SPORTS

Thank You Jackie, Chuck and Fritz.

By Don Collins

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illions of avid sports fans cram arenas and stadiums around the country every year to witness in awe the patented, acrobatic moves of a Michael Jordan on the basketball court or the scintillating defensive plays of an Ozzie Smith on the baseball diamond.

In a sense, sports enthusiasts daily pay deserving tributes to the Jordans, the Smiths, and all other black athletes who have toiled in the professional ranks.

But, since February is Black History month, sports fans-black and white - should pay a special homage to Jackie Robinson, Chuck Cooper, and Frederick Douglass "Fritz" Pollard, the genuine black pioneers of professional team sports, which were once, like everything else, segregated. These men paved the way for all black sports superstars. But it wasn't an easy path to groove.

Playing during the acme of segregation, Robinson, Pollard, and Cooper endured the death threats, the racial slurs, and the second-rate living and eating facilities to prove they could compete in the white leagues.

"They possessed a tremendous amount of character and courage," Dick Powell, general manager of the Baltimore Elite Giants of the Negro League from 1937-50, said about the three pioneers. He says, "They were very respected in the black neighborhood."

"They were outstanding men and good people," remarked Sam Lacy, long-time sportswriter of the Afro-American newspaper.

Whenever the topic of racial breakthrough in sports is mentioned, the first name that surfaces is Jackie Robinson. Before Robinson shattered the color line in 1947, he excelled in the Negro leagues.

But Powell contends that Robinson wasn't the best player to come from the black league. "We had a lot of players better than Jackie," Powell reflected. "Josh Gibson was one." "In fact, he was the best player I ever saw."

But Branch Rickey, then-general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, saw something in



Chuck Cooper

Robinson that he didn't see in the others.

"Jackie had the qualities they were demanding from an intellectual standpoint (Robinson graduated from UCLA)," Powell said. "He also had the composure to withstand all the distractions."

Rachel Robinson, Jackie's wife, has deplorable memories of those "distractions." "We (Jackie and Rachel) were bumped off planes and replaced by whites and no provisions were made for us to get to Stratford for spring training," Rachel said in Art Rust's book the Illustrated History of the Black Athlete.

But there was something that hurt Rachel Robinson more than the indignities. She says, "These were painful things for me, but it was particularly painful for Jackie because he was such an assertive person and had always been very sure of his manhood. To have to see him submit to these indignities was abominable."

Powell admits he was "relieved" when Robinson first donned the uniform of the Brooklyn Dodgers because he had been adamant that blacks deserved the chance to play in the big leagues.

More important, Robinson's baptism in baseball opened the door for Larry Doby, the second black man to play in the big leagues, and for all the other great black players to work in the major leagues.

"Our boys proved in little or no time, they could play in the big leagues," Powell said. "Our fellows accomplished things in 20 years that whites did in 60 years."

Charles Cooper, the first black to play professional basketball, admitted in Rust's book that Jackie Robinson absorbed the bulk of the bigotry. But the Duquesne graduate was confronted with his share after the Boston Celtics made him the first black ever

drafted by a National Basketball Association team in 1950.

"Traveling around the league, I encountered all the problems any black man of that period," Cooper said in Rust's book. "I had to sleep in different hotels when the team played on the road." I was called 'nigger' a few times and I had one fight in the NBA." But I naver thought of myself as a black pioneer in basketball. When Jackie Robinson broke the color line, he's the one who shouldered the burden that helped blacks . . . he was the pioneer."

Earl Lloyd of the Washington Capitols, and Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton of the New York Knickerbockers, followed Cooper to the NBA. Then, soon after, Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Rusself.

Even the most knowledgeable sports enthusiasts are not aware that "Fritz" Pollard was the first black to perform in professional football. He led the undefeated Akron Prosto the championship of the American Professional Football Association in 1920. After the Association was rechristened as the National Football League, Pollard became the first black coach in 1927.

Pollard revealed that "Jackie Robinson had an easy time in comparison to me. I'd run out to the field just before the whistles and they called me all the niggers in the world," Pollard said in Rust's book. "At the kick-off, they'd come after me even if the ball wasn't kicked to me." "I learned how to 'ball up' on the ground to absorb the blows."

So in February, when people heap adulation and praise on Martin Luther King, Jesse Jackson and others who have fought - and are still fighting - an exceptional battle for equality and justice for blacks, they shouldn't forget the battles fought by Jackie Robinson, Chuck Cooper, and "Fritz" Pollard.

How Harry Mayo, Jr. turned rust into gold...legally.

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