

Wendell Smith, the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal* and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball, 1933-1945

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In his autobiography *I Never Had It Made*, Jackie Robinson wrote that he would be forever indebted to Wendell Smith, because it was Smith who had first recommended him to Branch Rickey, as the man most suited to break down the color barrier in White organized baseball.¹ As sports editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, the largest and perhaps most radical Black newspaper in America, Smith told Rickey during a meeting between the two on April 17, 1945 that Robinson was one Black player who had Major League potential.² The meeting between Smith and Rickey was a significant one not only because it put Rickey on the trail of the talented shortstop of the Kansas City Monarchs, but because it represented a turning point in the nearly twelve year campaign that the *Courier-Journal* had waged against the exclusion of Blacks in America's National Pastime. Since 1933 the Pittsburgh based newspaper had written editorials, conducted interviews with White Major Leaguers, and written feature length articles, all in an attempt to see that qualified Blacks were allowed to compete in organized baseball. Led by the spirited and tenacious Smith, the *Courier-Journal* relentlessly hammered away at Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, club owners, field managers, ballplayers, and anyone else it felt was responsible for the ban on Black ballplayers. By the time Smith had his meeting with Rickey in the spring of 1945, the *Courier-Journal* was recognized nationwide for its unrelenting campaign to end discrimination in organized baseball.³

While scholars have given much attention to the part played by Rickey and

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1. Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: G. P. Putnam's sons, 1972), p. 41. Smith would assist Robinson in the writing of his first book entitled *Jackie Robinson: My Own Story* (New York: Greenberg Co., 1948).

2. This was the meeting in which Rickey announced the formations of his newly formed United States League.

3. Maybe more than any other Black newspaper, the *Courier-Journal* gave extensive coverage to various sporting events, anyone interested in the career of Joe Louis, the 1936 Olympic Games or Black baseball, would find the paper to be a valuable source of information.

White sportscasters in ending discrimination in organized baseball, this paper focuses on the heretofore untold role of Smith and the *Courier-Journal* in seeing that Blacks were allowed in the sport.⁴ What is immediately apparent from this analysis is that the Black Pittsburgh paper was partly responsible for Rickey's decision to bring a Black player into organized baseball. Although there were other Black newspapers in the United States that participated in the campaign against lily-white baseball during the 1930's and first half of the 1940's, it was the *Courier-Journal* that proved most effective in seeing that the game's racial barrier was finally lifted.⁵ Its greater influence in helping break down the walls of discrimination came partly because it had the largest circulation of any Black newspaper in the country. When the paper initiated its campaign in 1933, its circulation figure approximated 46,000. By the time Robinson had signed his contract with the Dodgers some twelve years later, the *Courier-Journal's* circulation had risen to nearly 260,000—almost 100,000 more than its nearest competitor.⁶ In addition to its large readership, the paper was particularly effective because it refused to relent in its call for complete equality in baseball, and continued to remonstrate against discrimination in the game despite the efforts of friend and foe alike to restrain its protests. Even during those moments when integration seemed an impossibility, the paper maintained a lively interest in the plight of the Black ballplayer and never stopped pressuring the baseball establishment. Lastly, the *Courier-Journal* proved most effective in its campaign largely through the tireless efforts of Smith, who became obsessed with seeing that Blacks were allowed in the game. Chester Washington, Alvin Moses, Rollo Wilson, and the other sports writers on the staff all took an active role in the campaign; but it was Smith who most doggedly fought for the inclusion of Blacks in organized baseball.

The issue of allowing Blacks in organized baseball did not become a popular topic of discussion in America's newspapers until the 1930's. One of the first attacks in the White press against the sports color line was made in 1931 by Westbrook Pegler of the *Chicago Tribune*.⁷ Pegler wanted to know how baseball could possibly be considered the National Pastime when it was the one sport that excluded Blacks from participating. He observed that great Black athletes were allowed to compete in football, basketball, and track, yet were unjustly excluded from participating in baseball. While Black athletes

4. See for example, Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1982); Arthur Mann, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1950); Bill Roeder, *Jackie Robinson Story* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1950); Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

5. Such influential Black newspapers as the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Age*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and *Baltimore Afro-American*, vigorously crusaded against organized baseball's racial policies. The *Afro-American*, behind its well-known sports editor Sam Lacy, achieved particular notoriety for the feature length articles and biting editorials it wrote on the subject.

6. N. W. Ayer and Sons, *Director of Newspapers and Periodicals* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer and Sons, 1933-1945).

7. Pegler's attack is mentioned often in the secondary literature. See for example: David Q. Voigt, *America Through Baseball* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1976), p. 114; Robert W. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, p. 175; Richard C. Crepeau, *Baseball: America's Diamond Mind, 1919-1941* (Orlando: University Presses of Florida, 1980), pp. 168-169.

could compete and associate on an equal basis with White collegians, “professional ballplayers must be protected by a regulation which the magnates haven’t the gall to put on paper.”⁸ Pegler was astonished that sports minded Americans had not lashed out against the color line.

In 1933 Heywood Broun told the baseball writers at their annual dinner in New York that he saw no reason why Blacks should not be allowed in the big leagues.⁹ Broun claimed that if Paul Robeson was good enough to win a place on the “mythical all-American” football team and Eddie Tolan was allowed to represent the United States in the Olympic Games, then Blacks were certainly capable of playing in the National and American Leagues. At the same dinner, Jimmy Powers, sportswriter of the New York *Daily News*, took a poll of some of the important baseball figures in attendance to determine their philosophical position on the issue.¹⁰ Of the six people polled by Powers, only John McGraw of the New York Giants openly objected to allowing Blacks in the Major Leagues. Such notables as John Heydler, president of the National League, Colonel Jacob Ruppert, owner of the New York Yankees, and Gary Nugent, president of the Philadelphia Phillies, all expressed a willingness to accept Blacks in the big leagues.

It was only after the stand taken by Broun and Powers at the baseball writers’ dinner in New York that the *Courier-Journal* began its concerted drive to see that the color line was dropped in the National Game. It immediately began its campaign by conducting what it called the “Big League Symposium.”¹¹ The symposium, which was the brainchild of the paper’s current sports editor Chester Washington, was set up to solicit the opinions of leading baseball men concerning the sports’ exclusionary policies. The paper focused on appraising the various arguments given as to why Blacks should or should not be allowed in organized baseball. Tellingly, most of the baseball executives who responded to the symposium denied they had any objections to opening up organized baseball to Black athletes, being reluctant even to admit that a color line existed in the game. John Heydler, the first respondent to the survey, had the audacity to say that baseball never excluded anyone on the basis of race, creed, or color. He noted that the only requirements a Major League player must have was great athletic ability and good character habits.¹² A similar comment was made by Gary Nugent who claimed that baseball “catered to all races and creeds.” Nugent had no objections to Black players in the big leagues. The only question in his mind was whether Black players had the ability to play in organized baseball.¹³

The four month long “Big League Symposium” run by the *Courier-Journal* was instructive in that it reminded the newspaper of organized baseball’s

8. Quoted in Richard C. Crepeau, *Baseball: America’s Diamond Mind, 1919-1941*, p. 169.

9. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, February 11, 18, 25, 1933; *New York Daily News*, February 8, 1933. Robert W. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, p. 175; Richard C. Crepeau, *Baseball: America’s Diamond Mind, 1919-1941*, p. 169.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, February 25, 1933; March 4, 11, 25, 1933; April 15, 1933.

12. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1933.

