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The Costs of Segregation to the Detroit Tigers



Many people know the remarkable and inspiring story of Jackie Robinson and how he endured racial insults to integrate major league baseball in 1947. In Robinson's first year alone he won the rookie-of-the-year award and led his Brooklyn Dodgers to the National League pennant.

But Robinson was only part of the integration story. What about those teams that refused to hire blacks, that insisted on following racist policies? What made them finally decide to integrate?

To answer these questions, it is useful to focus on the Detroit Tigers. While other major league teams were signing Satchel Paige, Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, and other black stars, the Detroit Tigers, under owner Walter Briggs, refused to hire any blacks. Wendell Smith, a black athlete and sportswriter, called Briggs "very prejudiced. He's the major league combination of Simon Legree and Adolf Hitler." Smith was no doubt exaggerating. However, the Tigers were indeed the next-to-last team in the major leagues to integrate (in 1958)—and only did so after Briggs had died.

Let's look at the results of Detroit's decision to avoid hiring blacks. Before baseball integrated, Detroit was a top team in the major leagues. Led by ace pitcher Hal Newhouser and sluggers Hank Greenberg and

Rudy York, the Tigers won the American League pennant in 1945. During each of the next two years, they finished in second place, clearly among the best teams in baseball.

The next year, 1948, the Cleveland Indians signed two outstanding black players: Larry Doby, a power-hitting outfielder, and Satchel Paige, possibly the greatest pitcher of his generation. The result was that Indians won the pennant by one game, and then, with seven key hits from Doby, they won the World Series. What's more, Cleveland set a major league record for attendance—2.7 million fans bought tickets to watch the integrated team play.

The examples of Brooklyn and Cleveland gave the other teams something to ponder. They could continue to ignore black talent, but there would be a cost: fewer wins and fewer fans.

The Detroit Tigers learned this lesson the hard way. In 1948 the Tigers dropped from second to fifth place in the American League—and during the next ten years they would finish among the top three teams only once. In 1952 they wound up in last place in the American League, winning only 50 games and losing 104. No batter on the team hit higher than .284.

From 1945 to 1952, the Tigers had plunged from world champions to cellar dwellers, yet Walter Briggs still refused to sign a black player or develop any blacks in Detroit's minor-league system. The Tigers did bring up Al Kaline and Harvey Kuenn, two excellent white players, who both won batting titles in the 1950s. But their talents

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were wasted without a quality supporting cast that included talented blacks.

With Detroit in a tailspin, Walter Briggs died and the Briggs family sold the Tigers in 1956 to Fred Knorr, a Michigan man who was very different from Briggs. During the 1930s, while Briggs was enjoying segregated baseball in Detroit, Knorr was 100 miles west, graduating from Hillsdale College, the second oldest campus in the United States to have an integrated student body. Knorr believed in integration on principle and soon helped contribute \$75,000 to develop 17 black players in Detroit's minor-league system.

Knorr was killed in an accident in 1960, but his policy of integration was paying off, and the Tigers made a splendid comeback during the 1960s. They signed Willie Horton, a power-hitting outfielder, and Earl Wilson, a veteran pitcher who won 22 games in his first season as a Tiger. In 1968 Wilson, along with Denny McLain, was a mainstay of the Tiger pitching staff. Horton hit 36 home runs and was fourth in the league in batting average. The Tigers that year, after a long drought, went on to win the pennant and the World Series.

Lessons Learned

What lessons can we learn from Detroit's experience with segregation? First, as baseball expert Steve Sailer has noted, "competitive markets make irrational bigotry expensive—not impossible, but costly." In the 1950s Detroit could continue to field segregated teams, but only at a price. Joseph Bibb, a black sportswriter, said it well: "The white man wants money and color pays off."

The Boston Red Sox learned this lesson the hard way, too. In 1959, one year after Detroit, Boston became the last team in major league baseball to integrate. The Red Sox, like the Tigers, paid their price for segregation in the won-lost column. More

specifically, in 1946, Boston won the American League pennant (with Detroit finishing second). From 1947 to 1951, with integration still slow, Boston never finished lower than third place in the American League. But they never finished higher than third place from 1952 to 1959, the year they finally integrated. During those bleak years, Boston manager Pinky Higgins, a native of Red Oak, Texas, insisted, "There'll be no niggers on this ball club as long as I have anything to say about it." No pennants either. Boston's superstar Ted Williams was the greatest hitter in baseball during the 1950s, but without roles for black players his Red Sox languished during that decade.

There is an economics lesson to learn here, too. The integration of baseball was a triumph of the free market. No government mandate forced Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' general manager, to sign Jackie Robinson. Self-interest, in the form of economic gain, was the key to integrating not just one team, but, within 12 years, all teams in the major leagues. Quotas and affirmative action were unnecessary and would have been counterproductive. When the baseball commissioner finally allowed open competition, some owners quickly wanted to hire black players—and soon after they did so, all teams voluntarily followed suit. Nobody forced anyone to do anything he didn't want to do.

One final point is that free markets in baseball provided black heroes to all Americans during the 1940s and 1950s. Whites all over Brooklyn cheered mightily for Jackie Robinson to clobber white pitchers, and for his black teammate, Don Newcombe, to strike out white hitters. After winning the 1948 World Series, Cleveland teammates Larry Doby and Steve Gromek, one black and the other white, were photographed in a spontaneous embrace. Racial barriers receded and sports became the entering wedge that helped make the revolution in race relations possible. □