



Storytelling, questions, curiosity about ‘Duty’ highlight annual event at The Cell

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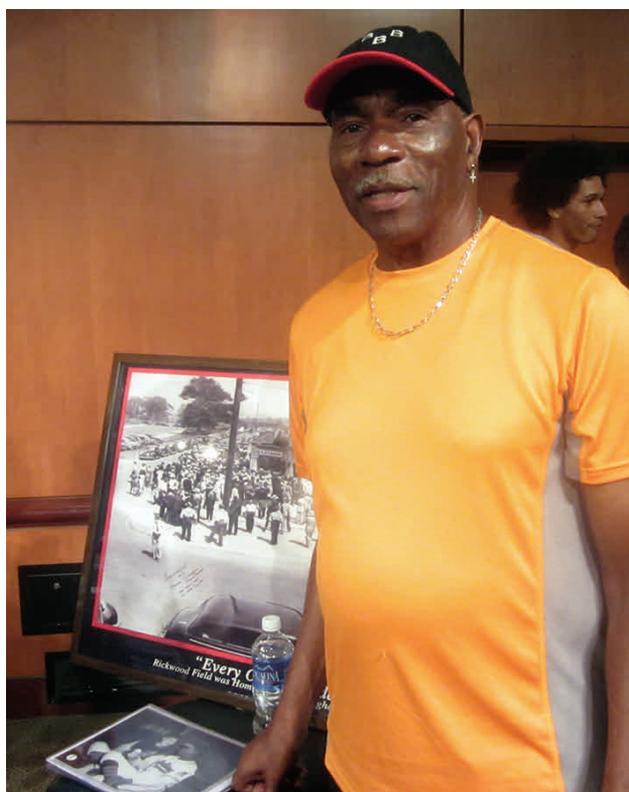
Overcoming and focusing are short, sweet lessons teen-age baseball players learned in a two-day event sponsored by the White Sox in Double Duty Radcliffe’s good name.

Here was Ernie Westfield, a childhood stutterer who was unfairly released by the Cubs in a guilt-by-association racial incident in Carlsbad, N.M. in 1960. And yet he went on to a long career as an adjudicator for the Illinois Dept. of Labor.

A few feet away was ex-Sox outfielder Chris Singleton, his grammar always corrected by his mother growing up. Good for him, as Singleton was fated to be a broadcaster, now for ESPN, longer than he’d be a ballplayer.

The way to success sparked even more questions from the participants in the seventh annual Double Duty Classic, a high school all-star baseball game at U.S. Cellular Field June 25. The Chicago Baseball Museum assisted the Sox with a special exhibit on Radcliffe, Chicago’s own Negro League superstar, the day before at the DuSable Museum of African-American History.

A lot of themes of persistence and determination shined through in a kind of honor of Double Duty, who had the blessings of extremely long life. The man who gained fame by catching Satchel Paige’s shutout in the first game of a doubleheader, then taking the mound himself to blank the same opponent in the nitecap, lived until 103 in 2005. “Duty” was a fixture at U.S. Cellular Field in the last decade of his life.



Ernie Westfield made a rare move — back to the Negro League after pitching in the Cubs organization.

The players and their parents were fascinated by “Duty’s” story. They stopped by at the DuSable exhibit in groups of 10 and 20 to hear a capsule story of his career. Many snapped photos with phones and tablets of the impactful pictures of “Duty” supplied by the Sox and Debra Richards, his great niece. Richards also lent Duty’s well-worn suitcase and trademark red fedora.

As part of the same program, the Double Duty attendees could hear living examples of perseverance from Westfield and Singleton, joined by Negro League historian Larry Lester, in a session in The Cell’s Conference and Learning Center three hours prior to the all-star game.



The Double Duty Classic panel was (from left) Chris Singleton, Larry Lester and Ernie Westfield.

A sense of shock hit the crowd for a second when Westfield told the story of how he ended up in the Negro League. He played pro ball as “Leon” (his middle name) Westfield. He first recalled the joy of being signed by the legendary O’Neil, who looked “like a minister” in his manner of dress as the Cubs’ first African-American scout. O’Neil brought luminaries like Ernie Banks, Lou Brock, Lee Arthur Smith, Joe Carter, George Altman, Oscar Gamble and Lou Johnson to the Cubs.