13. *Ibid.*, March 4, 1933.

racist policies. Allowing Black athletes to participate in some White controlled sports, yet denying them the opportunity to take part in organized baseball was contemptible and one of the worst forms of discrimination. The situation that Black ballplayers found themselves in was not irritating to the *Courier-Journal* merely because of the evasive position taken by baseball officials, but because it epitomized the dilemma that Black athletes had to cope with during the first half of the twentieth century in America. Like their fellow citizens, Black athletes generally wished to participate in the American social structure, but the injustices on the part of sport leaders in the United States forced them into an ethnocentric loyalty to the Black race. The freedom to take part in some White organized sports such as professional boxing, college football, and track and field, but inability to share in others held out hope for Black athletes while concurrently obliging them to identify with an oppressed group. The inconsistencies on the part of sport leaders in the United States was particularly annoying since it reminded Black athletes of their dubious status and the fact that it was nearly impossible for them to be both a Black and an American. Black athletes were no different than other Black citizens in that they displayed an ethnic dualism, a continual longing to attain self-conscious manhood while freely taking part in American life.¹⁴

When the "Big League Symposium" ended in May of 1933, the *Courier-Journal* was faced with the problem of what tactics and strategies it should employ to see that Blacks were finally allowed in organized baseball. About the only option available to the newspaper at this point was to try and convince the baseball establishment that there were Black athletes who possessed the physical abilities and "character habits" requisite to playing in the big leagues. As such, the paper spent a great deal of time over the next five years praising the abilities of Black players, comparing their talents with players in the big leagues, and recommending to baseball executives that they sign deserving Black players. It was customary for the paper to send letters and telegrams to baseball's top brass imploring them to hire Black players, not only because it would improve the performances of their individual clubs, but because it would prove to be of benefit to them financially. Chester Washington, for instance, submitted what he called a "Roster of Stars" to Horace Stoneham, president of the New York Giants, in the fall of 1937.¹⁵ Washington told the Giant president that if he signed such Black stars as Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, and Cool Papa Bell, his club would be a more formidable opponent for the New York Yankees in next year's World Series. Washington added that all these players were available at very reasonable prices.¹⁶

The Black Pittsburgh paper continued to send messages to baseball executives knowing full well that these men were very much aware of the outstanding skills of many Black players. The baseball establishment did not fail to

14. The person who probably best expressed this sense of ethnic dualism was W. E. B. Dubois, the famous Black intellectual and protector of the early twentieth century. See his book, *The Soul of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurp and Co., 1903).

15. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, October 16, 1937.

16. *Ibid.*

notice the excellent performances given by Black ballplayers in the Black leagues annual East-West All Star Games and the success these athletes experienced in a series of exhibition games against barnstorming major leaguers. The East-West Game, organized in 1933 by the Pittsburgh numbers king and tavern operator A. W. (Gus) Greenlee, was played each year at Chicago's Comiskey Park and brought together the greatest stars in Black baseball.¹⁷ This baseball classic was particularly important to the newspaper's campaign efforts because it was an event that showcased the talents of Black athletes. In fact, a degree of optimism always ran through the pages of the newspaper at the time of the All-Star game because it was the one occasion when organized baseball took notice of those outstanding Black players forced to perform in relative obscurity throughout most of the year.¹⁸ Never attracting fewer than 20,000 fans, the East-West Game was always attended by a number of influential baseball executives and White newspapermen who regularly came away from the contests praising the abilities of Black ballplayers. Not surprisingly, in Jim Crow America most of these men stopped short of suggesting that these Black athletes had definite Major League ability.

The outstanding performances turned in by Black players in the East-West Classic served the *Courier-Journal's* crusade very well, but not nearly as well as the victories garnered by Black clubs in exhibition games against selected groups of Major Leaguers.¹⁹ To lend more credence to its argument that many Black players were comparable in ability to their counterparts in organized baseball, the newspaper was quick to point to successes that Black clubs experienced in games against barnstorming big leaguers. Examples of those games would include the victory garnered by the Kansas City Monarchs over Dizzy Dean and a group of major leaguers on October 20, 1934, or the win posted by Satchel Paige and the Pittsburgh Crawfords over the same contingent of players just one week later.²⁰ These exhibition games always brought forth a plethora of favorable comments from big leaguers concerning the abilities of Black ballplayers. The person who was most vocal in his praise of Black players and on more than one occasion advocated the inclusion of these athletes in organized baseball was Dizzy Dean. He told the *Courier-Journal* in 1935, for instance, that if the "big leaguers believed that they were better than the best Negro players they had another thought coming," and that he would like to organize an "All Star Sepia Club to go barnstorming and show the Nordics something."²¹

By the beginning of 1938, the *Courier-Journal* had stopped merely trying

17. See Robert W. Peterson. *Only the Ball Was White*, pp. 100-101; John Holway, *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1975), pp. 9-10; A. S. "Doc" Young, *Negro First in Sports* (Chicago Johnson Publishing Co., 1963), p. 63.

18. See for example, *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, August 12, 1933; September 8, 1934; August 14, 1937; August 23, 1941; August 15, 1942.

19. These games were undoubtedly a source of embarrassment to the officials in organized baseball. It was difficult to reconcile the victories of Black clubs against the supposedly superior abilities of White Major Leaguers.

20. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, October 20, 1934; October 27, 1934.

21. *Ibid.*, October 19, 1935.

to persuade organized baseball of the big league potential of Black players and began to advocate more radical procedures for ending discrimination in the National Game. The person most responsible for the shift in tactics was Wendell Smith, whom the newspaper had recently hired as a sports reporter. Born in Detroit, Michigan on June 27, 1914, Smith had been a competitive athlete at both the high school and college level. He participated in basketball and baseball at a local high school in Detroit and after graduation enrolled at West Virginia State College where he was elected team captain in the two sports. He received a bachelor's degree in education from that institution in 1937. The interest that Smith took in the campaign might stem from the way he was treated as a young athlete. He reportedly experienced his first bitter taste of discrimination in sports at the age of 16 when he was unfairly dropped from an American Legion baseball team. Legend has it that Smith was finally restored to the team by his father's famous employer, Henry Ford. Later Smith experienced, like other athletes of his color, segregated living accommodations while on road trips. These incidents left an identifiable mark on Smith.

Disenchanted with what he considered the *Courier-Journal's* rather conservative position on the baseball issue, Smith immediately began to lash out at the national game for its racial policies.²² Writing in his self-styled column "Smitty's Sport Spurts," his first article on the baseball issue appeared in the paper's May 14, 1938 edition.²³ Here Smith indicted Black Americans for their continual economic support of Major League baseball. He was sickened by the fact that Blacks continued to flock to big league parks, spending their hard earned money and applauding the exploits of White ballplayers. Organized baseball had made it perfectly clear that they did not want Black ballplayers, yet Black Americans persisted in upholding the "institution that places a bold 'not welcome' sign over its thriving portal." Maybe most disconcerting to Smith was the fact that Black Americans were not patronizing their own ballparks, seemingly not caring if the Black leagues survived or not. In spite of the outstanding teams and brilliant players in Black baseball, most Black Americans, he said, offered them no encouragement or, worse yet, completely ignored their efforts. "Oh, we're an optimistic faithful, prideless lot," concluded Smith, "we pitiful Black folk."²⁴

Smith did not mean that Black Americans should be content with their segregated leagues, nor that they should give up their struggle to see Blacks allowed in the National Game. On the contrary, no one was more adamant than Smith in insisting that the color line be dropped from organized baseball. But along with the demand for equal opportunities in baseball, Smith was also calling for self-improvement, racial pride, and group unity among Black Americans—appeals which he believed were appropriate complements to the

22. After his tenure with the *Courier-Journal*, Smith would become a sportswriter for the *Chicago American* from 1947 to 1963. Thereafter, he was a sports columnist for the *Chicago Sun-Times* and a commentator for two Chicago television stations. Ironically, Smith and Robinson died within three months of each other in 1972.

23. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, May 14, 1938.

