

Ribowsky, Mark. *A Complete History, of the Negro Leagues, 1884 to 1955*. New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995, 332 pp. Photographs, index. \$24.95.

In recent years, increased interest in African-American sports history, particularly black professional baseball, has sparked the publication of numerous books attempting to chronicle the previously overlooked story of the Negro Leagues. While the increase in historical literature has proved beneficial to both African-American and sports historians, the standard of scholarship has been inconsistent at best. With the exception of a handful of meticulously researched works, most accounts of the Negro Leagues are factually unreliable, resulting from an overreliance on secondary sources and a failure to undertake the painstaking research necessary to derive a complete grasp of the often complex world of black professional baseball.

Mark Ribowsky's ambitiously titled *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884 to 1955*, the latest attempt to analyze the phenomena of black baseball, similarly falls victim to these shortcomings. While Ribowsky rejects the "overromanticized folklore" and "hyperbolic tales" of typical Negro League accounts and advances a more cynical view of black players and owners, his attempt at revisionist history is undermined by the book's astronomical amount of factual errors, shoddy research, and woeful misunderstanding of the basic facets of black professional baseball.

Ribowsky, the author of *Don't Look Back: Satchel Paige in the Shadows of Baseball* (1994), fails to comprehend how black baseball functioned, particularly prior to 1930. He unfairly questions the ethics of black owners such as

Rube Foster and Ed Bolden for “stealing” players from other teams, yet fails to realize that the absence of a reserve clause in black professional baseball until the 1920s resulted in widespread contract jumping, and star players inevitably gravitated towards the more stable owners and wealthier franchises. In addition, despite a supposed emphasis on management, Ribowsky’s account offers virtually no explanations for the success of particular clubs and ignores critical factors such as location, local competition, economic conditions, and white influence.

Ribowsky instead chooses a more superficial mode of analysis, concentrating mainly on personalities, yet his failure to undertake the necessary primary research to support his interpretations is painfully obvious. For example, his attempt to delineate the complex relationship between owner Ed Bolden of the Philadelphia-based Hilldale Club and Nat Strong, a white booking agent and owner of the black Brooklyn Royal Giants, contains a number of factual errors, misrepresentations, and distortions. Ribowsky’s assertion that Bolden alone profited on games played at his Hilldale Park is easily repudiated by an examination of the extant financial records of the Hilldale club which reveal that most opposing clubs received a guaranteed minimum amount with an option to receive a percentage of the gross. In fact, both professional black and independent white teams were especially eager to be booked at Hilldale Park because of the virtual guarantee of a profitable payday. Similarly, Ribowsky’s claim that Bolden and Strong reached a “truce” in November 1920 “allowing games to be played between Hilldale and Strong’s Brooklyn Royal Giants” has absolutely no basis in fact, nor does his statement that Eastern Colored League owners voted Strong out of the league in 1928. Not surprisingly, Ribowsky offers no footnotes or bibliography to support his numerous dubious assertions throughout the work.

Ribowsky’s highly inaccurate account of the first official black world series in 1924 typifies the book’s poor scholarship. The Baker Bowl, home of the Philadelphia Phillies, was the scene of the first two games of the series, rather than Shibe Park as Ribowsky erroneously suggests. In addition, Ribowsky confuses the low attendance of game four at Baltimore with game three, claims that games three and four were played a week apart rather than on successive days, and similarly errs in discussions of starting pitchers and distribution of gate receipts. Finally, there is no evidence to support Ribowsky’s assertion that Nat Strong “profited from the Negro World Series” through Ed Bolden.

Ribowsky also displays an alarming tendency to manipulate the original meaning and context of quotations to suit his own purposes. For example, a statement originally made in 1919 by William White, a New York-based columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, is distorted by Ribowsky to appear as if it originated from Rube Foster. Similarly, Ribowsky misleadingly employs a 1925 statement by black sportswriter Ira Lewis as evidence of criticism of Syd Pollock’s Havana Red Sox, blatantly ignoring the fact that Lewis could not possibly be referring to Pollock’s club, which was not even in existence until the early 1930s.

Despite Ribowsky's determination to advance a more provocative view of black professional baseball, the glaring factual errors and sloppy scholarship render *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884 to 1955* of little use to either the historian or general reader. One hopes that a more sophisticated and comprehensive history of black professional baseball will appear in the near future.

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