

MINNESOTA HISTORY

Rekindling a baseball great’s legacy

CURT BROWN

Upward of 25,000 scraps of paper and yellowed newspaper clippings in Peter Gorton’s northeast Minneapolis basement tell dual stories that intersect at an improbable place: the central Minnesota town of Bertha.

That mountain of research chronicles the dominant but largely forgotten career of a black baseball pitcher named John Wesley Donaldson. The other plot line centers on Gorton, a 46-year-old speech consultant and tireless researcher.

For 14 years, Gorton has been on a mission to rekindle the legacy of Donaldson, who crisscrossed Minnesota from 1911 to the 1920s between stints in the Negro leagues and with several barnstorming teams.

Gorton’s goal is to get the southpaw enshrined in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., which plans to pluck more historic black players from obscurity in 2020.

Nicknamed “Cannonball,” Donaldson played baseball for 34 years before becoming the game’s first African-American scout for the Chicago White Sox in 1949. He spent the peak of his career in Minnesota, playing in scores of towns from Worthington to Hibbing.

Gorton and his volunteer army of baseball researchers not only have documented 399 victories and at least 4,980 strikeouts for Donaldson, they’ve pinpointed 130 Minnesota cities and towns where he pitched.

One was Bertha, where Donaldson spent the 1924, 1925

and 1927 seasons with the Fishermen. “It’s swamp country without a fishing lake around,” Gorton said. “But the team was named after Ernie Fisher, the team’s general manager.”

Gorton knows the terrain well. He grew up 20 miles northeast of Bertha in Staples, where his dad was a dentist. In 2002, a phone call from an old social studies teacher “started a journey for me,” he said.

That teacher, Steve Hoffbeck, was writing a book about black baseball players in Minnesota and asked Gorton if he would take a stab at researching Donaldson. So Gorton made a trek to Bertha and stopped at the town’s historical society.

He found a poster of Donaldson from the 1920s and a basketball program from 1988 featuring Gorton and his Staples High School teammates. “I thought, goodness gracious, this guy is meant to become important to me,” he said.

His passion to unearth Donaldson’s past only grew when 39 seconds of rare film footage of the pitcher on the mound surfaced in Fergus Falls (vimeo.com/173608869). “The 39 seconds of film showing him pitching is so vital because it proves to the YouTube generation how dominating he was,” Gorton said.

That discovery came just after his first attempt to get Donaldson into the Hall of Fame fell short in 2006. Back then, Gorton’s research team had documented some 150 victories for Donaldson.

Gorton since has scoured digital newspaper archives on the web and scanned more



Donaldson Network

JOHN DONALDSON 1891-1970
A southpaw from Missouri, Donaldson pitched in 130 Minnesota cities and town from 1911 to the 1920s. His contemporaries said he was as good as Satchel Paige.

TALKING ABOUT ‘CANNONBALL’ DONALDSON

Peter Gorton will discuss his research to get African-American baseball pioneer John Wesley “Cannonball” Donaldson into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

What: Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) Halsey Hall chapter meeting.

When: Saturday, Oct. 29; registration at 8 a.m., meeting at 9 a.m.

Where: Faith Mennonite Church, 2720 E. 22nd St., Minneapolis.

Cost: \$5

More info: johndonaldson.bravehost.com.

than 5,000 microfilm rolls to confirm that Donaldson’s actual victories and strikeouts would put him in the top ranks of big league pitchers.

Even before the footage was unearthed, newspaper clippings told the story. In 1927, the Fairmont (Minn.) Daily Sentinel wrote: “John Donaldson is — and there is no one that is qualified to speak authoritatively that will dispute it — the greatest colored baseball player of today and of all time.”

The Lake Wilson Pilot in southwestern Minnesota described Donaldson as “graceful, polished and classy. ... He was the poetry and rhythm of baseball.”

And in his autobiography, Negro League legend Buck O’Neil compared Donaldson to Hall of Famer Satchel Paige. “John Donaldson ... showed Satchel the way, and the fact is, there are many people who saw them both who say John Donaldson was just as good as Satchel,” O’Neil wrote.

