

Somewhat miraculously, the McCoy-Nolan Giants managed to top their 1926 winning percentage of .837 with an even more successful 1929 season. According to the Pasadena, California, *Pasadena Post*, the McCoy-Nolan Giants came to Pasadena for a late-season barnstorming trip in November 1929, having won 163 of the 192 games they had played that season.¹⁴ With a record of 163 wins and just 29 losses, the McCoy-Nolans boasted an outstanding .849 winning percentage in 1929. The *Post* paired their reporting on the McCoy-Nolans' impressive win-loss record with the following words of praise for Milwaukee's Black barnstormers:

When Manager Gooch trots his championship baseball team of the northwest, the McCoy-Nolan Colored Giants of Milwaukee, on the field at Tournament park tomorrow, Pasadena fans will see a real team...The visitors claim to have an infield as fast as any major league infield and a hard hitting outfield.¹⁵

As the *Pasadena Post*'s reporting makes clear, the McCoy-Nolan Giants used their incredible success on the field, both prior to and during, the 1929 season to establish a winning reputation as far west as California.

The significance of the McCoy-Nolan Giants' extraordinary winning percentages become apparent when they are compared to the winning percentage of the 1906 Chicago Cubs, the team with the highest winning percentage in the history of Major League Baseball. In 1906, the Cubs

¹³ *The Winona Daily News*, July 25, 1926. This and all citations of *The Winona Daily News* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

¹⁴ *The Pasadena Post*, November 23, 1929.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

won 116 games and lost only 36, producing a .763 winning percentage.¹⁶ If the figures presented in newspapers reporting on the McCoy-Nolan Giants are to be trusted, the Milwaukee club finished with a higher winning percentage than the 1906 Chicago Cubs at least twice, in 1926 and 1929.

However, there are reasons to approach the McCoy-Nolan Giants reported winning percentages with skepticism. First, newspapers often determined these winning percentages by reading the reporting published by other newspapers, which were not always accurate. During an oral history interview with historian, John Holway, former Negro League outfielder, Gene Benson, recalled frequently lying to reporters about final scores and other game details:

A lot of times we would play a game, maybe you'd see one of the sports writers on one of the black papers, and he would ask us who we played and how we made out. And sometimes we would tell him lies – he'd put it in the paper the next day!¹⁷

While Benson's memories about intentionally misleading the press certainly do not characterize all reporting on Black baseball, they do bring into question the validity of some newspaper reporting on the Black game, which did not benefit from the formal and consistent reporting of the daily newspapers covering the white Major Leagues.

In addition to potentially unreliable reporting, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' incredible win-loss records must also be properly contextualized by assessing the quality of their competition. Whereas the 1906 Chicago Cubs earned their Major League-record .763 winning percentage by playing 152 games against all Major League competition, the McCoy-Nolan Giants achieved their impressive rates of winning by competing against teams from a wide-range of talent-levels.

¹⁶ Do-Hyoung Park and Chad Thornburg, "Looking at Baseball's Winningest Seasons," MLB.com, uploaded March 11, 2019, <https://www.mlb.com/news/most-mlb-wins-in-a-season-c289159676>.

¹⁷ Gene Benson, "Black Star of Philadelphia," in *Black Diamonds: Life in the Negro Leagues from the Men Who Lived It*, ed. John B. Holway (Meckler Books, 1989), 79.

Like most barnstorming clubs, the McCoy-Nolans booked games with almost any challenger, professional or amateur, regardless of their skill-level.¹⁸ While the McCoy-Nolan Giants played many of their games against elite semipro teams affiliated with such leagues as the Wisconsin State league and the Fox River Valley league, they also played many games with factory and company teams, as well as against hand-picked nines of local “all-stars.” As an example of this weaker competition, the McCoy-Nolans once played a game against the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* Newshounds, a team made up of *Press-Gazette* employees, in August 1924.¹⁹ The McCoy-Nolan Giants also barnstormed against college teams, like when they defeated the State Teachers College team in Stevens Point, Wisconsin by a 10-8 score in May 1928.²⁰ Sometimes the McCoy-Nolan Giants even competed against hand-picked nines of players that did not normally play on the same team but were assembled specifically to play the McCoy-Nolans on that day. One such matchup took place on September 16, 1930, when the McCoy-Nolans walloped a team comprised of “all-stars” from a Lincoln, Nebraska municipal league by a score of 13-1.²¹ These picked-nines obviously did not possess the team chemistry of ball clubs made up of ballplayers who normally competed alongside each other, giving the McCoy-Nolans a slight edge in these exhibitions.

