

# Oscar Charleston

## of Indianapolis

***Celebrating the Negro Leagues' 100-year anniversary  
and an Indy baseball legend***

by **MIKE LOPRESTI**

It is a very big year to remember baseball's Negro Leagues, with Indianapolis in the middle of it, for lots of good reasons. To find one of the best, let's go to Floral Park Cemetery on the west side of town.

The small grave marker, flat to the ground, can be hard to find. There's only room for a few words. *Oscar M. Charleston. Indiana.* Something about his military rank in World War I, and the dates of his birth and death – Oct. 14, 1896, and Oct. 5, 1954. That's it. No hint of what he meant to the game that became his life. No hint that here lies an Indianapolis native son, who belongs in the very inner pantheon of baseball. No hint that, in a recent list in *The Athletic* of the best players of all time, Charleston was all the way up at No. 5, ahead of the likes of Stan Musial, Ty Cobb and Walter Johnson. Oscar Charleston of Indianapolis.

A lot of people in Charleston's hometown might not have a clue about his place in the history of the sport. Peyton Manning has a statue outside Lucas Oil Stadium, Larry Bird and Oscar Robertson are secure in their legends. But what of the seventh of 11 children, son of a construction worker, who grew up playing ball on the sandlots of Indy? Who knows about him? The president of the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum on the phone from Kansas City, he knows.

"He's not that household name in the Negro Leagues from a mainstream standpoint, like the Satchel Paiges and Papa Bells and Josh Gibsons," Bob Kendrick was saying. Or Buck O'Neil, another superstar from the Negro Leagues. Anyway, Kendrick went on. "That was why it was always so eye-opening when Buck O'Neil would say – and he would say this without hesitation – that Oscar Charleston was the greatest baseball player he had ever seen. That he was Willie Mays before we knew who Willie Mays was."

Kendrick can go on and on about Charleston.

How he worked as a batboy for the Indianapolis ABCs of the Negro Leagues, a team whose moment in history shines brightly this year. More on that later. How he lied about his age to get into the military at age 15 and served in World War I. "I think that gives you an indication of the toughness about Oscar Charleston," Kendrick said. "All of the players that I have met from the Negro Leagues who knew him, and some who saw him, all talk about him with great reverence."







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## "The only thing he didn't do was sell popcorn."

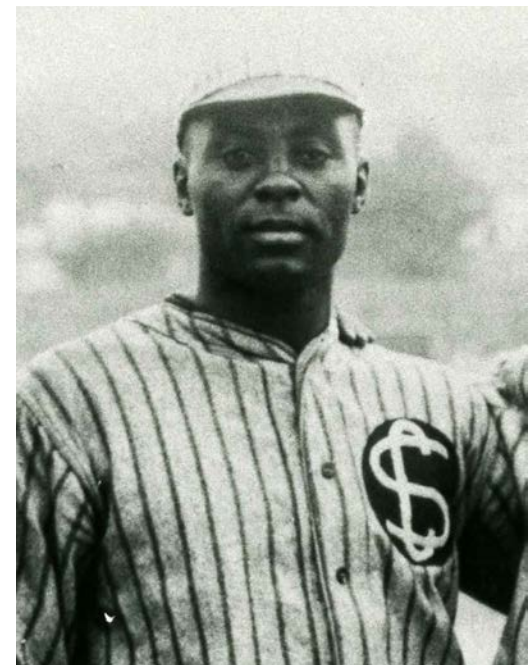
How Charleston returned to Indianapolis to start a four-decade career in baseball as a player and manager. How his production in the Negro Leagues was startling for many teams. *The Hoosier Comet*, people called him, for his speed.

"In the '21 season, Oscar Charleston led the Negro Leagues in home runs, triples, doubles, stolen bases and batting average. The only thing he didn't do was sell popcorn," Kendrick said. Yeah, but what would he have done in the big leagues, had the door not been closed? Well, in exhibition games against white major leaguers of his day, Oscar Charleston hit. 326. That's how good he was.

Or Kendrick can talk about how Charleston was fiery and intensely proud and competitive as a player and man, such as the time he ripped the hood off a Ku Klux Klan member. "And lived to tell about it," Kendrick said. "That's how bad Oscar Charleston was." But how he could also be gentle enough to manage an Indianapolis team with women on the roster. "His on-field demeanor and as a manager were totally different. He would fight you. But as a manager, he was as nurturing an individual as you would ever meet."

This is why Charleston's small, easy-to-miss gravesite nettles Bob Kendrick. Until the coronavirus intervened, Kendrick was to be in town on May 2 for an important anniversary ceremony. On May 2, 1920, a century ago, the Indianapolis ABCs beat the Chicago American Giants 4-2 in Washington Park, which was located not far from where Victory Field stands now. It was the debut of the Negro National League, generally recognized as the official beginning of the true Negro Leagues. While in town, Kendrick had something else on his list, too.

"As we look at the commemoration of 100 years since that first game, it's obviously



with a steady eye toward also acknowledging the greatness of Oscar Charleston. We just recently found out that he was buried in a relatively non-descript gravesite at Floral Park Cemetery. So that kind of prompted my mind that OK, as part of the centennial celebration as we go back into Indianapolis to commemorate this game, we need to rectify that situation and put a proper headstone on the gravesite of Oscar Charleston."

That will have to come post-virus, when the world returns to a more normal orbit. But Charleston has been gone since 1954. Another month or two is probably OK.

The Negro Leagues – offering opportunity to a baseball-loving population that the all-white major leagues would not – played in dozens of places. From the Seattle Steelheads to the New York Black Yankees. From the Chattanooga Choo-Choos to the Jacksonville Red Caps. From the Birmingham Black Barons, who once included Willie Mays, to the Kansas City Monarchs with an infielder named Ernie Banks, to the Baltimore Elite Giants with catcher Roy Campanella.