Playing baseball before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947 wasn’t glamorous for black players. But Donaldson was a pioneer. One owner offered him \$10,000 in 1917, he said, to “go to Cuba, change my name and let him take me into this country as a Cuban.” But Donaldson said that “would have meant renouncing my family ... or to have anything to do with colored people.” He refused.

“I keep my body and mind clean. And yet when I go out there to play baseball it is not unusual to hear some fan cry out” a racial epithet, he said. “That hurts. For I have no

recourse. I am getting paid, I suppose, to take that.

“But why should fans become personal? If I act the part of a gentleman, am I not entitled to a little respect?”

Born in 1891 in Glasgow, Mo., Donaldson married Eleanor Watson in 1917. She had family in Minneapolis, so Bertha was only a train ride away. The couple had no children, and when Donaldson died in Chicago in 1970 at age 79 he was buried in an unmarked grave with no one to pay for a tombstone.

Gorton helped to rectify that, along with a group called the Negro Leagues Baseball Grave Marker Project. In 2004, with help from Chicago White Sox owner Jerry Reinsdorf, former major league manager Don Zimmer and others, Donaldson got his tombstone.

But Gorton wasn’t finished. He doesn’t plan to rest until Donaldson is enshrined in the Hall of Fame. His group’s website — johndonaldson.bravehost.com — is a comprehensive collection of game stats, photos and stories under the slogan “Always Looking.”

“What started as an obsession has turned into a sense of responsibility,” Gorton said. “When you learn how great a player this man was, how can you sleep without trying to restore the legacy of a guy who deserves for people to know who he is?”



Curt Brown’s tales about Minnesota history appear each Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at mnhistory@startribune.com. His e-book “Frozen in History” is available at startribune.com/ebooks.



LEILA NAVIDI • Star Tribune file

The city started its organized garbage collection on Oct. 3, and not all residents are happy.

Bloomington’s organized trash haul has bumpy start

City hopes for clean transition amid lawsuit.

By MIGUEL OTÁROLA
miguel.otarola@startribune.com

Bloomington’s adoption of its new organized garbage collection system has been bumpier than the city would have hoped.

Starting organized collection Oct. 3, Bloomington joined St. Louis Park, St. Anthony and other suburban communities where the city regulates residential trash, recycling and yard waste pickup rather than leaving it to private haulers.

But some residents long have opposed the city taking the reins of what has been a private industry. That drama is not over yet, as the city tackles yet another lawsuit raised by citizens who want the issue of how trash is collected placed on the ballot.

Bloomington now coordinates garbage collection by a consortium of six licensed haulers, which follow updated routes and schedules. Starting next week, the city will charge residents for the service in their water bills every other month.

“This has been sort of the trend for most municipalities, and it’s mostly for efficiency purposes,” said Jennifer Nguyen Moore, project coordinator for Bloomington Public Works. She said she expects organized hauling to

reduce noise, road wear and safety hazards on the street.

Haulers exchanged more than 21,000 waste carts in the weeks leading up to organized collection, a laborious process that led concerned homeowners to call the city and ask if and when their bins would be switched.

“I think in hindsight we hope it would’ve gone a little smoother,” City Council Member Kim Vlasisavljevich said. “Hopefully now that we crossed the hurdle ... we’ll start seeing the program smooth out quite a bit.”

As haulers work out their new routes, the biggest concern surrounding the program remains opposition by a group of residents.

The group, which has raised several challenges against organized collection for more than a year, brought forward a second lawsuit after the City Council this summer said it would be “manifestly unconstitutional” to amend the city’s charter.

“They’re turning an industry upside down in changing our ability to contract who we want to contract with,” said plaintiff William Reichert, who has lived in Bloomington for almost 60 years. “You’re giving up your freedom of choice by letting the city do this.”

Some residents, such as Reichert, have chosen to take trash disposal into their own hands. A city committee has so

far reviewed 140 applications from homeowners who want to opt out of organized hauling, Nguyen Moore said.

A judge heard arguments from both sides on Monday, and a ruling is expected by January.

Shelley Ryan, an attorney representing the city, said the suit could block trash pickup and the city’s five-year contract with the consortium.