24. *Ibid.*

campaign effort. Smith believed that Blacks must do more than simply protest against segregation in organized baseball; they must also assume responsibility for seeing that Black baseball was a thriving and healthful institution. Smith noted that American custom and tradition had forced Blacks into segregated leagues; and while the *Courier-Journal's* campaign had rightfully been directed toward breaking down this enforced segregation, he was convinced that segregation and discrimination would continue in organized baseball for the foreseeable future. Consequently, while Smith believed that the *Courier-Journal* should not flinch in its fight against discrimination in baseball, he insisted that the newspaper also encourage racial self-help and self-organization to insure that Black baseball supplied those things and those opportunities that Black athletes lacked because of segregation. Only such institutions would rekindle race pride, and without pride it would be impossible for Blacks to have the unity and foundation necessary for a successful long range attack against discrimination in the National Game. In other words, Smith believed that Black Americans had to identify positively with their own race before it would be possible for them to stage any effective campaign effort. The continual emulation of Major League baseball by Blacks was effected only at the cost of frustration and disillusionment, all of which tended to undermine the self-reliance and confidence that Smith considered essential for ultimate integration of the sport.²⁵

As part of his program of unity, Smith was proposing by the beginning of 1939 that Black Americans organize a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) on behalf of the Black ballplayer and attack the color line "until we drop from exhaustion."²⁶ Smith noted that Blacks had been unable to make any progress as individuals; but, by being united into one large group, they could put more pressure on organized baseball to open its doors to Black athletes. He believed the time had come when the Black community in America should join forces and make a concerted stand on behalf of Black ballplayers.

Like many other thoughtful Blacks of this period, Smith was also beginning to prick the conscience of White America by pointing out the similarities between its treatment of Blacks and Nazi Germany's treatment of minorities.²⁷ Smith took advantage of the unrest in Europe to tie his racial demands to the ideology for which W.W. II would be fought. He believed that this was the ideal time to persuade, embarrass, and shame the leaders of the great American Pastime into a more enlightened attitude towards the Black athlete. Smith noted that baseball had always been flaunted before the world as a symbol of America's democratic process and belief in fair play. So, what better time to

25. This doctrine of self-help and racial unity has most often been expressed during times of greatest frustration and discouragement. See August Meier et al., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976).

26. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, January 14, 1939.

27. This tactic was not unique to Smith and the *Courier-Journal*, but was expressed by other Black newspapers. See for example, *Chicago Defender*, September 7, 25, 1940; *Baltimore Afro-American*, February 17, 1940; *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, April 19, 1941.

fight for the inclusion of Blacks in organized baseball, while America was busily crying out against inhumane practices in other countries and shouting about freedom and democratic ideals? If Black Americans must, wrote Smith, they should show the rest of the world that, compared with the demagogues of organized baseball, Hitler was not really so bad after all. The only difference was that his methods were a bit cruder.²⁸

Shortly after announcing his plans for a N.A.A.C.P. on behalf of the Black athlete, Smith conducted an exclusive interview with the president of the National League, Ford Frick. The interview with Frick was the first of many that Smith would conduct with the most influential men in organized baseball and was characterized by the kind of racist policies that Black Americans were only too used to. Frick told Smith that organized baseball had always been interested in Black athletes, but had not used them because White Americans had not been educated to the point where they would accept them on the same standard as they did the White player. Frick said that Major League baseball was like a newspaper in that it could not make changes until public opinion was ready for it. As an example, Frick noted that Blacks would not be able to travel with a club during spring training or while playing in certain major league cities, because Southern hotels and other public places would not accommodate them. This situation would raise havoc within a ballclub, Frick pointed out, because the only way a manager could develop team spirit was to keep his men together as much as possible.²⁹

Frick's statements provoked Smith into conducting a succession of interviews with eight managers and forty players in the National League to determine their position on the race issue. These interviews culminated in a series of articles in the *Courier-Journal* between July 15, 1939 and September 2, 1939 entitled "What Big Leaguers Think of Negro Baseball Players."³⁰ This was the most ambitious project yet undertaken by Smith, and the interviews were illuminating. Of all the men that Smith talked to, only Bill Terry, manager of the New York Giants, expressed the feeling that Blacks should continue to be barred from organized baseball. Nearly every manager told Smith that they would use Black athletes if club owners and league officials permitted it, while all the players interviewed expressed the hope that they could someday play alongside the Black ballplayer. For example, Leo Durocher, manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, told Smith that he would sign a Black player without hesitation if he thought it would help his ballclub. "However," said Durocher, "the decision as to whether or not they shall play is not up to the managers but ball club owners."³¹

The interviews conducted by Smith did not bring about any visible reaction from organized baseball's top executives, but did occasion a lengthy discussion among thoughtful Black Americans over the eventual plight of Black

28. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, February 18, 1939.

29. *Ibid.*, February 25, 1939.

30. *Ibid.*, July 15, 1939; July 22, 1939; July 29, 1939; August 4, 1939; August 12, 1939; August 19, 1939; August 26, 1939; September 2, 1939.

31. *Ibid.*, August 15, 1939.

baseball. The favorable comments from Major League coaches and players revealed some veiled concerns among Black Americans that they had not heretofore expressed publicly. Would the entrance of Black players in organized baseball automatically spell doom for both the Black American and National leagues? If the Black Leagues were not eliminated, would they then simply be used as training grounds for Black players prior to their entry into organized baseball? Like Smith himself, many people in the Black community believed it was their duty to protest against organized baseball's racial policies. But in addition to protest, many of these same people had expressed the belief that even if the color barrier was dropped in Major league baseball it was still feasible and advisable that Black Americans maintain the Black leagues to promote their own interest in the sport. Many Black Americans believed that it was absolutely necessary to maintain the quality of Black leagues so that they could testify to Black talent and enterprise. Even if the outstanding Black athletes were signed to Major League contracts, it was still the responsibility of Black Americans to insure that their leagues were of sufficient quality so as to continue to supply employment for the largest number of Black players. Whereas Smith advocated self-help and racial unity primarily as a means to break down discrimination in the national game and to guarantee for Blacks those opportunities they lacked because of segregation, many Black Americans seemed just as concerned with maintaining a certain degree of self-organization after the color line was broken. In no case did Black Americans, even those who were staunch supporters of integration in organized baseball, ever forget their connection with an oppressed people. The enormous gap between ideal and practice in organized baseball meant that most Blacks not only wanted to be a part of that institution, but that they also found it desirable to preserve their separate leagues operating with very little White interference.³²

Smith responded to these concerns by pointing out that he was no different from most Black Americans in wanting to maintain separate leagues once the color line had been broken in the Major Leagues. But he could not guarantee that Black baseball would continue to survive once organized baseball had been integrated. In truth, Smith was so busily involved with the campaign for integration that the future status of the Black leagues was not foremost on his mind at this time. In an apparent attempt, however, to reassure fearful Black Americans, Smith predicted that the desegregation of the Major Leagues would prove to be beneficial to Black baseball in every way. Smith noted, for example, that organized baseball would have to compensate Black baseball in some way for the players they signed from those leagues. As a result, wrote Smith, organized baseball would "add money to the pocket of the Negro owners, thereby enabling him to improve his ballclub and build for the future."³³ In retrospect, Smith was rather naive and overly optimistic in forecasting what the future might hold for the Black leagues once organized base-

32. This is a good example of the Black citizens incessant yearning to be both a Black and an American. It has been a constant dilemma for Blacks throughout American history.

33. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, September 9, 1939.

ball had been integrated. The entrance of Blacks into the Major Leagues, of course, would eventually result in the demise of the always unstable Black leagues.

