

## Preparing the Way and Opening the Door: Texas, Rube Foster, and the Integration of Baseball

*by Russell Hill*

Texas has a storied history in the realm of sports. The Dallas Cowboys and the Texas Longhorns have made the state legendary on the football field. In basketball, the San Antonio Spurs, Dallas Mavericks and Houston Rockets have all won championships. Within the last decade, the Texas Rangers and Houston Astros have both made trips to the World Series of baseball. Texans take pride, as they do with so many things, in the history and culture of Lone Star sporting. There are however, untold or perhaps under-told Texas sports stories, especially when it comes to baseball. These stories revolve and are interconnected through the history and heritage of black baseball that were forced into the shadows during the days of segregation and are only now slowly beginning to come out of the shadows and into the light. While cities like Boston, New York, Brooklyn, and St. Louis are given credit for contributions to the history of baseball, Texas is not given its fair due. Texas has a deep connection with the desegregation of baseball and the founding of the Negro National League that would help prepare black players for the day when they would be included as full members into America's Pastime and the Major Leagues. This story connects Jackie Robinson, the man who would become famous as the ballplayer who crossed the color barrier that forever changed the game of baseball, with Texas native Andrew "Rube" Foster.

Jackie Robinson is a name that is known by most Americans. His claim to fame was breaking the color barrier in baseball that had been in place since the 1880s to keep professional baseball devoid of black players. Times were changing, however and in 1947 Robinson became the first black player to play in the previously all-white Major League Baseball. The official credited with helping break down the color barrier in baseball is Branch Rickey; the well respected and revered white president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey was already a pioneer in the game, having created the farm system where teams would grow their talent and prepare players for the jump into the major leagues. But his new pioneering venture of signing Jackie Robinson as the first black player in professional baseball changed sporting history in America forever. National segregation thus suffered one of its first major blows and it was only a matter of time until it unraveled throughout all of American culture. Jackie Robinson became a hero for many blacks under the oppressive hand of Jim Crow laws, and remains a heroic figure today. He was a naturally gifted athlete who played basketball, football, and baseball before joining the army during World War II. During this time, he was stationed at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas and would spend his weekends visiting the Rev. Karl Downs, who was a pastor and the president of Samuel Huston College in Austin. Their

friendship developed and Robinson was offered a job as athletic director for the college after being discharged from the army.<sup>1</sup> It was during his tenure at Samuel Huston College that Robinson received a letter from the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Baseball League inviting him to play black professional baseball for them. This opportunity, and the help of Branch Rickey, gave him the foundation upon which to make the jump into the white Major Leagues when the time was right. Robinson's experiences in the Negro League, both good and bad, further established in his mind that black players could and should be included in white baseball. Robinson was later the first black player to be elected into the National Baseball Hall of Fame and his number 42 was retired league-wide.

The story of Branch Rickey, Jackie Robinson, and the integration of black baseball players, however, did not start in the 1940s in Brooklyn, New York. In effect, it started decades before with the birth of Andrew Foster in the small town of Calvert, Texas. Foster helped open the door and laid the groundwork for black players by creating the first professional black baseball league, the Negro League, to hone their skills and prove themselves every bit the equal counterparts of white professional players in the Major Leagues and perhaps even a little better. The story of Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball are woven with Texas threads, with Andrew Foster being the needle.

Following the end of Reconstruction in 1877, Texas experienced a growth of racial segregation between whites and blacks, as did the entire country. Discrimination was a fact of life for black Texans, and it did not spare Andrew Foster. When he was born on September 17, 1879, his hometown of Calvert was a thriving cotton city and commercial center.<sup>2</sup> His father, also named Andrew Foster, was a Methodist minister and had high hopes that his son would follow in his footsteps and join the ministry. Foster Jr., however, lived only to play baseball, much to his father's disapproval. Baseball players were looked down upon in society, and the profession was often seen as less than admirable. It only further lowered Andrew Foster's status in a land of institutionalized racism. Texas, like many of the Southern states, practiced Jim Crow laws, and young Andrew knew what it was like to be excluded because of the color of his skin. He spent his formative years at the only school in Calvert that would allow black children to attend. Academics were not a priority for Foster, and once he finished the eighth grade, he decided that school interfered with what he really wanted to do - play baseball.<sup>3</sup> Not having to worry about school or schoolwork, he directed all his attention and focus towards his love of pitching. His prowess as a pitcher grew with stature, and by the time he was 17, he was rumored to have stood six foot one inch tall and weighed close to 210 pounds. Stories even abounded that he organized and operated a baseball team in Calvert during his teenage years. Whether these stories are true or not, they illustrate several important aspects of Foster's personality and drive, his love of baseball and the desire to operate and manage a team that would manifest itself later in his life.

