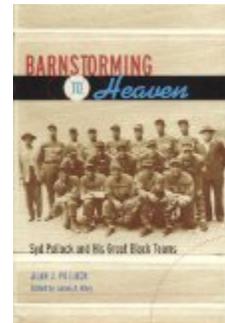


H-Net Reviews

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Allan J. Pollack. *Barnstorming to Heaven: Syd Pollock and His Great Black Teams*. Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 407 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1495-8.

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The Clowns of Summer

Of the many teams that combined comedy and baseball on the barnstorming circuits of the twentieth century none were better known than Syd Pollock's Indianapolis Clowns. Both the comedy and the baseball were of the highest quality during the heyday of itinerant baseball. Like many of their counterparts, the Indianapolis Clowns employed African-American players excluded from the opportunity to play in what was called "organized baseball" at both the major and minor league levels.

Syd Pollock, a Jewish-American entrepreneur who married an Irish-Catholic, started his baseball ownership career with the Westchester Blue Sox in 1920, and moved through a number of franchises in that decade. Syd was also a promoter for a number of other traveling teams. In 1929 he took ownership of the Havana Red Sox, his first Black team, and it featured the elements of comedy and shadowball that became the mark of all the many versions of the Clowns.

Barnstorming to Heaven is a memoir by Allan Pollock, Syd's son, who spent a great deal of time traveling with the team as a child, and then became involved in the business side of the team as an adult. Following Allan Pollock's death James A. Riley, historian and biographer of African-American baseball and its players, edited this volume.

This is not a history of African-American baseball. It is a memoir, which at times resembles a diary. It is best categorized as a set of primary source documents which capture much of the spirit, detail, and personalities of the barnstorming phenomenon in baseball, from

the glory days of the thirties and forties to its decline and fall following the desegregation of major and minor league baseball.

For the most part the first half of book has little narrative line. It does offer snapshots of players and managers, colorful anecdotes about the style of play, and the vicissitudes of life on the road. Many of the great players with whom we are now familiar appear here, along with many that remain anonymous in the white world of baseball. Pollock paints an excellent portrait of the difficulties of barnstorming for both players and management, as well as offering a feel for the rhythms of life on the road.

In 1931 the Havana Red Sox became the Cuban House of David and in 1932 the Cuban Stars. Pollock continued his ownership of the Cuban Stars into the mid-thirties when he became part owner of the Miami Ethiopian Clowns. In 1938 Pollock became sole owner. The Clowns were show business and baseball and at times were criticized for their style as well as their name. Allan Pollock concedes that criticism of the use of term "Ethiopian" and players wearing war paint had some merit, but categorically denies that this was a minstrel show. "The team was good or great. The players were black and proud, and Dad loved the level of play and entertainment they achieved" (p. 95).

Just how good this team was is attested to by the fact that in 1941 the Miami Ethiopian Clowns won the Denver Post Tournament, which was the national championship for teams outside of "organized baseball." Predictably, the first team to win a national championship representing

Miami went unreported in the two Miami white daily papers. In 1943 the Clowns dropped "Ethiopian" from their name, shed the war paint, moved to Cincinnati, and entered the Negro American League. By then they had lost half the players from the 1941 championship team to the war and to other teams offering more money. Negro League attendance in the forties reached new highs, in no small part due to the entrance of the Clowns who in 1944 moved on to Indianapolis.

Beginning in part 5, "The Fifties," *Barnstorming to Heaven* develops a bit more of a narrative line and is more analytical as it focuses on the impact of desegregation on the barnstorming business. Allan Pollock says that as the forties passed into the fifties, the Negro Leagues were passing "from the Golden Gate era into their dying decade" (p. 174).

In this second half of *Barnstorming to Heaven* Pollock reviews the final surge and then the decline and fall of his father's business. From the beginning of desegregation troubles appear, as the best players were, ever so slowly, siphoned off into the major and minor leagues.

One of the most famous of the Clowns to move on into organized baseball was Henry Aaron, who in 1952 at age of eighteen joined the Clowns for \$200 a month to play shortstop. When he reported to the team everyone was amazed by the power of his hitting, especially when it was noticed that he was batting cross-handed. Aaron's stay with the Clowns was short but memorable and Pollock details the negotiations that sent Aaron on to the Braves.

As time passed the Negro American League began to lose franchises, going from six to four in 1953, and Syd Pollock began to look for more ways to put fans in the stands. In 1953 Toni Stone became the first woman to compete on a man's team. She was a major gate attraction until the novelty wore off, and her starting salary of \$300 per month was raised to \$350 and then \$400. Allan Pollock estimates that the infusion of new money from the increased attendance accountable to Stone may have extended the life of the Negro American league by a sea-

son or two. The following year Toni Stone was gone, replaced by Connie Morgan and Mamie "Peanut" Johnson.

The Clowns were league champions in 1950, 1951, and 1952 and again in 1954, but the steady decline of the Negro American League led the Clowns to withdraw after the 1954 championship season. In 1955 the Clowns became a purely traveling team touring with the New York Black Yankees, a team put together solely for that purpose.

The decline continued as the fifties gave way to the sixties and it was clear that the Clowns were slipping away. Syd Pollock sold his share in the Clowns following the 1964 season, although he continued as a booking agent for the team in 1965.

Allan Pollock analyzes the decline of the Negro Leagues and the Clowns. As he does so he offers a look at the forces that surrounded the team in the sixties and how the Civil Rights movement impacted this business enterprise. The Clowns were increasingly hurt by high park rentals, irresponsible behavior by other teams calling themselves Negro League players, and by poor press coverage. The Clowns outlasted the other barnstormers but in the end Syd Pollock knew that the impact of desegregation and the indifference of the major league teams doomed the Clowns to the fate of those outside the inner circles of "organized baseball."

Allan Pollock's memoir is a significant historical document as it is one of the rare first-hand accounts of both barnstorming baseball and the barnstorming business. This is neither a great history of African-American baseball nor even a history of barnstorming. Nonetheless it is a book of value to anyone who seeks to understand the fate of one type of baseball within the tent of African-American baseball, or anyone who wants to go back inside this colorful and entertaining baseball life.

Allan Pollock has left behind a portrait of one significant corner of the baseball world in the twentieth century. It is a good source for both knowledge and entertainment.

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