While Smith was at work conducting interviews and discussing the prospects of Black baseball, the *Courier-Journal* busily reported the criticism increasingly levied against organized baseball's racial policies by socially conscious White Americans. The late 1930's saw a ground-swell of protest in the White community over baseball's color line, and the newspaper was anxious not only to make its readers aware of the protests but also to commend White citizens for their courageous stand. The paper reported in 1938, for instance, that the American Youth Congress had passed a resolution censuring organized baseball for their exclusion of Black players.³⁴ In 1939, the *Courier-Journal* praised Senator Charles Perry of New York City for the resolution he introduced in the New York State Legislature expressing disapproval of Major League baseball's racial policies.³⁵ In the same year the paper lauded Jimmy Powers for the campaign he had been waging in the New York *Daily News* against racial discrimination in the National Game.³⁶ The newspaper reported that Powers had recommended in his *Daily News* column that, instead of worrying about minorities in foreign lands, some attention should be given to the Black ballplayer in America.³⁷ In 1940 the paper noted that a group of sports editors from various college newspapers in New York had passed a resolution condemning discrimination against Black players by Major League baseball.³⁸ It was also in 1940 that the New York Trade Union Athletic Association launched its crusade to end discrimination against Black athletes by organized baseball. Inspired by Smith's interviews with Major League coaches and players the Association planned an "ending of Jim Crowism in baseball day" during the summer of 1940.³⁹

The public pressure beginning to mount against organized baseball's exclusionary policies was part of the identifiable progress in interracial understanding and growing respect for non-White citizens taking place in America during the end of the 1930's. There was a marked change in the attitudes of some Whites towards Black Americans by the close of the decade, a change that Blacks often credited to the New Deal. In interracial activities, conferences were regularly being held on a variety of subjects, and though self-consciously interracial, the pattern developed almost irrevocably. Adults and college students met to discuss economic matters, religion, education, and, of course, civil rights. White Southerners began to speak up for Black Americans. It was still a rarity; but the simple fact that a White North Carolina legislator would question a decreased allotment for a Black college or a White supervisor of schools in Georgia would acknowledge the inequalities of segre-

34. *Ibid.*, May 14, 1938.

35. *Ibid.*, August 5, 1939.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, March 19, 1940.

39. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1940.

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gated schools indicated change. The all-White Mississippi Education Association organized a committee in 1938 to suggest ways in which students might study Black Life, and various Northern newspapers in 1940 editorially conceded the importance of Black history week.⁴⁰

While the *Courier-Journal's* campaign was affected by the liberalized racial attitudes of White Americans during the late 1930's, it took America's entrance into World War II to bring about a marked change in the newspaper's crusade to open up organized baseball to Black athletes. The newspaper's efforts were stimulated by the fundamental changes that were taking place among Black Americans by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack. Black Americans were part of the population called to the defense of democracy in the world; but, when they responded and tried to do their share, they were turned away. The result was a general feeling of disappointment and a lessening of the Black's morale toward the war effort, as contrasted with the rest of American society. But paradoxically, the Black Americans' morale was both high and low. The same slogans which caused Blacks to react sarcastically also served to accentuate the disparity between the tenets and the practice of democracy as far as Black Americans were concerned. Owing to their inferior position in society, Blacks responded to the war both as Americans and as Blacks. Discrimination against them had given rise to a cynical attitude toward national goals, but simultaneously resulted in a positive attitude toward racial aims and aspirations. Black Americans, stimulated by the democratic ideology of the war, were reexamining their position in American society and exhibiting a spirit they had never shown before. Part of the new-found spirit among Blacks expressed itself in increased militancy and a readiness to protest loudly and unremittingly against grievances.⁴¹

The war crisis, therefore, gave the *Courier-Journal* more reason and opportunity to protest against discrimination in the National Game than at anytime during the previous eight years. The hypocrisy and absurdity involved in fighting a war for the, four freedoms against aggression by a country proclaiming a master race ideology, while concurrently upholding racial discrimination in organized baseball, were too obvious. The war provided the newspaper with a unique opportunity to expose the gap between America's creed and its practice. The democratic ideology and rhetoric with which the war was waged kindled hope in the *Courier-Journal's* campaign because the newspaper could fasten its racial demands to the same ideology in its efforts to see that the National Game was finally integrated. The newspaper could utilize the present crisis to illustrate that the game of baseball was not the great leveler and was not a sport within the reach of all men. As Smith so aptly put it: "big league

40. For example of the apparent progress in interracial understanding during the late 1930's see: August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976); Bernard Stemsler, ed., *The Negro in Depression and War* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969); Raymond Wolters, *Negroes and the Great Depression* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Corporation, 1970).

41. See for example: Cornelius L. Golightly, "Negro Higher Education and Democratic Negro Morale," *Journal of Negro Education*, 11:3 (July, 1942), 322-328; Horace R. Clayton, "Negro Morale," *Opportunity*, 19:1 (December, 1941), 371-375. Louis Wirth, "Morale and Minority Groups," *American Journal of Sociology*, 47:3 (November, 1941), 415-433.

baseball is perpetuating the very things thousands of Americans are overseas fighting to end, namely, racial discrimination and segregation."⁴²

That the *Courier-Journal's* campaign effort was gaining momentum by the time of America's entrance into the war is evidenced by the increasing amount of attention being paid to the baseball controversy by writers of the newspapers sports staff other than Smith. Cum Posey, Alvin Moses, and Chester Washington, in particular, were stepping up their coverage of the baseball issue by the first part of 1942, in spite of the responsibilities they had covering other sporting events. These writers were veterans in the newspapers' crusade to reform organized baseball, but now they protested against the sport's racial policies as never before and assisted Smith with their own renewed vigor. Washington, for instance, wrote a letter to Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis in May, 1942 telling him that major league baseball would be wise to follow the lead of the Navy and treat Blacks with more dignity. "The Navy was big enough" wrote Washington "to catch the spirit of the times and realize the trend toward democracy in all of the American institutions." So it dropped some of the bars of segregation as Secretary Knox announced a change in racial policy. "Organized baseball would do well," continued Washington, "if it sensed the swing toward liberalism and allowed qualified Blacks to participate in the game."⁴³

Irrespective of the contributions made by Washington and the other sports writers on the *Courier-Journal's* staff, it was Smith who continued to set the tone of the campaign and most vigorously opposed discrimination in the National Game. In August of 1942, an apparent turning point in the campaign occurred when Smith was asked by William E. Benswanger, President of the Pittsburgh Pirates, to recommend four Black players for a tryout with his National League team.⁴⁴ Benswanger, who was being pressured by the American Communist party's *Daily Worker* to give Black players an opportunity with his club, consented to hold a tryout in the early part of September, but only for those athletes picked by the *Courier-Journal*.⁴⁵ Smith combed a list of approximately 200 Black players and finally selected Josh Gibson, Willie Wells, San Bankhead, and Leon Day for the tryout with the Pirates. Smith was absolutely ecstatic about the proposed tryout and was lavish in his praise of Benswanger, calling the Pirate president the greatest liberal in baseball history. In his willingness to give Black players a tryout, Benswanger was risking "the wrath of his associates for an ideal which has been contrary to the general pattern of the exclusive sport in which he operates."⁴⁶

42. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, July 25, 1942.

43. *Ibid.*, May 30, 1942.

44. *Ibid.*, August 1, 8, 15, 29, 1942.

45. The *Daily Worker* had also been waging a lengthy campaign against organized baseball's racial policies. The Communist party, of course, relished the opportunity to point out the discrimination and other inadequacies that often characterized American life. See: Ronald A. Smith, "The Paul Robeson-Jackie Robinson Saga and A Political Collision," *Journal of Sport History*, 6:2 (Summer, 1979), 5-27.

46. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, August 29, 1942. It was about this time that Bill Veeck planned to purchase the Philadelphia Phillies and till the roster with Black players. See Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier*, p. 98.

Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball

Smith need not have been so complimentary of Benswanger, because the Pirate president reversed his decision and never did grant the tryout to the Black players. Looking back, it is safe to say that Benswanger probably never had any intention of upholding his commitment, but merely expressed a willingness to conduct the tryouts in an attempt to placate the *Daily Worker*, which had been pressuring him to sign Black players. Benswanger was not cut out for the role of pioneer and, like many other White Americans, was generally opposed to any changes in racial policies.⁴⁷

The steps taken by Smith and the *Courier-Journal* to see that Blacks were included in organized baseball were frustrated by the general attitude being exhibited by a large majority of White Americans during this period. The increasingly liberalized attitude of some White Americans during the latter 1930's was still not shared by a good portion of the population in this country. In 1942, after almost ten years of agitation by the newspaper, six out of ten White Americans, according to one poll, felt that Black Americans were satisfied with the way things were and received all the opportunities they deserved. A vast majority of Whites in all sections of the country believed that the Black American's restricted role in society was the result of his own inadequacies rather than anything Whites had done. More than half of all Whites interviewed in the Western part of the country believed that there should be separate restaurants, separate schools, and separate neighborhoods for the races.⁴⁸ Sociologist Howard W. Odum wrote from the South that there was "an unmeasurable and unbridgeable distance between the White South and the reasonable expectation of the Negro."⁴⁹ White Southerners were accusing outsiders from the North of attempting to undermine segregation under the claim of wartime necessity.

The White opposition to racial change added to the bitterness of Black Americans and resulted in increased racial tensions in all sections of the country. Communist agitators sought to take advantage of the growing racial unrest and participated in various schemes in an attempt to widen the division between the races. The mounting racial tensions were best represented by the 1943 riots in Detroit, Harlem, and Beaumont, Texas. The Harlem riots were so severe that Mayor La Guardia declared that section of the city off limits to servicemen. The New York City Mayor also organized a committee on unity designed at keeping racial tension in check and thwarting potential violence.⁵⁰

It was in this kind of atmosphere that Smith continued his fight in 1943 against racial discrimination in organized baseball. Left with few available options, Smith asked that the federal government set an example for baseball's top brass by supporting integration in the game. Like the majority of

47. Benswanger never did formally announce his decision not to give the players a tryout. He simply ignored the issue and let it run its course.

48. Hazel Gaudet Erskin, "The Polls: Race Relations," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 26:1 (Spring, 1962), 137-148.

49. Howard W. Odum, *Race and Rumors of Race: Challenge to American Crisis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1943), p.7.

50. See Joseph Boskin, ed., *Urban Racial Violence in the Twentieth Century* (Beverly Hills: Glencoe Press, 1969); Alfred McClung Lee and Norman D. Humphrey, *Race Riot* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1943).

Black Americans, Smith wanted a show of good intention from the Federal government that changes would be made in the racial status quo.⁵¹ He was particularly adamant in calling upon President Roosevelt to adopt a "Fair Employment Practice Policy" in big league baseball just as he had done in war industries and governmental agencies. It was disconcerting to Smith that Roosevelt had never seen fit to issue a statement regarding the exclusion of Blacks from Major League baseball. The president had been conspicuously inconsistent in telling certain segments of society that they must hire without discrimination and at the same time giving "such a discriminating organization as big league baseball a nod of approval."⁵² Contributing to Smith's unhappiness was Roosevelt's temerity in speaking on several occasions about the importance of maintaining the quality of organized baseball throughout the duration of the war. Smith noted that, if the president were really concerned about sustaining the caliber of play in organized baseball, he should make sure that Blacks were allowed in the game.

Not unexpectedly, the president failed to respond to Smith's request for governmental assistance in the *Courier-Journal's* campaign effort. Roosevelt's refusal to intercede on behalf of the Black ballplayer was part of the president's reluctance to recognize the revolutionary changes occurring among Black Americans during the war years. Smith could at least take bitter solace in knowing that Roosevelt's lack of enthusiasm for reform in race relations was not restricted to baseball. For instance, Edwin R. Embree of the Julius Rosenwald Fund urged Roosevelt in February, 1942 to establish a commission of experts on race relations to advise him on what procedures the government should take to improve the course of things. Roosevelt's response indicated that race relations was low on his list of priorities during the war years. The President believed that such a commission was "premature" and that "we must start winning the war... before we do much general planning for the future."⁵³ Roosevelt did arouse himself over outrageous racial incidents. When Roland Jones, a well-known Black singer, was beaten and jailed in a small Georgia town, Roosevelt sent off a note to his Attorney General: "Will you have someone go down and check up... and see if any law was violated. I suggest you send a Northerner."⁵⁴

The disappointment that Smith felt over the President did not deter him from continuing the crusade on behalf of the Black ballplayer. If anything, he was more obstinate and determined than ever. Thwarted in his efforts to get Roosevelt involved in the campaign, Smith spent a good portion of 1943 admonishing Clark Griffith, owner of the Washington Senators, for his blatantly

51. This was the demand voiced by most Black leaders during this period. While its racial policy had been acquiescence in segregation since the end of reconstruction the government was now asked by Blacks to set the example for the rest of the country by supporting integration.

52. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, April 24, 1943; May 8, 1943.

53. Quoted in Sternsher, ed., *The Negro in Depression and War*, p. 310.

54. *Ibid.* For a discussion of Roosevelt's conservative attitude towards Black Americans see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957); Frank Freidel, *F.D.R. and the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).

racist view of Black ballplayers.⁵⁵ Griffith was the one owner in Major League baseball who chose to speak out against the Black athlete. While most big league owners did not often express their anti-segregationist views in public, Griffith was not the least bit hesitant in letting people know that he did not favor Black participation in organized baseball. Griffith expressed, on more than one occasion, his belief that Blacks should devote all their time and effort to developing their own leagues.⁵⁶ Griffith emphasized that Black baseball should be a separate entity, unencumbered by any relationship with White organized baseball. Smith realized, as did other Black Americans, that Griffith's stance on Black baseball was guided more by financial concerns than by altruistic considerations. Like other big league owners, Griffith would do whatever was necessary to perpetuate the existing Black leagues because he made a good deal of money renting his ballpark to the Homestead Grays.

Smith naturally abhorred Griffith's view and wrote that the philosophical position taken by the owner of the Washington Senators was in direct opposition to everything that Black Americans had been fighting for. The real source of Smith's anger, however, was not Griffith's stance on Black baseball but his willingness to sign ballplayers of every racial and ethnic group other than Black Americans for his ballclub. Smith and his fellow *Courier-Journal* sports writers were particularly disturbed over the big league owners' outlandish hiring practices during the war years. For obvious reasons, organized baseball was in desperate need of players during World War II: but Major League owners still refused to sign quality Black players who were more than willing to fill the void. Instead of soliciting the services of outstanding Black athletes, big league owners would travel the world over searching for and signing foreign-born players for their individual ballclubs. Griffith was the most aggressive in this endeavor. "Griffith is one of the big league owners," Smith noted sarcastically, "who prefers to go outside the borders of these United States and bring in players, rather than hire American citizens of color. He has so many foreigners on his team it is necessary to have an interpreter, and if you ever hear this conglomeration of personalities talking to each other in the airport, you'd swear you were sojourning in Madrid, Lisbon, or Havana."⁵⁷

Smith spent much of 1943 not only criticizing Griffith but in trying to get the leaders of Black baseball to make an official statement as to how they felt about the possibilities of Blacks in the Major Leagues. He believed it was imperative that the two leagues in Black baseball "go on record" with respect to Black players in the big leagues. Black baseball was one group, wrote Smith, that was particularly affected by the campaign, and it seemed only natural that they should voice their opinion on the subject.⁵⁸ Much to Smith's chagrin, no official statement on the campaign was made by the leaders in

55. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, February 27, 1943; April 24, 1943; May 8, 1943.

56. *Ibid.*, February 27, 1943.

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, January 23, 30, 1943.