By 1897, Calvert, TX had become too small to keep the large and jovial pitcher, and Foster ventured out to Austin to try his hand at pitching for Tillotson College (Tillotson College

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<sup>1</sup> Rampersad, Arnold. *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*. New York, NY: Knopf, 1997. 114.

<sup>2</sup> Cottrell, Robert Charles. *The Best Pitcher in Baseball: The Life of Rube Foster, Negro League Giant*. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

merged in 1952 with Samuel Huston College to form Huston-Tillotson University)<sup>4</sup> His father enrolled him at the college in hopes of converting him to the ways of the Methodist church and to the profession of a pastor.<sup>5</sup> Baseball, however, remained his primary focus. Foster's tenure at Tillotson College lasted only a season, and he moved on to the semi-professional Texas black baseball world of barnstorming teams and sporadic schedules. No one knows when black baseball formed in Texas, but the earliest known records indicate that teams began competing in the 1880s. Baseball, like everything in Texas, remained segregated, and black baseball created semi-professional teams that gained a large number of fans in the black communities. This was the divided world of baseball that Foster set out to change.

Records and statistics of black baseball in Texas are rare, but the few preserved newspaper stories recount the pitching exploits of Rube Foster as he pleased the crowds and stunned the opposing teams. However, most of the legends of Rube Foster are simply that - legends. When no records exist, stories and legends are all there are to go on, and Rube Foster's is not lacking in either of these. He traveled to Waco and signed on to be the pitcher for the Yellow Jackets, who had created an impressive fan base and were considered one of the best black teams in Texas. His time with the Waco Yellow Jackets and the dazzling pitching performances spread the legends of his dominating presence on the pitcher's mound and of his jovial Texan personality. He gained even more notoriety when he helped lead the Yellow Jackets to the Texas black baseball title in 1899.<sup>6</sup> As with most players in the black semiprofessional world of baseball in Texas, Foster changed teams almost annually, also playing for the Fort Worth Colts and the Palestine Yellow Jackets. In 1902, he found himself in Hot Springs, Arkansas, where he drew the attention of two of the greatest managers in baseball history, Connie Mack and John McGraw. Mack's Philadelphia Athletics and McGraw's New York Giants spent the spring training in Hot Springs and it is said that Foster would pitch to Mack's catchers. It is even rumored that Foster taught the legendary Christy Mathewson his famous fade away pitch.<sup>7</sup> While this is only rumor, Mathewson, who had a record of 14-17 the previous year, never won less than 22 games and never lost more than 13 games for the next 12 seasons.<sup>8</sup>

After his time in Hot Springs, Foster, like so many blacks, migrated up north for better opportunities and a better life than could be found in the south. He found his opportunity in the form of playing in Chicago for Frank Leland and his Chicago Union Giants. Leland formed the Union Giants with the purpose of playing against white baseball teams and asked Rube Foster to be the his star pitcher. With true Texas bravado, Foster responded "If you play the best clubs in the land, white clubs, as you say, it will be a case of Greek meeting Greek. I fear nobody."<sup>9</sup> Sadly, his time with the Union Giants was short-lived after a promising start. He pitched a shutout his first game on the mound and then his performance steadily declined. He left the Union Giants mid-season and returned to Texas, only to be offered a spot on the Philadelphia-based Cuban X-Giants. While his first game pitching was a loss, the rest of his season was

<sup>4</sup> Lester, Larry. *Rube Foster in his time*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. , 2012. 6.