These matchups the McCoy-Nolan Giants had with lower-level competition were far from guaranteed victories, however. For example, in what Madison, Wisconsin’s, *The Capital Times*, described as “one of the greatest games of ball ever played here,” the McCoy-Nolans lost a 1-0 twelve-inning nail-biter in early August 1925 to an Aluminum Goods factory club in

¹⁸ Michael Harkness-Roberto, “Barnstorming: The Monarchs, the House of David, and the Colored House of David,” *Black Ball* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 60-61.

¹⁹ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, August 4, 1924.

²⁰ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, May 23, 1928.

²¹ *The Nebraska State Journal*, September 17, 1930. This and all citations of *The Nebraska State Journal* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

Manitowoc, Wisconsin.²² According to the reporting of *The Capital Times*, the Giants were originally scheduled to play a team of Manitowoc shipyard workers, but a tragic triple-drowning incident earlier in the week led to the substitution by the Aluminum Goods squad.²³ Although the McCoy-Nolan Giants did not win every game they played against this inferior competition, the fact that such victories were included in the club's overall win-loss record demonstrates how the McCoy-Nolan Giants high winning percentages do not necessarily tell the whole story.

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants did play many games against what some might consider "second-rate" competition, the ball club also had their share of matchups with some of the most talented teams in the country. According to the April 26, 1925 edition of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were booked to play the NNL St. Louis Stars in the Stars' final exhibition game before the start of their league schedule.²⁴ In previewing the exhibition, the *Post-Dispatch* demonstrated their knowledge of the McCoy-Nolans' elite reputation by printing, "The Milwaukee club is said to be the best independent negro baseball club in the country. They have lost but one game this spring."²⁵ Although the McCoy-Nolan Giants operated outside the formal Negro Leagues, they were clearly worthy of barnstorming against one of the NNL's top teams that season; the St. Louis Stars finished the 1925 NNL season in second place, with an impressive 59 wins, 30 losses, and two ties, losing to the mighty Kansas City Monarchs in the NNL Championship Series.²⁶ The St. Louis Stars were not the only top all-Black ball club that the McCoy-Nolan Giants crossed bats with, according to a box score printed in the *Pittsburgh*

²² *The Capital Times*, August 7, 1925. This and all citations of *The Capital Times* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 26, 1925. This and all citations of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "1925 Season," Seamheads Negro Leagues Data Base, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www.seamheads.com/NegroLgs/year.php?yearID=1925>.

Courier, which chronicled a game played between the McCoy-Nolans and the barnstorming Gilkerson's Union Giants.²⁷ The McCoy-Nolan Giants proved to be no match for the Gilkerson's Union club in that June 1926 "battle of the Black barnstormers" played in Peru, Illinois, with the Milwaukee club surrendering seven runs in the fifth inning on their way to an embarrassing 13-3 loss.²⁸

In addition to barnstorming against other talented all-Black teams, the McCoy-Nolan Giants also played multiple games against the House of David, the club that baseball historian, Scott Simkus, called, "the most famous independent professional team in the 1920s and '30s."²⁹ Sponsored by the religious commune that Benjamin Purnell founded in Benton Harbor, Michigan in 1902, the House of David originally comprised itself of ballplayers from within Purnell's cult, but eventually recruited talented outsiders in order to remain competitive as the team developed into a lucrative enterprise for the Benton Harbor commune.³⁰ The players on the House of David were required to follow certain rules in order to be on the team. They had to refrain from smoking, sex, the consumption of meat, and were prohibited from cutting their hair or shaving their beards, resulting in the team's trademark shaggy aesthetic.³¹ Like the McCoy-Nolan Giants and many Black independent clubs, the House of David developed a popular schtick akin to clowning, in the form of their mesmerizing pre-game pepper ball routine, making them one of the biggest gate attractions on the barnstorming circuit.³² According to the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, the McCoy-Nolans engaged the House of David in a pair of games during

²⁷ *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 12, 1926.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Scott Simkus, *Outsider Baseball: The Weird World of Hardball on the Fringe, 1876 – 1950* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 185.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 187-188.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 185.

