

Philly's Gene Benson was winner on and off the field

by William C. Kashatus



Benson helped pave the way for blacks in the major leagues

ing — defensive outfielders in the Negro Leagues. A three-time All-Star, Benson pioneered the over-the-shoulder basket catch that would later be popularized by Willie Mays of the New York Giants.

The stocky outfielder's unusual batting style was just as entertaining. Holding the bat down low near his waist, Benson stood laterally in the batter's box facing the pitcher. Then, at the last second, he would drive the pitch to the opposite field. Despite his highly unorthodox style, available records indicate that his lifetime batting average was .330, with a peak mark of .370 in 1945.

So impressive was Benson's flashy performance that it transcended the color barrier. White fans were excited by the Stars' center fielder as well as by his team's faster-paced style of play, with its emphasis on base-stealing, drag-bunting and hit-and-run. They came in droves to the Stars' park at 44th Street and Parkside Avenue, and on Monday nights to Shibe Park, where the Stars drew as many as 30,000 spectators.

Major-league owners recognized the powerful appeal of players like Benson as well as black baseball itself and sought to capitalize on it. Branch Rickey, president of the Dodgers, was the first to act when he signed Robinson from the Kansas City Monarchs in 1945.

But Robinson was apprehensive about his historic role. While he possessed the natural ability to excel at any sport, he also had a quick temper that exploded at the slightest suggestion of racist behavior. Nor was he confident about his baseball skills, having spent only one season in the Negro Leagues.

To prepare him, Rickey arranged for Robinson to join a group of Negro League All-Stars on a barnstorming tour of Venezuela. Benson, a 32-year-old veteran on that squad, agreed to mentor the young infielder. Over the winter, Benson advised, assured and encouraged the young Dodger-to-be.

Had he been younger, Benson might very well have been chosen to crack the color barrier. He certainly possessed the playing ability, temperament and character to do it.

Indeed, Benson continued to serve as a

mentor to black youth, as well as a popular speaker to school groups on the significance of baseball to American race relations. His kind, soft-spoken nature endeared him to many.

Sadly, recognition has been slow in coming for Gene Benson. Since 1969, when the first Negro Leaguers were voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, only power hitters and top pitchers seem to gain induction. Benson was neither. Even with the recent 50th-anniversary celebration of Robinson's breaking of the color barrier and the proliferation of books on the Negro Leagues, the flashy outfielder has not been given his full due.

He didn't seem to mind. A deep sense of personal humility was among his chief characteristics.

On Monday morning, as I sat at Gene Benson's memorial service, I couldn't help but think of the manner in which the Rev. Jesse Jackson eulogized Jackie Robinson nearly three decades earlier.

Referring to the "small dash" separating the birth date from the death date on a gravestone, Jackson said the significance of man's life can be best measured by that "seemingly irrelevant dash," what he contributed between his birth and death. "On that dash," said Jackson, "Jackie Robinson integrated baseball, not for himself, but for all of us. On that dash, he helped us to ascend from misery to hope with the meaning of his life."

In his own easygoing way, Gene Benson helped to make that dash a bit more bearable for Robinson as well as for those of us whose lives he touched. ■

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