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If He Were White: Portrayals of Black and Cuban Baseball Players in the White Press and the System of Color Caste in Organized Baseball 1880-1915

In 1901, New York Giants manager John J. McGraw attempted to circumvent the unwritten rule in Major League Baseball, known as the “color line.” While managing the Baltimore Orioles, McGraw signed Charlie Grant, a well-known black professional ballplayer whom he had discovered working as a bellhop at the Eastland Hotel in Hot Springs, Arkansas. As a means of undermining the color barrier, McGraw figured that a change in name and heritage might accomplish his objective. Because of his light complexion, Charlie Grant became Chief Tokohoma, a full-blooded Cherokee. The *Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that “McGraw has signed a Cherokee Indian, Tokohoma... if Tokohoma dallies with firewater...he will not last long in the American League.”

Despite the efforts to “pass” Charlie Grant off as a Cherokee Indian, the black second baseman’s reputation proved his undoing. Grant had debuted professionally with the Page Fence Giants in 1896, and had played for the Columbia Giants, a Chicago based club, in 1900. Grant was well known in Chicago baseball circles, and black fans that publicly congratulated him inadvertently revealed his identity. In addition, Chicago White Sox President Charles Comiskey recognized Grant from previous appearances in Chicago as a member of the Columbia Giants. Grant never played for McGraw’s Orioles, but he had come closer than any other black player to cross the color line at the turn of the century. On April 20, 1901, the *Sporting Life* attached this postscript to the Charlie Grant affair: “McGraw’s wonder, Tokohoma, the Cherokee Indian, will play with the Columbia Giants of Chicago, again this season.”

The Charlie Grant affair reveals how both the white press and organized baseball socially constructed the concept of race. Both institutions lumped players with darker complexions than whites into a universal category, regardless of either their racial or ethnic heritage. Players of color were characterized by such euphemisms as “dusky,” “swarthy,” or the most universal term, “colored.” In more denigrating terms, players of color were depicted as either “darkies” or “coons.”

The Charlie Grant affair also reveals how players of color responded to the social mores imposed upon them. Players were either coerced or they voluntarily “passed” as white, or some other acceptable racial or ethnic group, and attempted to disguise their cultural heritage. Players with light skin color did play in the minor leagues, as long as their reputations did not expose them. Moreover, players under constant surveillance from the press, fans, or other players, might enjoy only brief careers in organized baseball. But players with darker complexions were nullified by organized baseball’s system of color caste. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to analyze the system of color caste commonly referred to as the color line that emerged in organized baseball and to illustrate how the mainstream press reported the plight of players of color from 1880 to 1915. Two questions guide this narrative: how did the mainstream press portray players of color and what does the plight of players of color tell us about the phenomenon known as “passing,” the effort to cross the racial line and win acceptance in the white world?