Black baseball until the year had almost come to a close. That the owners remained virtually silent on the issue throughout most of 1943 was interpreted by Smith to mean that they were opposed to the campaign effort. Smith had theorized for a number of years that the owners in Black baseball looked upon the fight from a "selfish, ungrateful angle," and would undermine the newspapers' crusade if given the opportunity.⁵⁹ The seeming reluctance on the part of the owners to make an announcement simply reconfirmed Smith's suspicions and caused him to brand the owners as traitors.

The first person from Black baseball to speak out on the campaign was J. B. Martin, president of the Black American League, who did not voice the opinion of the owners in his league until late 1943.⁶⁰ Martin noted that the owners in his league were no different than Smith and other Black Americans in wanting to see Black athletes have the opportunity to participate in organized baseball. He wanted it clearly understood that his league was not opposed to any campaign which would advance Black players into the Major Leagues. Martin went on to add, however, that Black baseball could not be expected to rectify the exclusion of Black players from major league baseball. The leaders in Black baseball, said Martin, could not "force big league owners to admit Negro players, nor would they assume that responsibility."⁶¹

To Martin and the other leaders in Black baseball, it was simply bad business to lend their support because they understood that they had a great deal to lose and nothing to gain from the campaign effort. In fact, the owners were far-sighted enough to realize that the entrance of Blacks into organized baseball meant, in all likelihood, the eventual dissolution of the Black leagues. The owners did not share Smith's belief that Black baseball would continue to survive once the color line was broken. The magnates in organized baseball would simply entice the outstanding Black players to join their clubs, which would mean the beginning of the end for Black baseball. This possibility was particularly disconcerting to the owners at this time because Black baseball, after years of struggling financially, finally enjoyed a period of relative stability.⁶² It was only during the war years that Black baseball reached its peak in player salaries, attendance, and number of scheduled games. To support the campaign during lean years would have been difficult enough for the leaders in Black baseball. But now, with the league functioning on a more solid foundation, it was nearly impossible for the owners to throw their support behind the movement. Even if the owners wished to see Blacks become successful in organized baseball, which some of them undoubtedly did, it was not enough to rationalize the support of a campaign that could result in the ultimate demise of a league they had worked so hard to make successful.

Frustrated in his attempts to get an official statement from the owners in Black baseball, Smith's next move in the campaign effort was to contact the

59. *Ibid.*, January 23, 1943.

60. *Ibid.*, December 25, 1943.

61. *Ibid.*

62. See Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, p. 98. John Holway, *Voices From the Great Black Baseball Leagues*, pp. 11-16.

commissioner of organized baseball, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, and ask him to meet with the Black Newspaper Publishers' Association in December, 1943 at the winter baseball meetings.⁶³ Smith desperately wanted this confrontation since it would give an influential group of Black Americans a perfect opportunity to plead their case on behalf of Black ballplayers in front of Landis and the Major League owners. Fortunately, Landis agreed to entertain Smith and the other members of the delegation which included seven Black newspapermen, plus the famous Black singer-activist Paul Robeson. This was a significant meeting, first of all, in that it was the first time that Black representatives were given the opportunity to come face to face with the leaders in organized baseball and argue for the inclusion of Blacks in the National Game. The meeting was also important because it gave Landis the perfect occasion to tell America that he was not responsible for the discrimination against Black ballplayers. Often targeted as the man most accountable for the color line in organized baseball, Landis sought to refute those claims.

Landis began the meeting by emphasizing that he wanted it "clearly understood that there is no rule, nor to my knowledge, has there ever been, formal or informal, or any understanding, written or unwritten, subterranean or sub-anything, against the hiring of Negroes in the major leagues." With that behind him, Landis then introduced Robeson to the club owners. "I brought Paul here," Landis explained, "because you all know him. You all know that he is a great man in public life, a great American."⁶⁴ Robeson, an All-American football player and Phi Beta Kappa honor student at Rutgers University, was the first of four delegates to address the club owners on the issue of Black ballplayers. He told the owners that he came to the meeting "as an American and former athlete." He said that it was time for organized baseball to change its racial policies and "beseeched the owners to hire Negro players."⁶⁵ After Robeson had completed his speech Landis introduced John Sengstacke to the club owners. Sengstacke, president of the Publishers Association and manager of the *Chicago Defender*, said that the ban against Blacks in organized baseball was "neither wise nor practical." He stressed the "un-American, undemocratic implications which the gentlemen's agreement imposed upon the face of this country."⁶⁶

Ira Lewis, president of the *Courier-Journal*, followed Sengstacke to the podium and proceeded to refute each argument that organized baseball was accustomed to using when defending their decision not to allow Blacks in the National Game. Lewis began by stating that it was simply untrue that Major League players would refuse to play against Black athletes. The interviews that Wendell Smith had conducted for the *Courier-Journal* made it clear that most big league managers and players were not opposed to having Black players in organized baseball. In addition to managers and players, Lewis noted

63. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, December 11, 1943. See also the *Chicago Defender*, December 11, 1943; *New York Times*, December 4, 1943.

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

that the American public was also ready to accept Blacks in the National Game. As an example, Lewis observed that Americans, both Black and White, had approved of Black participation in college track and professional boxing. Concerning the playing abilities of Black ballplayers, Lewis pointed to the number of victories garnered by Black teams against barnstorming Major Leagues. On the question of travel accommodations, Lewis told the club owners that Black stage performers with White casts managed to handle the perplexing problem without any difficulty and saw no reason why Black ballplayers could not do the same. Finally, on the question of holding spring training in the South, Lewis suggested that training sites be moved from that part of the country to Cuba and other areas of Latin America where excellent facilities were available.⁶⁷

After disclaiming each argument, Lewis then created considerable tension in the meeting by pointing out that Commissioner Landis' opening statement was not completely true and that there was, indeed, an unwritten law against Black athletes in organized baseball. At that point, the energetic Landis, visibly upset by Lewis' remarks, jumped to his feet and angrily reiterated his opening statement. When Landis had finished, Lewis bowed diplomatically in recognition of the Commissioner's position and with a satirical smile on his face, said: "But Judge Landis, we believe that there is a tacit understanding, there is a gentlemen's agreement that no Negro players be hired."⁶⁸ Lewis' comments obviously impressed the club owners. He was the one Black delegate who had the courage to make such a bold statement and for the first time since the meetings began the room was filled with total silence. Lewis continued his speech by telling the club owners that like all Blacks he "felt the bitter pangs of sorrow and disappointment over the unfair and unjust attitude of organized baseball toward Americans of color." He implored the owners to do away with the gentlemen's agreement and allow the national pastime to "become a game for all the boys in America."⁶⁹

The last member of the Publishers Association to speak on behalf of Black ballplayers was Howard H. Murphy, business manager of the *Baltimore Afro-American*. Murphy summed up the comments that had previously been made and then read four recommendations that the Black delegates wanted acted upon by the club owners. The publishers asked that immediate steps be taken to accept Black players "into the framework" of organized baseball; that the "process for promotion and elevation" in baseball be applied without prejudice; that the same system of selection of players be used; and that a joint statement be made by the two leagues."⁷⁰

When the publishers completed their appeals, Landis asked if any of the forty-four officials in attendance from organized baseball had any questions or comments they would like to make concerning the issue of Black ballplayers.

67. Ibid.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid.

70. Ibid.

Tellingly, not one of the officials from organized baseball asked any questions of the publishers. It was not until the meetings were over and they had had the chance to meet privately, that the owners issued the now oft-repeated statement: "Each club is entirely free to employ Negro players to any and all extent it pleases. The matter is solely for each club's decision, without restriction whatsoever."⁷¹

Smith and the other members of the delegation were grateful to have had the chance to air their grievances in front of baseball's highest officials and were confident they had made a good showing. They realized, however, that the official statement issued by the baseball magnates was mere rhetoric and a public relations gimmick. Landis and the owners could talk all they wanted about each team being free to employ Black players, but none of the big league clubs had any intention of signing these athletes.