³² *Ibid.*, 187.

the 1928 season.³³ The *Sentinel* reported that on August 31, the McCoy-Nolans “trounced the whiskered club” in New York Mills, Minnesota by a 9-1 score.³⁴ Then, on September 10, the House of David got their revenge, busting open a scoreless game in the eighth inning to defeat the McCoy-Nolan Giants 10-2 in Aberdeen, South Dakota.³⁵

The McCoy-Nolan Giants also played in multiple games against active and former players in white organized baseball. When the McCoy-Nolans traveled to Tucson, Arizona in October 1929 for a game with the semipro Southern Pacific Lines team, the local Arizona club bolstered their lineup for the contest with a pair of minor leaguers. According to the *Arizona Daily Star*, Jimmie Reese, member of the Pacific Coast league’s Oakland Oaks and future New York Yankees second baseman, agreed to join the Pacific Lines’ lineup for the exhibition with the McCoy-Nolan Giants.³⁶ *The Daily Star* also reported that Reese would be joined by fellow minor leaguer, Jack Pilkington of the New York-Pennsylvania league, in suiting up against the McCoy-Nolans.

Milwaukee’s McCoy-Nolan Giants also demonstrated that they were capable of hitting big league pitching when they met the Watertown, South Dakota semipro team for an exhibition game on September 7, 1930. According to the reporting of the *Argus-Leader*, former New York Giants pitcher “Rube” Shauer toed the rubber for the Watertown club that day, surrendering ten hits to the McCoy-Nolans’ batters, as the Milwaukee barnstormers defeated the ex-major leaguer

³³ *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 11, 1928. This and all citations of *The Milwaukee Sentinel* accessed at NewsBank, <https://www.newsbank.com/>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ *The Arizona Daily Star*, October 27, 1929. This and all citations of *The Arizona Daily Star* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

by a 6-1 score.³⁷ While Schauer faced the McCoy-Nolan Giants at the ripe age of 39, the right-hander had a brief, but successful Major League career during his twenties, pitching to the tune of a 3.35 ERA in 93 games across five big league seasons with the New York Giants and Philadelphia Athletics.³⁸ In competing against players who played in white organized baseball, the McCoy-Nolan Giants demonstrated that they were worthy of the winning reputation that followed them as they barnstormed the country during the mid-late 1920s.

Athletes and Comedians

Newspaper evidence reveals that the common Black baseball practice known as “clowning” played an even larger role in the second incarnation of the McCoy-Nolan Giants than it had for the Milwaukee Bears or even the McCoy-Nolans of 1922. This renewed emphasis on clowning seems to fit with the larger trend in Black baseball, in that independent barnstorming clubs were more likely to embrace clowning than were Negro League franchises. In his 1907 *History of Colored Base Ball*, Sol White stressed the need for the Black game to eliminate “vaudevillian” baseball in order to align the industry’s professional development with that of the white Major Leagues.³⁹ In advocating against clowning’s place in serious Black baseball, White wrote:

The attitude of the spectators, or as they are popularly called “fans” has changed at about the same rate as the game. Formerly they were content with being amused and the game developed comedians like Abe Harrison and Bill Joyner. But now they demand faultless play...The funny man in colored base ball is becoming extinct. Where every man on a team would do a funny stunt during a

³⁷ *Argus-Leader*, September 8, 1930. This and all citations of the *Argus-Leader* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

³⁸ “Rube Shauer,” Baseball Reference, accessed July 27, 2020, <https://www.baseball-reference.com/players/s/schauru01.shtml>.

³⁹ Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 61-62.

game back in the eighties and early nineties, now will be found only one or two on a team who essays to amuse the spectators of the present day.⁴⁰

Although clowning never completely left Black professional baseball, as White falsely predicted, the controversial practice became disfavored in the organized Negro Leagues, while remaining an important part of an independent barnstorming team's repertoire for attracting white fans.