<sup>5</sup> "The Story of Marvelous: Rube Foster." *AFRO Magazine*, September 1953: 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dixon, Phil S. *Andrew "Rube" Foster: A Harvest on Freedom's Field*. Xlibris, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Clark, Dick, and Larry Lester. *The Negro Leagues Book*. Cleveland, OH: The Society for American Baseball Research, 1994. 40.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Ward, Geoffrey C. *Baseball: An Illustrated History*. New York, NY: A.A. Knopf, 1994. 157.

impressive. By the end of the 1903 season, Foster compiled a 54-1 record.<sup>10</sup> To put that number into perspective, no white Major League pitcher has come close to a win record like that in the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Ed Walsh was the closest when he compiled a 40-15 record during the 1908 season for the Chicago White Sox. Foster and the Cuban X-Giants went on to face Sol White's Philadelphia Giants for the "Colored Championship of the World" title. Foster was responsible for four out of the five X-Giant wins that helped them win the championship. Sol White was so impressed with Foster's pitching prowess that he offered him more money to play for his Philadelphia Giants the next season, to which Foster agreed. For the next three seasons, Foster led the Philadelphia Giants to three consecutive titles. It was during the 1905 season that Foster gained the nickname "Rube" after defeating Philadelphia Athletics' pitcher George Edward "Rube" Waddell, who was later inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame. As Foster recounted, "it was when we beat the Athletics, with Rube Waddell pitching, that they gave me the name of the colored Rube Waddell."<sup>11</sup> From that moment on, he would be forever known as Rube Foster.

In 1907, Foster had become the best and most popular black pitcher in baseball. His skills were highly revered, so much so that Sol White asked Foster to write an article entitled "How to Pitch," for a book he was writing about the history of black baseball. The article further spread the Texan's reputation as the best pitcher in black baseball across the country. However, this collaboration with White would be their last, as a contract dispute and a desire for better pay led Foster to sign with his former team, the Leland Chicago Giants. This move signified a turning point in Rube's career that set him on the path of changing him from the best black pitcher in the country to the head of the first organized black baseball league. The reunion with his former boss Frank Leland and his Giants in 1909 was marred by both injury and internal struggles. Foster broke his leg and by the end of the season was struggling to seize power of the Giants away from Leland. This internal power struggle caused Leland to abandon the team he created.<sup>12</sup> With complete control of the team, Foster set about creating a black baseball dynasty. He took the Giants on a barnstorming tour of Texas in 1910 and was given "a welcome that would have done honor to the President of the United States."<sup>13</sup> Foster eventually renamed the team the Chicago American Giants, for which he would have a dual role of star pitcher and manager. The Chicago American Giants became, as Foster claimed, "The Greatest Aggregation of Colored Baseball Players in the World"<sup>14</sup> as they won back-to-back championships in 1911 and 1912.

In 1913, Foster wrote an article in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* calling for the need of a Negro League, stating, "In my opinion, the time has come when the formation of colored leagues should receive consideration. In fact, I regard it as absolutely necessary."<sup>15</sup> Foster's proposed solution to this necessity was "proper financial backing and encouragement" in order to "form an eight club circuit" Negro League that was "superior in playing strength to either the American association, International league or Pacific Coast league."<sup>16</sup> Foster knew that the only way black

<sup>10</sup> Fink, Rob. *Playing In Shadows*. Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2010. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Lester, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Cottrell, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Fink, *Playing in Shadows*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> Cottrell, 62

<sup>15</sup> Foster, Andrew Rube. "Success of Negro on Diamond Told By "Rube" Foster." *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 21, 1913: B1.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

baseball could be taken seriously and gain equal footing with white baseball was to form a professional league. This vision of a black, professionally organized baseball league would come to fruition under his drive and leadership.

