

Rogosin, Donn. *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*. New York: Atheneum, 1983, xiii + 283 pp. Photos, appendices, index. \$14.95 (cloth).

Readers initially approaching this book may assume that they will find a rehash of the poignant National Public Radio series which the author was responsible for. That assumption, however, is erroneous. Instead, following the lead of Robert Peterson's seminal work, *Only the Ball Was White*, Rogosin has given meaning to Jacques Barzun's observation that "whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball." But then, perhaps no topic in sport history is better suited to proving Barzun right than baseball and race relations. As Rogosin puts it:

To examine the world that Negro baseball made is to open a window on black life during segregation. Scrutiny of the life of the Negro leagues provides a texture, a context, necessary for grasping its irrationality. Negro baseball operated in a segregated world. But the walls of segregation were porous and, in the final analysis, Negro league baseball attacked those walls ideologically, economically, and emotionally (p. 32).

The irrationality that is the book's focal point, is the deeply ingrained myth that blacks did not belong in the major leagues because they were not playing there, and the Negro leagues' role in removing it. The leagues were indeed reflective of black society. To begin with, they were testimony to the extensive northward migration of southern blacks that marked the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Too, as Rogosin notes, the leagues were among the nation's largest black businesses. But because the wealth of northern black communities did not match their numbers, gangsters came to play an increasing role in team operations, since they were often the only black people with sufficient capital to invest in baseball. Largely excluded from the sport pages of white newspapers, the leagues provided heroes for readers of the northern black press, symbolized in the popularity of the annual East-West Classic at Commiskey Park. Yet, ironically, black newspapers did not send correspondents to cover road games until they reported Jackie Robinson's every move for the Brooklyn Dodgers.

The leagues, themselves, however, were but a limited part of black baseball, and Rogosin sets forth a number of self-evident, but often ignored, truths. For example, despite their numbers, northern black communities were generally unable to adequately support league teams. Understandably, then, the teams and players, individually, turned elsewhere for financial support. Barnstorming before white audiences far removed from major league circles was of course an important source of income, and Rogosin firmly corrects the unfortunate image projected by the popular *Bingo Long* movie. In addition, semipro teams, mostly in the western part of the country, welcomed outstanding black players, and the latter came to play prominent roles in the annual tournaments at Denver and Wichita. Too, Latin America also provided opportunities for black stars and competition for black owners. A decade before the Pasquel brothers' "raids" created consternation amongst major league owners, Latin American baseball entrepreneurs (including the Dominican Republic's dictator, Rafael Trujillo) lured Negro league stars, often the very hearts of entire teams.

Successful competition with major leaguers on barnstorming circuits and in Latin American winter leagues demonstrated what black players already knew—that they were major league in ability. This is of course an essential point for Rogosin, but for students of American sport an even bigger reward is to be found in the means the author uses to reach this end. What emerges is a finely spun synthesis describing baseball when it was indeed the "national pastime"; a time when seemingly every community from big city neighborhood to rural hamlet had a competitive team. In addition, of necessity, Rogo-

sin's essay demonstrates yet another self-evident truth, that baseball was not just the United States' national game, but also that of Latin American countries, notably Cuba. In short, the author does indeed make clear that to understand baseball is an important route to understanding America. Rogosin's reliance on oral history further embellishes this understanding, as well as enlivens the book, largely because he has asked the right questions. Thus, for example, we learn firsthand the differing attitudes of northern black players on the segregated sportsworld they faced in comparison to their southern peers.

One of the author's unfolding theses is that the organized but unrecognized Negro leagues made baseball integration inevitable. While some readers may argue that Rogosin's interpretation gives undue credit to black team operators, and correspondingly too much credence to their testimony, at the very least they were no worse than their white counterparts; certainly they were much less hypocritical. More important, while Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson were indeed a remarkable pair, Rogosin, by demonstrating that Negro league players were outstanding human beings as well as athletes, coping effectively, for example, with the sensitive racial and political situation in Latin America, helps put baseball's integration in proper perspective—to be read in conjunction with Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment*.

With its contributions to sport history, *Invisible Men* is not immune from shortcomings. Surprisingly, perhaps, the author's knowledge of baseball is sometimes awry. For example, Shibe Park, contrary to Rogosin, was indeed a major league facility, at least in name. And while the Philadelphia Stars had a home-field advantage there, this edge seems to have disappeared when Shibe's regular occupants, the Athletics and Phillies, played at home. Similarly, Mike Gonzales may well have been one of several Cuban blacks who played in the majors before Jackie Robinson's arrival, but Gonzales never did so for the Washington Senators. These and other foibles do not, however, significantly detract from Rogosin's ingenuity, industry, and crisp writing. The publisher's failure to catch errors, however, is further compounded by its decision not to provide notes—a choice that could not have been based on an attempt to save space, since Atheneum has included fifty-two pages of appendices from *Only the Ball Was White*, which was recently reissued in paperback.

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