The disenchantment that players in the organized Negro Leagues had with clowning can be observed in multiple oral history interviews with former Negro Leaguers. Outfielder, Gene Benson, recalled his aversion to clowning in the following way during an interview with John Holway:

There was no foolishness, no clowning. Some of us were approached [to clown], but we all turned it down. We had a team called the Clowns, but that wasn't in our [Negro National] league. We were ball players, we had some principles. We weren't clown ball players; we played *baseball*.⁴¹

Benson's desire to be respected as a true ballplayer and not a "clown" ballplayer echoes the sentiments that Sol White expressed in 1907, when he wished for the Black game to adopt the professionalism of the white Major Leagues.

Like both Gene Benson and Sol White, Negro League legend and the first Black coach in Major League history, John "Buck" O'Neil, discussed his dissatisfaction with clowning, when he spoke with John Holway about his memories of the Cincinnati Clowns entry into the NNL in 1943:

The Clowns came in the league in 1943. Bebop painted himself up and would dance with King Tut. Goose Tatum be looking some place else, and the ball would come, and he'd catch it. It was more like a minstrel show. Our players didn't like it so much. We were playing strong baseball, we had Satchel [Paige] for a good draw. We didn't want the Clowns in the league, but they were such a

⁴⁰ Sol White in *Sol White's History of Colored Base Ball, with Other Documents on the Early Black Game, 1886 – 1936*, ed. Jerry Malloy (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 71, 74.

⁴¹ Gene Benson in *Black Diamonds*, 79.

good draw, everyone else wanted them; everyone wanted our ball club and the Clowns.⁴²

For Sol White, Gene Benson, Buck O’Neil, and many more prominent figures in Black professional baseball, clowning represented a degrading cousin of the racist minstrel tradition that perpetuated negative stereotypes about Black people. However, as O’Neil alludes to in his oral history, clowning attracted large numbers of ticket-buying fans, allowing the practice to maintain a foothold in the Black game, even when members of organized leagues tried to push it to the periphery.

While newspaper articles covering the 1923 NNL Milwaukee Bears never reported that the team engaged in clowning, references to comedic antics appear with regularity in coverage of the McCoy-Nolan Giants. In May of their first season back in operation, the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* described the McCoy-Nolans’ clowning antics by writing, “The McCoy-Nolans have a number of fun-makers in their battle front and the negroes are always cutting loose with something while in action.”⁴³ Similarly, on July 19, 1924, the Escanaba, Michigan, *Escanaba Daily Press*, linked the McCoy-Nolan Giants’ clowning with their ability to attract fans by publishing the following preview of the team’s upcoming appearance in their town:

The McCoy-Nolans are a good scrappy aggregation and in addition carry a particularly funny line of stunts that makes them about the best entertainers of any colored team on tour, and the game Sunday afternoon will draw a big crowd.⁴⁴

As the *Daily Press*’s reporting makes clear, the McCoy-Nolan Giant had a reputation for comedic stunts on the baseball diamond, and this reputation for comedy contributed greatly to the newspaper’s confident prediction that a large crowd would attend the McCoy-Nolan’s

⁴² John “Buck” O’Neil, “An American Monarch,” in *Black Diamonds*, 100.

⁴³ *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, May 17, 1924.

⁴⁴ *The Escanaba Daily Press*, July 19, 1924. This and all citations of *The Escanaba Daily Press* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

exhibition in Escanaba. The McCoy-Nolan Gaints' reputation for comedy and large crowds also appeared in the Neenah, Wisconsin, *News-Record*, which printed the following on August 23, 1924:

The Nolans in addition to being one of the two or three strongest negro teams in the game are always a big drawing crowd because of the merriment they provoke with their vaudeville antics.⁴⁵

As this excerpt further confirms, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were not only highly competitive ballplayers on the field, but they also possessed a knack for theatrics that kept fans entertained.