The statements by Landis were particularly irritating to members of the *Courier-Journal* staff who for years had pin-pointed him as the man most responsible for the color line in organized baseball. Shortly after becoming commissioner in 1921, Landis prevented players from wearing Major League uniforms in exhibition games against Black clubs.⁷² He apparently hoped that this would keep people from finding out that barnstorming Major Leaguers were losing to Black clubs. In 1938 the two managing editors of the *Courier-Journal*, Robert L. Vann and William G. Nunn, met with Landis to ask him about the exclusion of Blacks from the National Game.⁷³ In customary fashion, Landis said the time was not right for Blacks in baseball and that Black fans could boycott Major League games if they wanted. That same year, Wendell Smith began to taunt Landis for his refusal to take a stand on the issue and force club owners in organized baseball to sign qualified Black players.⁷⁴ On the occasion of Landis' death in the latter part of 1944, nearly a year after he had entertained the Black Publishers Association, Smith wrote an article in the *Courier-Journal* that summed up the feelings of most Black Americans towards the late commissioner. Smith noted that Landis had always held himself up as a symbol of honesty and courage before the entire sports world. The commissioner was against anything that might reflect negatively on the National Game. But the fact remained, wrote Smith, that Landis never used the powers of his office to do anything about the discrimination of Black athletes. The question of Blacks in organized baseball was an issue that he preferred to let ride. It was the one problem that Landis "never faced with the courage and exactness that he faced others" in his nearly twenty-five years as baseball's top executive.⁷⁵

It was nearly a year and a half after the Black Publishers Association had presented its case at the 1943 Winter baseball meetings, that there was any indication that club owners might be willing to give Blacks an opportunity to

71. Ibid.

72. Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier*, p. 98.

73. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, May 14, 1938.

74. Ibid., December 10, 1938.

75. Ibid., December 2, 1944.

play in the Major Leagues. In April 1945, Joe Bostic, sportswriter of the *People's Voice*, a New York based Black newspaper, and Jimmy Smith, sportswriter of the *Courier-Journal's* New York edition, were able to arrange a tryout for two Black ballplayers with the Brooklyn Dodgers.⁷⁶ This now well-publicized tryout took the Dodger officials completely by surprise. Bostic and Smith had decided the time was right to demand a tryout and simply showed up at the National League club's Spring training camp at Bear Mountain, New York one Friday morning along with Terry McDuffie, a pitcher with the Newark Eagles and Dave (Showboat) Thomas, first baseman of the New York Cubans. Bostic, acting as a spokesman for the group, asked that the two Black players be given a tryout immediately. Robert Finch, an assistant on the Dodger ballclub, told Bostic that the day's training schedule had already been planned and that the team only gave tryouts to those players invited to camp. Bostic responded to Finch by asking him if the group could speak with the Dodger president, Branch Rickey, about the matter. Finch consented to the request and arranged for a meeting between Bostic's group and Rickey.⁷⁷

The meeting with Rickey proved to be a success, the Dodger president agreed to give the two Black players a tryout with the club the following day. Rickey was not pleased, however, with the way Bostic and Smith had handled the situation. He resented the fact that the two men had pressured him into giving the Black players a tryout. Rickey believed that he and the Brooklyn Dodgers had been put in a very embarrassing situation. He reprimanded both Bostic and Smith for not writing to him ahead of time and asking for the tryout.⁷⁸

As it turned out, Rickey did not have to make a difficult decision because it became obvious to almost everyone during the tryout that McDuffie and Thomas were simply not Major League material. Both of the men were in their late thirties and their best years in baseball were behind them. These two players were probably the only ones that Bostic and Smith could get who were willing to go along with the plans. On completion of the tryouts, Wendell Smith wrote in the *Courier-Journal* that Rickey's decision not to sign the two Black players to a Dodger contract was probably the right one. But he told the newspaper's readers that this would not be the last time a Major League club owner would be confronted with Black candidates. In the near future, Rickey and his colleagues would have to make a decision on younger Black players "who will have better records and greater possibilities."⁷⁹

Smith's prediction was a correct one, because just one day after the Bear Mountain tryout. April 16, 1945, three other Black players were given a tryout

76. *Ibid.*, April 14, 28, 1945. See also Robert W. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, pp. 183-184; Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson*, pp. 99-101; Carl T. Rowan, *Wait Till Next Year* (New York: Random House, 1960), pp. 103-104.

77. *Ibid.*

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, April 14, 1945.

by the Boston Red Sox at Fenway Park.⁸⁰ This tryout came about through the efforts of Smith and Isadore Muchnick, a White city councilman from Boston. Muchnick, who represented a largely Black neighborhood, had repeatedly asked the officials from both the Red Sox and Braves to give Black players a tryout with their respective teams. Unable to get any response, Muchnick threatened to support the recurring movement by religious groups to ban Sunday baseball in Boston unless the two clubs consented to giving tryouts to Black ballplayers. Smith, recognizing the sincerity of the threat, contacted Muchnick and told him that he could provide Black players of major league quality if the Boston City Councilman really wanted to exert more pressure on the two clubs. Muchnick told Smith that he did and asked the *Courier-Journal* sports editor to bring the best Black players he could find to Boston.

Less than a week later, Smith arrived in Boston with three players he believed were the most ideal candidates for such a tryout. The players were Sam Jethroe, an outfielder for the Cleveland Buckeyes; Marvin Williams of the Philadelphia Stars; and Jackie Robinson of the Kansas City Monarchs. The reception that Smith and the three players received when they got to Boston was less than cordial. Expecting to be in Boston just one day, the players were put off for nearly a week and a half before the Red Sox management finally agreed to give them a tryout on April 16.⁸¹ The delay in the tryout did not visibly affect the players as they generally performed magnificently in the hour and a half tryout. "Nobody put on an exhibition like we did." Robinson later recalled. "Everything we did, it seemed like the good Lord was guiding us."⁸² Boston manager Joe Cronin and his coach Hugh Duffy admitted that the three players had looked awfully good during the brief tryout.⁸³

When the tryout ended the three players were asked to fill out application blanks and told that the Red Sox would contact them sometime in the near future. Unfortunately, nothing resulted. The three players returned to their respective ballclubs and fruitlessly waited for some response from Red Sox officials. Smith was naturally disappointed that the Red Sox did not see fit to sign any of the three players. In contrast to the Dodger tryout at Bear Mountain, the three players in Boston, particularly Robinson, were relatively young men and possessed definite big league potential. The only excuse the Red Sox management could give was that the tryout was too brief to determine the playing abilities of the Black athletes. Robinson, Jethroe, and Williams would have to be tested under game conditions before any decision could be made.⁸⁴

80. *Ibid.*, March 24, 1945, April 21, 28, 1945. See also the *New York Times*, March 10, 24, 1945; April 17, 21, 1945; Robert Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, pp. 183-184; Carl T. Rowan, *Wait Till Next Year*, pp. 96-101; Arthur Mann, *The Jackie Robinson Story* (New York: Grosset and Dunlop, 1950), p. 27; Bill Roeder, *Jackie Robinson Story*, p. 27; Bill Roeder, *Jackie Robinson Story* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1950), pp. 12-13.

81. In typical fashion, the officials of both the Red Sox and Braves kept putting the tryout off in hopes that the problem would go away. See specifically the *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, April 21, 1945.

82. Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson*, p. 102.

83. *Ibid.*

84. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, April 28, 1945.

