

Holway, John. *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues*. New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1975. Pp. xviii, 353. Index, illustrations. \$9.95.

By comparison to most other American sports, the national pastime has received extensive study by journalists, literary scholars and social scientists. But virtually all attention has been devoted to major league baseball. There is scanty literature on amateur baseball or other levels of professional baseball. One area of growing interest in the last few years is black semiprofessional baseball. In this volume John Holway has collected seventeen interviews with stars of the negro leagues plus another one with a former owner. Mr. Holway is a member of the Society for Baseball Research, and by professional analyzes world economic problems for the U.S. Information Agency. While an army officer in Tokyo, he wrote books about Japanese wrestling and sumo wrestling. He is now working on a new book on parapsychology in sports.

The point of this book is to prove the high quality of the black professional leagues and the black ballplayers. Indeed, at one point Holway suggests that black baseball was the more important half of baseball (p. xv). To prove this thesis, the bulk of the published interviews are focused on material relating to inter-racial games with major leaguers. Besides the oral testimony, there are statistical tables summarizing each interviewee's record against major league all-star teams.

The use of oral testimony can be an interesting and extremely useful procedure for historians trying to unravel the experiences of the inarticulate. This methodology was first utilized for baseball by Lawrence Ritter in his excellent collection, *The Glory of Their Times*. Through skillful interviewing, Ritter produced an important and invaluable document of social history which tells us a great deal about the social backgrounds, values, and occupational subculture of major leaguers in the early twentieth century. Since then Roger Kahn in *The Boys of Summer* and Donald Honig in *Baseball When the Grass*

was *Real and Baseball Between the Lines* have tried to do the same thing for more recent ballplayers. The black athletes Holway deals with were largely forgotten until brought back to life by Robert Peterson in *Only the Ball was White*. Holway's volume provides additional material on the lives and times of the black ballplayers, which could only be secured through oral testimony. The interview technique was also relied on heavily by William Brashler for his novel *Bingo Long's Traveling All-Star and Motor Kings Show* and his new biography of Josh Gibson.

Holway's interviews reveal quite a bit about the negro league stars and their values. Their ultimate goal was to make the majors. Surprisingly, none were, bitter that any chance was denied them. All were proud of their athletic accomplishments, and they repeatedly pointed out the popularity of black all-star games and exhibition games with major leaguers where they acquitted themselves well. The blacks respected the ability of major leaguers, and believed that white managers, players and sportswriters also respected them for their ability. The younger men interviewed who were active in the 1940s remembered they had felt an obligation to their younger colleagues, the Campanellas, Dobys, Irvins and Newcombes to help them get into the majors once Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier. Cool Papa Bell claimed that he let Monte Irvin beat him in a race for the batting championship one year to bolster Irvin's reputation and give him a better chance at the majors. All of the players seemed to feel a responsibility towards their deceased cohorts to try to keep alive their memory. The interviewees frequently criticized the public reputations of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson because they felt these famous men had gotten too much public acclaim while their peers had been forgotten. Other players were often pointed to as having been better receivers or more polished pitchers. Also, many respondents indicated that Robinson was far from the best of his contemporaries on the playing field. However, they generally acknowledged that he was probably the best prepared educationally, experientially, and psychologically for his ordeal.

There is some hard evidence in the text, besides just opinions and attitudes. For example, there is some data on salaries. The current occupations of the interviewees are reported, along with comments about the social origins of certain men. A number of them were college educated, a rarity not only for blacks, but anyone of their age. Only two of the seventeen interviewees ended up in a blue-collar job. Although none were well-to-do, the other gentlemen had respectable jobs of varying social status. However beyond this, the material is rather narrow, limited mainly to on-field anecdotes. We need to learn much more about the social origins of these men and the status of their occupation in the black community. Was baseball seen as a potential career? What were the relations with management? What were the working conditions and living conditions? How long did the typical man play? Did their fame help them after retirement?

The interview material is supplemented with a short summary of the history of black baseball that is completely inadequate. Any serious student must complement Holway with Peterson. The volume is well produced by the publisher, easily readable, and amply illustrated with photographs from private collections. Holway interviewed in all about seventy players, but did not explain why he selected the particular men he did to include in the book. Virtually all were star players, and it would have been interesting to see what a journeyman had to say. In a day of high priced books, *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues* is a good buy, exploring an important, but often forgotten aspect of American social history.

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