The McCoy-Nolan Giants did not reserve clowning to their first season back in operation, rather the ball club appeared to make "vaudevillian antics" a prominent part of their enterprise throughout their second existence. On June 12, 1926, the Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, *Chippewa Daily Herald*, published the following description of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants:

Not only are these fellows fast and experienced ball players, but they provide a side line of entertainment which adds much to the fun of the fans for they are good actors as well as players.⁴⁶

The McCoy-Nolans' reputation as entertainers continued even into 1929, when the Casper, Wyoming, *Casper Star-Tribune*, published the following preview of an upcoming game with the McCoy-Nolans by quoting an article in the *Billings Gazette*:

The Giants not only revealed themselves as competent ball players, but as entertainers. Comedy in baseball repartee and pepper ball exhibitions kept the fans in good humor from the beginning to the end.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *News-Record*, August 23, 1924. This and all citations of the *News-Record* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁶ *The Chippewa Daily Herald*, June 12, 1926. This and all citations of *The Chippewa Daily Herald* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁴⁷ *Casper Star-Tribune*, September 25, 1929. This and all citations of the *Casper Star-Tribune* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

The McCoy-Nolan Giants' renowned clowning antics were even reported on as far west as Arizona, with the *Arizona Daily Star* writing the following in their recap of a game between the Milwaukee club and the local Espee Lines semipro team, "The itinerant ball club proved to have a group of hard hitters and they were inclined to clown considerably when handling the ball."⁴⁸ As these numerous references to the McCoy-Nolan Giants' comedic routines make clear, the McCoy-Nolans were far more willing to engage in the controversial act of clowning than were the teams of the NNL.

Life on the Road in Jim Crow America

For the McCoy-Nolan Giants and other early-twentieth century Black barnstorming teams, life on the road in Jim Crow America presented many challenges. The players not only had to contend with the general discomforts of being away from home for long periods of time, but they also confronted difficult situations unique to the Black experience. While no oral or written sources produced by members of the McCoy-Nolan Giants have been identified, many Black ballplayers who traveled with similar barnstorming teams have had their experiences preserved in oral history interviews. These oral histories provide valuable insights into the experiences of the Black ballplayers that lived on the road in Jim Crow America. In an interview with John Holway, former Kansas City Monarch pitching legend, Chet Brewer, reflected on his time barnstorming during the 1924 season with the Gilkerson's Union Giants, another Black independent club similar to the McCoy-Nolans. Brewer recanted the following while discussing the challenges of life away from home:

We used to ride three or four nights in that big bus and never see a bed. We'd play in one town at night and then after the game, shower in the shower room, get in the bus, ride all night to the next town and get out and go to some little hamburger

⁴⁸ *Arizona Daily Star*, October 28, 1929.

joint and have some lunch, go to the ball park early, wash our underwear out, hang it up to dry, wash our socks and things. Then when the game was over, well, we were clean. We lived out of our shaving kits with our toothpaste and what-have-you.⁴⁹

Although Brewer never played for the McCoy-Nolan Giants, his memories of not having a bed to sleep in or clean clothes to wear from his time with the Gilkerson's Union Giants undoubtedly reflected experiences common to all Black barnstorming clubs of the era.

In his interview, Brewer also discussed multiple encounters he had with Jim Crow racism while traveling in the Midwest along many of the same barnstorming trails as the McCoy-Nolan Giants. Brewer recalled one incident, which took place in the McCoy-Nolans' home state of Wisconsin:

I remember one night in Medford, Wisconsin, not anywhere near the South, in an old second-rate white hotel. They had a restaurant and the food was terrible. We wouldn't eat there, got a "Dutch lunch," sandwiches out of a grocery store. One cold morning in September this man came up at two o'clock in the morning with a pistol, made us get out of this hotel, said, "If my food's not good enough for you darkies to eat, my hotel isn't good enough for you to stay in." Had to get out and ride to the next town. And it was cold.⁵⁰

Brewer's memories about being refused service in a white hotel were far from unique. In another interview conducted by John Holway, George Giles, one of the best first basemen in the history of the Black game, reflected on his many run-ins with Jim Crow while barnstorming between Negro League games:

We couldn't stay in white hotels, we couldn't eat in restaurants. In cities there were usually Negro hotels. In those small towns we would stay in family houses, two players here, two players there... In some of those small towns we couldn't stay, and sometimes we'd just ride all night and sleep in the bus. Then we'd have to play the next day. A lot of times we couldn't take a bath after a ball game... I never could understand this racial thing. It was kind of disgusting. When we were barnstorming, the white teams would stay in a hotel, and we'd be changing

