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## Baseball pioneer Williams dies in Sarasota

By [Billy Cox](#)

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Willie "Curley" Williams, one of baseball's quintessential journeymen who started his career in the Negro Leagues, died early Tuesday morning under Hospice care at 86, following complications from a stroke.

The former power-hitting shortstop and third baseman made it as far as the Chicago White Sox AAA team, but spent most of his 15-year professional baseball career strapping on cleats in locales as disparate as Canada and Puerto Rico. He spent the last 47 years of his life in Sarasota.



Willie "Curley" Williams (Photo provided)

"Newark, Scranton, Houston, New Orleans, Birmingham, Toledo, Colorado Springs, Jacksonville — this guy went everywhere," says longtime friend, Houston rehab therapist Dr. Layton Revel. "He was the epitome of what a baseball player was like in the '50s.

"And he posted big numbers everywhere he played. I mean, in '63, he's 40 years old and he's hitting close to .400."

The 1963 season was his final year as a pro, when Williams was a player-manager with Lloydminster of the Northern Saskatchewan Baseball League. He batted .391.

Williams moved to Sarasota the same year, where he worked as a pathology assistant in the Sarasota County medical examiner's office until his retirement in 1990. His Willie "Curley" Williams Foundation would later grant college scholarships to underprivileged students, and the Sarasota City Council proclaimed a "Curley Williams Day" in 1997.

Annette Williams, his wife of 22 years, said he got his nickname from "wearing processed hair like Nat King Cole." She said he followed baseball, particularly the Atlanta Braves and the Tampa Bay Rays, until the end.

Johnny "Lefty" Washington, a Williams teammate with the Houston Eagles in the late 1940s, fondly remembered his buddy — who also played third base — but not solely for his athletic skills.

"Oh, he was a good hitter, a line-drive hitter and a place-hitter. And he was smart," Washington, 81, recalled from his home in Chicago.

"But he also tried to talk us up to the minor league teams. Curley knew a lot of people and he got quite a few players up there."



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Williams once snickered at one of Hollywood's most famous attempts to revisit the era of segregated baseball, in the 1976 Richard Pryor comedy, "Bingo Long and the Traveling All-Stars."

"There wasn't any clowning around on ratty buses," Williams said. "We were there to play serious baseball, and we rode in a brand-new Greyhound bus."

Chicago baseball historian Gary Crawford, a friend of Williams, says roughly 200 veterans of the Negro Leagues are still alive. Crawford posts all those statistics, including those of Williams, online at [attheplate.com](http://attheplate.com)

"Curley was a real stand-up guy," Crawford said. "He was a caring person and he really put his money where his mouth is."

Visitation for Williams is 5 to 7 p.m. Sunday at Jones Funeral Home in Sarasota. Services will be 11 a.m. Monday at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Sarasota.

Survivors also include daughter Jaquelyn McNeil of Bradenton; son Todd Bryant of St. Petersburg; brother LaSalle of Orangeburg, S.C.; stepdaughter Paula Farlin of Sarasota; and five grandchildren.

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