“If [the plaintiffs] were to succeed, that contract would be terminated, the process would essentially halt, causing disruption to the city,” Ryan said. “It’s always serious when ... cities are sued, especially by [their] own residents.”

But for the plaintiffs, the issue is about more than just organized trash collection.

“This opens up Pandora’s box when you allow them to create a template ... that allows the city to do this with other private industries,” said plaintiff Joel Jennissen, who has lived in Bloomington for about 16 years.

Vlasisavljevich said she understands there are residents who prefer to choose their own hauler. She said she wants to relieve the fears of those who feel that Bloomington is operating under a hidden agenda.

“You need to trust that the elected officials will act in the best interest of the residents,” Vlasisavljevich said.

Miguel Otárola • 612-673-4753

Police, racial relations are a fragile work in progress

◀ **TEVLIN** from BI and Minnesota Vikings player Alan Page, succinctly described why it was called: “We’re here because as a country, as a state, we have a problem.”

Page said he became aware of black people’s fear of cops early, when he was about 10. “And it wasn’t new then,” he said. Page believes the problem is “leftover vestiges of how this country started. Slaves were three-fifths of a person. My ancestors came here against their will.”

“There have been issues of disparate [racial] treatment for a long time,” said Page. He cited a 1993 study of the judiciary that found that blacks were treated differently from whites in the courts, including higher bail and longer sentences for the same crimes.

“The difficulties here are almost mind-boggling,” Page said. He said, however, that it’s possible to come together if we “deal with the root causes, not the symptoms.”

Medaria Arradondo, deputy chief of the Minneapolis Police, has been a cop for 27 years. He said sometimes “our most well-intentioned acts have unintended consequences. No doubt, too many young black men are dying.”

Sometimes, Arradondo said, police are assigned to communities “to support bad policies” created by politicians and become the enforcers for bad strategies, making the community turn against them.

Belton responded that police have a “moral responsibility” to resist orders to engage in bad behavior or enforce unjust laws. “Because you have the authority to stop and frisk doesn’t mean you should stop and frisk more black people,” Belton said.

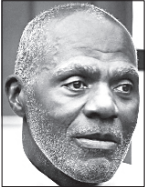
Arradondo said when he became an officer, “I took an oath to protect the constitutional rights of every citizen. If police officers just did that, we wouldn’t have half the problems we do.”

Arradondo said the department is making inter-



DAVID JOLIS • Star Tribune file

“Because you have the authority to stop and frisk doesn’t mean you should stop and frisk more black people.” — Steve Belton



Page



Hodges

nal changes right now. He said Chief Janeé Harteau has assigned each leader in the department to study and implement reforms recommended in the 21st Century Policing report ordered by President Obama.

Then there was Chris Johnson, a junior at North High School, who offered the perspective of a young black man. Johnson said police-involved shootings of young black men have been discussed in class, where kids and teachers talk about how both the victim and the officer might have handled the situations differently. He said he and his friends have generally positive views of police because the school’s police liaison, Charles Adams, is also the football coach. He’s revered and respected by the students, Johnson said.

That’s one of the keys to improved police-community relationships, Belton said. We need to be “developing relationships that allow us to humanize one another,” he said. “It’s hard to act up in front of somebody you know.”

Page witnessed just such

a relationship when he visited Lucy Craft Laney school in north Minneapolis. The officer had “healthy, normal” interactions with students, and they adored him, Page said.

Belton said several members of his family serve in law enforcement, so he emphasized that you can both support the police and criticize them when necessary. “We are not anti-police,” he said. “We are anti-lawlessness, including police anti-lawlessness.”

Belton, a former lawyer, and Page, the former judge, said it’s difficult to balance transparency and speed with due process in police-involved shootings, especially when so many are now recorded. They understand the practical reasons to withhold the videos — to avoid influencing a potential jury or tainting an investigation.

The Jamar Clark case, however, produced “a community narrative that he was shot in handcuffs,” said Belton. “Due process was trumped by transparency.” Getting the information out faster might have calmed the situation down, he said.

“I begin with hope,” said Belton. “Because I’m a pastor, I cannot live without hope.”

jtevlm@startribune.com
612-673-1702
Follow Jon on Twitter: @jontevlin