⁴⁹ Chet Brewer, "Papa Chet," in *Black Diamonds*, 25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

clothes in a farmer's barn. We've been in towns where they wouldn't even sell us sandwiches to take out.⁵¹

As John Holway's oral history interviews with Chet Brewer and George Giles reveal, Black ballplayers often faced tremendous challenges while barnstorming in Jim Crow America. While their white competition slept in warm hotels and ate nutritious food in white-owned restaurants, Black barnstormers were often forced to sleep on a cold bus, eating only when and where they were allowed. Although neither Brewer nor Giles traveled with the McCoy-Nolan Giants, their experiences with racial prejudice were common to all Black barnstormers in early-twentieth century America. The fact that Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants managed to achieve the levels of on-field success that they did while navigating the stormy seas of American racism make their accomplishments all the more impressive.

As with many traveling Black ball clubs during the Jim Crow era, the McCoy-Nolan Giants' bus acted as a home, shielding them from the violent racism outside. Back in 1895, the private railroad car represented one of the most important ingredients in the successful barnstorming model established by the pioneering Page Fence Giants.⁵² By traveling in a specially designed train car, complete with a bathroom, kitchen, and enough space to eat and sleep, the Page Fence Giants were able to mitigate the negative effects of being Jim Crowed on the road.⁵³ This mode of transportation became the standard for the nation's top all-Black teams, including Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants. When the McCoy-Nolans traveled to Billings, Montana in September 1929, the *Billings Gazette* published the following description of the team's travel accommodations:

⁵¹ George Giles, "The Black Terry," in *Black Diamonds*, 59-60.

⁵² Michael E. Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1860 – 1901: Operating by Any Means Necessary* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 136.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

The team travels in their own bus, designed along the Pullman type and capable of hauling 25 persons and their baggage. A mechanic is employed to drive and keep the machine in operation.⁵⁴

Although the McCoy-Nolan Giants traveled in a Pullman bus and not a train car, this vehicle offered the club the same refuge while they traveled in parts of the country where they were not welcome because of their race.

While the McCoy-Nolan Giants' Pullman bus offered the team some protection from being Jim Crowed while on the road, the vehicle could not protect the ball club from the racism published by newspapers that reported on these travels. As with both the first incarnation of the McCoy-Nolan Giants and the 1923 Milwaukee Bears, white midwestern newspapers routinely implemented overtly racist language to describe the McCoy-Nolan Giants when they returned to operations in 1924. The *Sheboygan Press* published some of the most racist reporting while previewing an exhibition between the McCoy-Nolans and the semipro Sheboygan Chairs in late-August 1924. First, on August 29, the *Sheboygan Press* referred to the McCoy-Nolans as the “dusky darky team from Milwaukee,” hammering home the racialization of the Milwaukee club with redundant racist adjectives.⁵⁵ The *Sheboygan Press* doubled down on their racist reporting the next day, calling the McCoy-Nolan Giants the “ebony hued watermelon hounds from Milwaukee.”⁵⁶ By appealing to the racist “watermelon trope” and blatantly dehumanizing the McCoy-Nolan Giants' players by referring to them as “hounds,” the *Sheboygan Press* followed a common pattern in the reporting of white midwestern dailies on Black baseball, whereby these

⁵⁴ *The Billings Gazette*, September 19, 1929. This and all citations of *The Billings Gazette* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁵ *The Sheboygan Press*, August 29, 1924. This and all citations of *The Sheboygan Press* accessed at Newspapers.com, <https://www.newspapers.com>.

⁵⁶ *The Sheboygan Press*, August 30, 1924.

newspapers made overt attempts to “other” African Americans from white society by using racist, dehumanizing language to describe Black teams, players, and sometimes even fans.