It would be several years before Foster's vision of an organized professional black baseball league could be realized. Between 1913 and 1919, Foster's Chicago American Giants dominated the other black teams they played. He also began pitching less and increasing his role as manager, and by the 1917 season he would pitch his last game. All of his time, energy, and focus would be spent on managing his American Giants and, more importantly, organizing black baseball. The process was slow, owing primarily to America's involvement in World War I in 1918 as well as the worst race riots in the country's history in Chicago and elsewhere during the summer of 1919. It was in this climate of violence and racial animosity that Foster began laying the foundation for the first black baseball league. On February 13, 1920, a meeting occurred between Foster and seven other black baseball team owners at a YMCA in Kansas City to officially form the National Associate of Colored Professional Base Ball Clubs, known as the Negro National League<sup>17</sup> For the first time, black baseball players had a league to call their own. The Negro National League consisted of eight teams from Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburg, Detroit, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, and Havana, Cuba.<sup>18</sup> Foster was elected president and treasurer of the Negro National League, and was the driving force that helped make it financially successful. The league, according to Donn Rogosin, "was a product of his imagination and foresight, and he ruled with an iron but usually benevolent hand."<sup>19</sup>

The Negro National League that Foster helped create and guide prospered through the 1920s.<sup>20</sup> Foster, however, felt the stress of trying to manage his team and to keep them competing at the high level he demanded, and that of trying to run a professional league. By 1926, it had taken such a toll that Foster became debilitated by a mental breakdown and was admitted into Kankakee, Illinois sanitarium outside Chicago. Without his leadership, the Negro League struggled but barely managed to stay alive until the effects of the Great Depression finally ended the league in 1931. Andrew "Rube" Foster never recovered from his mental breakdown and died in Kankakee on December 9, 1930 at the age of 51.<sup>21</sup> It is said that thousands of mourners paid their respects to this pioneer of black baseball. Although Foster's Negro League did not survive the trauma of his death and the Great Depression, it did leave a lasting legacy and, more importantly, a foundation for other black baseball leagues to take its place. The New Negro League was formed in 1933, and the Negro American League followed in 1937. These leagues carried on the tradition of organized black baseball that allowed Jackie Robinson to play for the Kansas City Monarchs and prepare him to break the color barrier.

Andrew "Rube" Foster may have left Texas to pursue his desire to play baseball and create a black league, but he was always a Texan. He was known to "address males and females

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<sup>17</sup> Peterson, Robert. *Only the Ball Was White*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992: 83.

<sup>18</sup> Chicago Daily Tribune. "Foster To Lead Colored League." January 29, 1922: A3.

<sup>19</sup> Peterson, 88.

<sup>20</sup> Rogosin, Donn. *Invisible Men: Life in Baseball's Negro Leagues*. New York, NY: Kodansha International, 1995: 11.

<sup>21</sup> Lester, 169.

alike as ‘darling’ in his booming Texas drawl”<sup>22</sup> as well as carrying around a revolver wherever he went.<sup>23</sup> Foster’s contributions to black baseball and his legacy forever link him to Texas, Jackie Robinson, and the breaking of the color barrier in America’s Pastime. Although the creation of the Negro Leagues and the integration of baseball happened in Chicago and Brooklyn, Texas still played a part and still bears remnants of Foster’s legacy. Downs Field, on east 12th Street in Austin, the home field for Huston-Tillotson University’s baseball team, was home to the Austin’s Negro League team, the Austin Black Senators. This small, unassuming field saw Negro League greats as Willie Wells, Buck O’Neal, Satchel Paige, and Jackie Robinson play ball.<sup>24</sup> For Foster, his purpose and vision was to “do something concrete for the loyalty of the race”<sup>25</sup> so that when “the Major Leagues opened the doors, black players would be ready to walk through it.”<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, Foster was unable to see the door opened for Jackie Robinson. The story of Robinson and the desegregation of baseball is a cloth of many threads. Through Andrew “Rube” Foster and his creation of the Negro Baseball Leagues as well as Robinson’s own personal history with the state, Texas can claim several of these threads.

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<sup>22</sup> Enders, Eric. *The Scribner Encyclopedia of American Lives: Sports Figures*. Edited by Arnold Markoe. Vol. 1. New York, NY: Gale Group, 2002: 293.

<sup>23</sup> Ward, 157

<sup>24</sup> "District Days At Historic Downs Field Featuring Play Ball." *Austin Fusion Magazine*. <http://austinfusionmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/District-Days-at-Downs-Field-Flyer.pdf> (accessed April 10, 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid

<sup>26</sup> Morelli, Jack, and Mark Chiarello. *Heroes of the Negro Leagues*. New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2007: 38.

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