The Negro Leagues landed in Dayton and Austin and Harrisburg.

And Indianapolis.

“Indianapolis plays such a key role in this story and I’m going to venture a guess that there are a lot of people in Indianapolis who have no idea their city’s connectivity to the history of the Negro Leagues,” Kendrick said. “The people who do know something about the Negro Leagues, they’ve probably heard about the Indianapolis Clowns and not the ABCs. C. I. Taylor (of the ABCs) was a tremendous manager. Matter of fact he’s highly regarded as one of the greatest managers, not only in the history of the Negro Leagues but the history of this game.”

There had been widespread baseball back to the 1800s, but May 2, 1920 is when the golden age of the Negro Leagues began. The ABCs were the hosts the day it all started. The team had been created by the American Brewing Company -- hence their nickname -- and been one of the premier teams in black baseball in the early part of the century. In 1920, with Charleston in the lineup, they finished fourth in the inaugural Negro National League season. Charleston left for the St. Louis Giants in 1921, Taylor died in 1922, and the team soon faded away.

Charleston’s career took him from team to team, including the Homestead Grays and Pittsburgh Crawfords, two flagship franchises of the Negro Leagues. According to Kendrick, each had five future Hall of Famers on the roster when Charleston played.

Meanwhile, back in Indianapolis, a team called the Clowns was earning its niche.

Legend has it, the Clowns were first formed in Miami in the mid-1930s, with one of the founders a bootlegger. By 1943, they had become the Cincinnati Clowns, then the Cincinnati-Indianapolis Clowns, then the Indianapolis Clowns for good in 1946.

They could play baseball, certainly. But part of their persona was a barnstorming act as well, with music and comic skits and a mascot called Richard “King Tut” King,

wielding a giant glove and doing all manner of routines without a ball. Goose Tatum, who won fame as a Harlem Globetrotter in basketball, could also play baseball and was often part of the show, with a hidden ball trick.

“Goose could play, Goose was a slick-fielding first baseman,” Kendrick said. “We’ve got some video of him playing at old Victory Field, and he’s putting on a show. He and King Tut and the guys are doing the Globetrotter routines, but then you see these snippets of his masterful skills around first base. Major League Baseball tried to sign Goose but he didn’t want to go to the minor leagues.”



*Negro American League Champions*

The Clowns were entertaining enough that three decades later, Hollywood would produce a movie inspired by them – The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings, starring James Earl Jones, Richard Pryor and Billy Dee Williams.

That side of the Clowns came from a New York showman named Syd Pollock, who ran the club and decided for his team to thrive, it needed to do more than play the game.

“It’s interesting with the Clowns, because the Clowns are a part of what has created this stereotypical depiction of the Negro Leagues,” Kendrick said. “The Clowns are mightily important to this story because the

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Clowns have probably been one of the most misconstrued of all Negro League teams because they brought the entertainment level to the game that I'm not sure we've seen since. They were masterful. But some teams took that as, that is all that the Negro Leagues were. This kind of vaudevillian side-show so to speak, and that is not all that the Negro Leagues were.

"I think that's where the controversy comes in, the fact that you had these white men helping create this kind of vaudevillian entertainment spectacle. They had King Tut, probably today what you'd call a mascot. But the rest of the guys were serious baseball players. You ask one of those guys to dress up in a clown outfit, you'd have to fight him."

The clock was ticking on the Negro Leagues starting in 1947, when Jackie Robinson integrated the major leagues. Given the inevitable flow of black players to the majors that would follow, what future did the Negro Leagues have? But the Clowns had one glorious era left in them.

They won the Negro American League championship in 1950 and Sam Harrison won the triple crown. They won again in 1951, and according to records, did not play one home game. "They were," Kendrick said, "the ultimate barnstorming team." In 1952, Pollock signed, for \$200 a month, a teenage shortstop who didn't have much interest in entertaining or hidden ball tricks. His name was Hank Aaron.

Aaron hit cleanup for Indianapolis but was soon gone to the Boston Braves' organization. The Clowns won another title. In 1953, Pollock brought in another infielder named Toni Stone, who would hit .243 as a Negro Leagues player. Did we mention she was a woman?

The Clowns added a fourth and last championship in 1954, with several new faces. One was Oscar Charleston, lured out of retirement to manage the team.



Two others were Connie Morgan and Mamie "Peanut" Johnson, two more female players. But that was the last hurrah as far as championships. By fall, Charleston was gone, killed by a stroke, and buried in... well, you know.

Meanwhile, the Negro Leagues were fading fast. The Clowns hung on a few more decades as a traveling entertainment show, but the end came in the 1980s, the last flickering light of what was once a bright coast-to-coast inferno of Negro Leagues baseball.

"People have such a strong identity to two specific teams, the Kansas City Monarchs and the Indianapolis Clowns, because they were barnstorming tremendously," Kendrick said. "People remember that with great fondness, but that doesn't diminish how great a team the Clowns really were."

"I love pointing out the picture of Aaron standing at the train station in Mobile, Ala., when people walk through the museum, because I think in a lot of ways it is an aha moment," Kendrick said. "I think there's always a little bit of doubt and skepticism about just how great the Negro Leagues were. And then you come to this picture of a baby-faced Henry Aaron standing at the train station about to leave – probably for the first time ever – to go join the Indianapolis Clowns. The light bulb goes on and this stuff starts to make sense."

"Because there is this possibility that Oscar Charleston might have been as good as ol' Bob is saying he was." ♥