

Dan Lerner  
Michigan State University

## **A League of Our Own: B. F. Moseley's 1910 Negro National Baseball League**

In early-twentieth century Chicago, the world of segregated professional baseball was engulfed in numerous conflicts arrayed along class lines. In 1910, a war began for control of black baseball in the city, pitting the old guard against a new vanguard from the city's growing, African American professional class. A leader of the new generation was Beauregard F. Moseley – lawyer, businessman, and baseball entrepreneur. Moseley combined his passion for baseball and business acumen with a commitment to race advancement. His unsuccessful attempt to form a national, all-black professional baseball league created a unique blueprint for urban racial reform and highlighted struggles over the many facets of black identity in the rapidly growing city.

Taking his cue from Booker T. Washington, B.F. Moseley set out to establish an all-black national baseball league rather than simply demand the integration of “Organized Baseball’s” two major leagues. Moseley’s interest in baseball came from his entrepreneurial instincts as well as his sense of racial justice. In the early 1900’s, baseball was proving to be a profitable enterprise. Moreover, by 1910 Organized Baseball’s white magnates were loudly touting the sport as the national pastime, a bastion of both rugged masculinity and gentlemanly dignity, and a remedy for a perceived “crisis of masculinity” resulting from the close of the western frontier. This was a gendered, racially-specific construct, but because of the sport’s special popularity in Progressive Era American culture, success in the baseball world held a unique social and political significance for African American men as well.

Moseley believed a professional national baseball league financed and managed by African Americans would lead to success in other race endeavors and thereby expedite the eventual end of segregation. He used a highly-visible black business venture and the image of the male African American athlete as a

rallying point for race progress and self-help. Moseley's efforts were grounded in the optimism of the Progressive Era. He used baseball as part of a program of urban reform, not unlike African American women's pursuit of a strategy of racial uplift and self-help within their organizations during this same period. The efforts of black clubwomen to "lift as we climb" are well-documented; the similar work of African American sportsmen is not. Although the League folded before a single pitch was thrown, Moseley's efforts secured his standing as a business leader, a political force, and an entertainment entrepreneur within Chicago's increasingly divisive African American community.

Among the historical questions this paper addresses are: what does the centrality of black professional baseball tell us about the process of identity-building among black Chicagoans? How did African Americans use cultural strategies to combat the growing urban institutional segregation in the north? How do cultural forms such as sports become politicized in the pursuit of urban reform? To answer these, I situate the intersection of sports, race, and politics in urban America at the core of my work. My method builds upon three different but overlapping historiographical groups: sport history, African American history, and urban history. This approach allows me to explore the interplay of several crucial urban issues that have heretofore been examined separately in the historiography: African-American migration, the politics of race as a component of urban machine politics, the development of a segregated economy, and competing visions of what the city ought to be and do to ensure an egalitarian, prosperous existence for all of its inhabitants.

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