Contributing to Smith's sense of frustration was the fact that the Boston tryout did not get the kind of national publicity he had hoped for. Unfortunately, Smith's old nemesis, President Roosevelt, died just one day after the Boston tryout and American newspapers were filled with details of his passing rather than the results of the tryout. This lack of national exposure combined with the Red Sox refusal to sign any of the Black players, only tended to fuel the resentment of an already angry Smith. Five Black players had tryouts with Major League clubs in two days and not one of them had been signed to a contract. It was a humiliating experience that Smith would not easily forget.⁸⁵

On the day following the Boston tryout, Smith traveled to Brooklyn to attend the press conference Branch Rickey had called to announce plans for his newly formed United States League. The new league consisted of six Black baseball teams, one of which was Rickey's own Brooklyn Brown Dodgers. Ostensibly set up to be a "legitimate and valuable alternative for Negro players," the new league was actually organized by Rickey to conceal the fact that he was scouting Black players for the Brooklyn Dodgers.⁸⁶ Under the pretext of seeking players for his new club in the United States League, Rickey could now seek out Black athletes for the Brooklyn Dodgers without fear of retribution from the enemies of integrated baseball.

The Black writers in attendance at the press conference were livid about Rickey's refusal to respond to questions about Black players in the Major Leagues. Not knowing of Rickey's real intentions, the black press accused the Dodger boss of trying to uphold segregation while at the same time exploiting Black players. They could see no difference between the Black leagues and Rickey's proposed United States League. Ingeniously, Rickey answered his detractors by saying that his new league would be better organized and financially more stable than the Black leagues. The ultimate objective, said Rickey, was to have the newly formed league absorbed into organized baseball.⁸⁷

Smith tended to be just as skeptical about Rickey's new league as other members of the Black press. Considering the frustrating events of the last few days, Smith found it particularly difficult to accept the United States League as a genuine project, and he told Rickey so at the press conference. It was during this meeting, however, that Rickey pulled Smith aside and asked the *Courier-Journal* sports editor if he knew of any Black athletes capable of playing in the Major Leagues. Recognizing the role he played in the recent Boston tryout and the campaign he had been waging for a number of years, Rickey evidently felt that Smith was the man most knowledgeable about the talents of Black ballplayers. Smith responded to the question by telling the Brooklyn Dodger boss: "If you aren't serious about this, Mr. Rickey, I'd rather not waste our time discussing it, but if you are serious, I do know of a

85. See Carl T. Rowan, *Wait Till Next Year*, p. 100.

86. Ruben W. Peterson, *Only the Ball Was White*, p. 187; Harvey Frommer, *Rickey and Robinson*, p. 103; Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made*, pp. 41-47; Carl T. Rowan, *Wait Till Next Year*, pp. 104-106.

87. *Ibid.*

player who could make it. His name is Jackie Robinson.” At that point, Rickey sat back in his chair and said: “Jackie Robinson, you say. It seems to me I’ve heard of that fellow somewhere.”⁸⁸

The conversation between Rickey and Smith at the Brooklyn press conference was influential in that it prompted a more thorough investigation of Robinson’s background and ultimately led, of course, to the signing of the former U.C.L.A. athlete. The conversation also had the immediate effect of lessening Smith’s feelings of distrust towards Rickey. Disappointed initially by Rickey’s refusal to discuss openly the issue of Blacks in organized baseball, Smith had a change of heart after the Dodger general manager questioned him in private about the capabilities of Black athletes. In fact, about a week after the press conference, Smith wrote a column in the *Courier-Journal* praising Rickey’s open-mindedness and his apparent interest in Black players. Smith said that there was no doubt in his mind that Rickey had a sincere interest in both Black ballplayers and the Black leagues. Regardless of whether he employed a Black player on the Dodgers, Rickey deserved the highest accolades possible for both his willingness to give Black players a tryout and the fact that he was the first man in the Major Leagues to “inject himself forcefully” into the structure of Black baseball. “From this perch,” wrote Smith, “it appears to me that Branch Rickey, one of the wisest and shrewdest men in baseball, looms as a valuable friend, both for organized Negro baseball and the cause of the Negro player in the majors.”⁸⁹ Smith would find this out a few months later.

While Rickey was busy searching for Black talent, there were a number of other efforts being made to integrate organized baseball—efforts that Smith and the *Courier-Journal* were apparently not always aware of. In May of 1945, Rickey and Larry MacPhail, president of the New York Yankees, were designated by their respective leagues to head a four-man committee to examine the question of Blacks in organized baseball.⁹⁰ At about the same time, Vito Marcantonio, U.S. Congressman from New York, asked that a congressional investigation be made concerning the discrimination of Black ballplayers. Marcantonio announced that A. B. (Happy) Chandler, newly elected baseball commissioner, the two league presidents, and all the Major League owners would be called to testify on the baseball issue.⁹¹ A few months later, Mayor LaGuardia of New York City appointed Branch Rickey to a committee of ten which was organized to examine the question of Blacks in organized baseball. The committee, which was never mentioned by Smith and the *Courier-Journal*, finished its work in November of 1945 and strongly recommended that Major League baseball accept Black athletes.⁹²

88. Bill Roeder, *Jackie Robinson*, pp. 17-18. Smith realized that Robinson was not the most talented Black player, but possessed the kind of temperament and intelligence essential for the person who would eventually break the color barrier.

89. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, April 28, 1945.

90. *Ibid.*, May 12, 1945.

91. *Ibid.*, April 28, 1945: May 5, 1945.

92. *New York Times*, August 12, 1945.

The recommendation made by the committee of ten was actually a little late in coming, because just one month earlier Rickey had announced the signing of Robinson to a Dodger contract. The signing of Robinson was certainly the biggest sports story of the year and culminated the nearly twelve year campaign waged by Smith and the *Courier-Journal* against organized baseball's discriminatory policies. Not unexpectedly, Smith and the newspaper's other sports writers were ecstatic when they found out about the historic signing of Robinson.⁹³ They found particular satisfaction in knowing that they were partly responsible for Rickey's decision to bring a Black player into organized baseball. The newspaper's plethora of editorials, feature length articles, interviews with Major League players and managers, and the active role it took in both the Bear Mountain and Boston tryouts were all instrumental in keeping the race issue squarely on the minds of organized baseball's leading officials. Of all Black newspapers, the *Courier-Journal* was the most vocal and persistent in its condemnation of lily-white baseball.

Wendell Smith, of course, was the catalyst behind the newspaper's campaign effort. It is difficult to say with any degree of certainty just what influence Smith had on Rickey and the rest of the magnates in organized baseball. It seems safe to say, however, that without people such as Smith it might have been years before the men in organized baseball allowed Blacks in the National Game. What Smith did as effectively as anyone else was to point out that discrimination in organized baseball symbolized the dubious status of Blacks in American society. On several occasions, Smith expressed the feeling that until Blacks could participate fully in the national game, they could not lay claim to the rights of a full-fledged citizen. He made it clear that the campaign was not merely a fight to wear a baseball uniform. It was a struggle for status, a struggle to take democracy off of parchment and give it life. To Smith, the discrimination against Blacks in organized baseball cut deeper into his feelings than did other areas of employment discrimination. If baseball was indeed the National Pastime, the great leveler in society, then it naturally followed that Black athletes deserved to participate in it. Smith realized, as did many other Black Americans, that the inclusion of Blacks in organized baseball was only a temporary expedient, at best only an indirect way of achieving participation in American life. The participation of Blacks in organized baseball would clearly be no solution to the problems of the race because the political and economic dominance would still remain in White hands. Yet Smith believed that the desegregation of baseball would give Blacks a new sense of dignity and self-esteem, ingredients that were not only inspiring in and of themselves, but necessary components to the ultimate destruction of discrimination in this country. Fortunately, the war effort provided Smith with the perfect opportunity to persuade and shame Major League owners into a more civilized attitude towards the Black ballplayer. Without that feeling, the owners in big league baseball might have continued

93. *Pittsburgh Courier-Journal*, November 3, 1945.

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their racist policies and the *Courier-Journal's* campaign efforts would have lasted indefinitely. One will never know for sure, but if the campaign had persisted, Smith most certainly would have continued to lead the campaign until his dream of Blacks in organized baseball had become a reality.