



# Background Reading: Civil Rights & Baseball

**Grades:** 5-6

**Objective:** Students will read the essay about baseball, the Negro Leagues, and the post-World War II civil rights movement using the attached organizer.

**Time Required:** One class period

**Source:** Britannica Kids and CILC Maker Space



# Civil Rights and Baseball



## INTRODUCTION

The rights of a country's citizens are called civil rights. Many African Americans were denied full civil rights for about 100 years after the end of slavery. The struggle for those rights, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, is known as the civil rights movement.

Before the Civil War most Blacks in the United States were enslaved people, who had no civil rights. After the war ended in 1865, Blacks made some progress. Between 1865 and 1870 the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery and gave citizenship and voting rights to formerly enslaved people.

These rights were often ignored, however, especially in the South. To keep poor African Americans from voting, some states made people pay a tax or pass a difficult test before they could vote. Violent groups such as the Ku Klux Klan tried to scare Blacks away from the polls. Southern governments passed laws to keep African Americans separate, or segregated, from whites. In many places, for example, Black children were not allowed to attend the same schools as white children.

African Americans were also kept out of baseball. From the last years of the 1800s until 1946, African Americans were not allowed to play in what was then called "Organized Baseball" (the major and minor leagues). There was no actual rule against it, but racism at the time in general and among the owners of the major league teams meant that no Blacks were included on the teams. Instead, other baseball leagues, called Negro leagues, were formed for Black players.

## EARLY NEGRO LEAGUES

Major league baseball for white players began in 1876 when the National League was formed. The American League was founded in 1900 as a rival to the National League. Black players were excluded from both leagues. The first attempt to form a Black baseball league was in 1906. The International League of Independent Base Ball Clubs was started in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, area. There were two white teams and four Black teams. The league lasted for one season.

## **The National Negro League and Eastern Colored League**

The first successful Negro league was formed in 1920 under Rube Foster. Foster had been the best Black pitcher in the early 1900s and then became the best-known African American manager and promoter.

In February 1920 Foster organized a meeting in Kansas City, Missouri, where the Negro National League (NNL) was established. The 1920 NNL had teams in seven midwestern cities. In 1923 the Eastern Colored League (ECL) established four teams in eastern cities. From 1924 through 1927 the NNL and the ECL champions met once a year in a Negro World Series.

## **Money Problems**

The finances of these early leagues were unstable for a number of reasons. It was difficult to make a schedule because few of the teams had ballparks. Many teams had to use major and minor league ballparks when those teams were playing out of town. The Great Depression, which started in 1929, left most fans with little money to spend on baseball games.

## **BLACK BASEBALL DURING WORLD WAR II**

During World War II the country began to recover from the Depression. Americans needed distractions from the war and had a bit more money to spend. African Americans bought more tickets to Negro-league baseball games and the sport became a \$2 million-a-year business. It was probably the most successful Black-dominated business in the United States at that time. Teams competed against Black as well as white nonleague teams, in up to 150 games a season. In the winter, star players went to Mexico, Cuba, and other Latin American countries where baseball was popular. Satchel Paige, Cool Papa Bell, Josh Gibson, and Buck Leonard were some of the most famous players of the Negro leagues.

The situation began to change when in 1947, two years after the end of the war, Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers. He became the first African American to play for a major league team and a symbol of the growing civil rights movement in the United States.

## **THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND BASEBALL**

When Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers he made baseball one of the first areas of society to integrate Black and white Americans. A year later in 1948 US President Harry Truman ordered the military to integrate. In 1954, the US Supreme Court ruled that Black children had the legal right to go to the same schools as white children. Using nonviolent protests, boycotts, and marches, African Americans successfully fought for greater equality in every part of society, from education and housing to voting rights throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

During that time more Black players followed in Jackie Robinson's footsteps and joined formerly all-white major league baseball teams. The Negro leagues suffered as a result of these developments. Fans followed the Black players to Major League Baseball and increasingly ignored the Negro leagues. The talent pool was also shrinking. Stars such as Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and Satchel Paige left to play in the major leagues. The Negro leagues tried to attract more fans. A few teams signed some white players, and during the 1950s two teams had female players. However, this was not enough to save the leagues. The National Negro League ended in 1948, and the Negro American League disbanded in 1960.



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<https://kids.britannica.com/kids/article/baseball/352829>  
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## Taking Notes

Directions: Use this organizer to take notes on the essay.

**list of key words**

**words I need to define**

**summary of main points**

**timeline of key events**

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**questions I have**