The Great Depression and the Fall of the McCoy-Nolan Giants

Despite all their success in 1922, and then again from 1924-1932, the McCoy-Nolan Giants, like so many other professional baseball teams, could not survive the crippling economic impact of the Great Depression. Even the Major Leagues, which prospered like most of the U.S. economy during the 1920s, felt the effects of the Depression. In 1931, Major League attendance fell by more than fifteen percent, causing a drop in overall income as most teams lost money.⁵⁷ The disturbing trend continued in 1932, when attendance at big league games dropped below seven million for the first time since 1919, as total losses exceeded \$1.2 million.⁵⁸ The Depression also impacted the game’s lower levels; In an attempt to remain solvent, several minor leagues in Organized Baseball suspended operation during the 1932 season.⁵⁹ Still others reduced salaries, roster sizes, and ticket prices.⁶⁰ Perhaps most damaging to Black barnstorming clubs like the McCoy-Nolan Giants were the losses of lucrative games against white semipro teams, as the Depression forced many of these ball clubs to disband.⁶¹

With the Great Depression’s disruption of the Black baseball industry’s symbiotic relationship with the white semipro, Black ball clubs became more reliant on Black patronage to remain in business.⁶² This reliance on Black patronage during the Depression years proved fatal to many teams in the Black baseball industry, because African Americans as a group felt the

⁵⁷ Jules Tygiel, *Past Time: Baseball as History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87-88.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁹ Neil Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Lomax, *Black Baseball Entrepreneurs, 1902 – 1931*, 333.

negative effects of the economic downturn earlier and more severely than did most white Americans. Since most Black businesses operating during the 1920s primarily served other Blacks, these businesses were reliant on the incomes of an overwhelmingly working-class population.⁶³ When the earliest signs of recession appeared in the mid-1920s, African Americans were often the first to lose their jobs or have their salaries reduced.⁶⁴ As Black unemployment grew and wages shrank, Black owned businesses suffered as well from a reduction in the Black patronage on which these businesses relied, causing an economic depression within the Black community even before the stock market crashed in October 1929.⁶⁵ With previously lucrative games against white semipro teams no longer an option, and America's Black population in rapid economic decline, Black baseball lost many of the gains it had made during the 1920s. Historian, Neil Lanctot, explained this downturn in professional Black baseball by writing:

By late 1932, black professional baseball in the east and midwest had virtually returned to its pre-1920 status of a handful of unaffiliated professional teams scheduling exhibition games on little more than an ad hoc basis.⁶⁶

Newspaper evidence suggests that Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants were not spared from the Black game's decline brought on by the Great Depression. After the 1930 season, references to the McCoy-Nolan Giants became increasingly rare, with the club completely disappearing from sports pages after 1932.

Conclusion:

When the NNL Milwaukee Bears failed to complete their only season in 1923, the McCoy-Nolan Giants returned to the barnstorming trails in 1924, picking up where they left off in 1922, when they first started their ascent towards becoming one of the country's top

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Lanctot, *Negro League Baseball*, 9

independent all-Black teams. Under the management of Charles L. Gooch, the second incarnation of Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants achieved new levels of success from 1924 to 1932, before the Great Depression forced them to disband like so many other Black and white semipro teams. According to newspaper reports, the McCoy-Nolans routinely won the vast majority of their games, posting an impressive .837 winning percentage in 1926, and an even better .849 rate of winning in 1929. In addition to their baseball skills, Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants entertained fans by engaging in controversial clowning routines. While the ball club clowned a little in 1922, the practice became a much larger part of the McCoy-Nolans' identity from 1924-1932. With this combination of athletic talent and comedy, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were able to achieve what all traveling Black teams aspired to, by expanding their barnstorming tour both to California and overseas to Cuba. While the Great Depression forced a premature ending to the story of one of Milwaukee's most successful professional baseball teams, their story, with all that it can teach us about Black barnstorming and American race relations, is one worth telling.

Conclusion

During the years of baseball's color line, Black ballplayers, and entrepreneurs from all over the United States navigated the nation's segregated social and economic systems to build viable Black baseball enterprises. By the 1920s, Black baseball had established itself as one of the nation's earliest and most profitable Black institutions. While much of what we know about Black baseball history comes from research on the Black game's premier franchises, such as the Chicago American Giants, Kansas City Monarchs, and Homestead Grays, among others, the stories of many teams remain trapped in the past, awaiting formal scholarship to unlock their contributions to our understanding of the Black game's history.