“He always had a smile on his face,” Westfield said of O’Neil. He tried to adopt his attitude.

Small town Tennessee product Westfield was so skinny at 6-foot-2, 175 pounds he’d wear two pairs of pants to fill himself out. He thought he’d be starting his career at age 21 in 1960 at two Class D clubs, then the lowest level of the minors. After a brief stint in Morristown, Westfield was transferred to the Carlsbad (N.M.) Potashers, managed by career minor-leaguer Verlon (Rube) Walker. A year earlier, present-day Illinois Secretary of State Jesse White began his eight-year Cubs organizational career as a speedy outfielder with Carlsbad. White made it to Triple-A in two-plus seasons, but never got the summons to Wrigley Field despite some impressive stolen-base totals.

Kid pitcher swept up in Carlsbad racial incident

Westfield was 2-3 in 11 games in Carlsbad. But his stay was cut short when two white teammates unleashed a torrent of epithets, including the “n” word, at an opposing African-American pitcher. There was a dugout skirmish among teammates of different races. Westfield was not involved, but still was released without explanation.

He then took an uncommon route for the time — he went back to the Negro League, then in its last season as talent was continually drained by the big-league organizations since Jackie Robinson. Westfield pitched for the Birmingham Black Barons. When the league folded after 1960, the Barons became the Champaign Eagles traveling team, based in the home town of owner Wardel Jackson, whom Westfield called a “kingpin” — a big-time gambler.

Westfield would go on to best pro-bound college stars with a knuckle-curve pitch he copied from Dodgers star Carl Erskine. But his best baseball days were derailed due to the bad politics of the time. He found a long career in state government instead.

When he talks about his competitive days, Westfield always presents his own poems that have a message.

“I started by writing a poem to a girl I liked to counter-act my stuttering,” he said. “Bob Love (former Bulls star and noted stutterer) and I spoke together at a school. Greatest thing is my mother told me is Moses stuttered. You just think ahead of your speaking. At this age, I don’t care if they laugh at me.”

Here is Westfield’s poem, titled *The Strikeout*, that he read to the student-athletes at The Cell:

The first pitch

I really didn’t see;

Because the ball was so fast,

It scared the devil out of me.

The second pitch,

I saw a tiny little bit;

But before I could swing,

*The ball was in the catcher’s
mitt.*

The third pitch came at me,

So, I moved out of the way;

*I didn’t know it was a curve-
ball,*

*Otherwise, I would have
swung away.*



Curious participants in the educational section of the Double Duty Classic take photos of the pictures of "Duty" organized by the Chicago Baseball Museum.

*I didn't know who the pitcher was,
But they said "Satchel" was his first name;
And I would have gotten a hit,
If they had taken "Satchel" out of the game.*

*Yes, I struck out,
And didn't swing at a single pitch;
But I'll know what to do next time,
If I get another chance to hit.*

Impactful visit to Negro League museum

Other views of the triumphs and tribulations in baseball were offered by Singleton and Lester.

Singleton, the center fielder on the Sox's 2000 AL West champs, said he experienced a "life-changing" visit to the Negro League Museum in Kansas City the previous season as a rookie. Lester told of how the Negro League's East-West All-Star Game at old Comiskey Park across 35th Street "was the biggest black event other than a Joe Louis fight...It was the Masters, Indy 500 and Kentucky Derby all rolled up into one."

Obviously, the threesome's presentation proved to the assembled the old adage there's no such thing as a stupid question. The queries to the panel from the teen-agers were thoughtful, almost beyond their years. One savvy athlete hit the nail on the head about the decline in black participation in baseball – the transference of the love of the game from father to son, and consequently the lack of such passing-down process in so many single-parent homes headed by mothers over the past few decades.

Another old adage is if we don't learn from history, we're condemned to repeat it. With those inquiring minds and the interest in the details of "Duty's" life, progress – however modest – was made by the latest Double Duty event.