Until now, two of these teams were Milwaukee's McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears. As this analysis has demonstrated, the histories of these two Milwaukee-based ball clubs reflect many overarching themes in early-twentieth century Black baseball. The McCoy-Nolan Giants, an independent barnstorming club sponsored by a white plumbing supply company, traveled the country from the relative safety of their Pullman bus, as they stopped in towns and cities from the Midwest to the Pacific Coast, risking a run-in with Jim Crow with every trip. To attract white fans and keep crowds entertained when the on-field action got boring, the McCoy-Nolans made the controversial decision to clown, engaging in comedic antics for laughs and dollars, while simultaneously feeding some of the worst stereotypes about Black people. All the while, the McCoy-Nolan Giants built an almost unmatched reputation for winning baseball games, as they transformed a local-to-regional barnstorming network with roots in the Midwest into the national-to-international network to which all similar Black teams aspired.

There were also the Milwaukee Bears, the Cream City's ill-fated NNL franchise, who owed their very existence to the success of the McCoy-Nolan Giants in 1922. Although the Bears played just three months in Milwaukee before poor attendance forced them to relocate mid-season, their story illustrates many of the challenges which confronted Rube Foster's fledgling NNL, including franchise instability, scheduling inequities, the absence of ballpark ownership in the Black game, and a general lack of cooperation between NNL owners. The story of the 1923 Milwaukee Bears also provides a medium through which to explore important themes in the development of Black Milwaukee, as many of the Bears' difficulties attracting fans in the Cream City were likely tied to Milwaukee's relatively small and working class Black population. While the NNL's more successful franchises relied on Black patronage more than independent Black barnstorming teams, the Milwaukee Bears operated in a market not well-suited for the much-needed support of Black fans.

While the Bears' brief stint in Milwaukee appears unremarkable on the surface, the club's management team featured two of the most revered figures in the history of the Black game, Pete Hill, and Dave Wyatt. The Milwaukee Bears also played in some of the first Negro League games ever umpired by Black men, which marked a momentous achievement in the development of the Negro Leagues. These connections to such significant figures and events in Black baseball history alone make the Bears' story worth adding to the larger story of Milwaukee baseball.

By analyzing newspaper reporting on both the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears, important patterns in the ways that white midwestern papers covered Black baseball are brought to light. White daily newspapers, like the *Milwaukee Journal*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, *Green Bay Press-Gazette*, and *Sheboygan Press*, among others, routinely utilized overtly racist language when reporting on Black baseball teams like the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee

Bears. By employing derogatory terms like “darky” and “Sambo,” when describing Black players and teams, these white newspapers worked to dehumanize African Americans, othering them from mainstream white American society.

In addition to illustrating some of the major themes in the history of early-twentieth century Black baseball, this analysis into the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears presents readers with an important question regarding the business models of all-Black teams; why did the Milwaukee Bears fail so badly in 1923 when the McCoy-Nolan Giants experienced so much success for the better part of the 1920s? The answer to this question can largely be found in the fundamental differences that existed between operating a Black professional baseball team as part of an organized league, and operating one as an independent barnstorming attraction, without a set league-schedule. While the McCoy-Nolan Giants benefitted from being able to set their own schedule by booking games with a wide array of semiprofessional competition, the Milwaukee Bears lacked autonomy, being at the mercy of both Rube Foster and his suffocating control of the NNL, and the white American Association Milwaukee Brewers, who held scheduling precedent over the Bears at Athletic Park. By not affiliating themselves with any organized Negro League, the McCoy-Nolan Giants were allowed the flexibility of building their own schedule, booking games with midwestern semipro teams that promised the most lucrative pay day at the gate. While these fundamental differences in business-model do not provide the only explanation for the divergent outcomes of the McCoy-Nolan Giants and Milwaukee Bears, they do raise important questions about the merits of strictly barnstorming versus joining an organized Negro League.

Of course, the story of Black ball in the Brew City is bigger than baseball. While the work of the baseball historian may seem trivial on the surface, baseball scholarship often

produces myriad connections to what some might consider “real history.” The stories of the McCoy-Nolan Giants and the Milwaukee Bears are not just baseball stories; they are stories about race and overcoming racism in America; they are stories about Black entrepreneurship and perseverance on a nationwide scale; they are stories about both the possibilities of interracial cooperation and the blunt realities of segregation and racial inequity; and for Milwaukee, a city which continues to wrestle with a racist past and present, these are stories that cannot be forgotten.

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