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BASEBALL

Monte Irvin, Star Outfielder Who Lost His Prime to Racism, Dies at 96

By **RICHARD GOLDSTEIN** JAN. 12, 2016

Monte Irvin, the New York Giants outfielder who was one of the first outstanding black players in the major leagues and a Hall of Famer for his brilliance in the Negro leagues, where he spent most of his prime years before baseball's color barrier was shattered, died on Monday night at his home in Houston. He was 96.

The National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., announced his death. Irvin was voted into the Hall in 1973 after it was opened to Negro leagues stars.

Irvin also became the first black executive in Major League Baseball's hierarchy, assigned to promote a game that had once barred him because of his race and had left him and his fans wondering, What if?

From the time he was growing up in New Jersey, where he had arrived by way of Alabama, Irvin could do everything: In high school he was an all-state performer in baseball, basketball, football and track and field, building his strength by helping his father deliver milk by horse and wagon.

On the baseball field he could hit both for average and for power, as well as steal bases and cut down a runner from the outfield with his howitzer of a right arm.

Yet by the time he played his first game for the Giants, in 1949, after years as a star for the Newark Eagles of the Negro National League — having endured the long bus rides, the run-down hotels and the precarious paydays of black baseball — he was already 30, two years older than Jackie Robinson had been when Robinson broke the major league color line with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Irvin knew his best years were behind him.

“I was way past my peak then,” he later said. “My only regret is that I didn’t get a shot at 19, when I was a real ballplayer.”

Willie Mays, the Giants’ great center fielder, who joined the team in 1951, when he was 20 years old, regarded Irvin as a mentor. In a statement on Tuesday he said, “I lost someone I cared about and admired very, very much; someone who was like a second father to me.”

When the Giants overtook the Dodgers in the storied National League pennant race of 1951, Irvin, playing in his first full major league season, provided a glimpse of what he could have done to big league pitching during all his years of waiting. He batted .312 with 24 home runs and a league-leading 121 runs batted in during the regular season, and he hit .458 and stole home in the Giants’ World Series loss to the Yankees.

“Most of the black ballplayers thought Monte Irvin should have been the first black in the major leagues,” Cool Papa Bell, a Negro leagues star and Hall of Famer, was quoted as saying in the book “Baseball for the Love of It” (1982), by Anthony J. Connor. “Monte was our best young ballplayer at that time. He could hit that long ball; he had a great arm; he could field; he could run. Yes, he could do everything.”

But in 1945, when Branch Rickey signed Robinson to the Dodgers’ organization, Irvin was returning from Army service. He did not make it to the majors until July 8, 1949, when he and Hank Thompson became the Giants’ first two black players.

Irvin played on two pennant winners with the Giants: the 1951 team, remembered for Bobby Thomson's playoff home run off Ralph Branca, and the 1954 club, which swept the Cleveland Indians in the World Series.

A thick-bodied right-handed batter, Irvin had a career average of .293 with 99 home runs over seven seasons with the Giants and one with the Chicago Cubs, despite his belated arrival in the majors and a severe ankle fracture he sustained in 1952.

He became baseball's first black executive in 1968, when he was named to handle promotion and public relations for Commissioner William D. Eckert. He remained in the commissioner's office, as an aide to Eckert's successor, Bowie Kuhn, until 1984.

In 1971, Irvin was appointed to a committee created to open the Hall of Fame to Negro leagues stars. He was voted into the Hall by that unit two years later, following Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson and Buck Leonard to Cooperstown.

Irvin had been the second-oldest living member of the Hall of Fame behind Bobby Doerr, the Boston Red Sox second baseman, who is 97. The No. 2 spot is now held by Red Schoendienst, best known for his years with the St. Louis Cardinals, who is 92.

Monford Merrill Irvin was born on Feb. 25, 1919, in Haleburg, Ala., one of 11 children raised by Cupid Alexander Irvin, a sharecropper, and his wife, Mary Eliza. When he was 8, he and his family moved to Bloomfield, N.J., and they settled in Orange, N.J., two years later. He soon developed a powerful physique, strengthening his legs by climbing on and off a horse-drawn wagon that his father and his brothers were using to deliver milk for a dairy.

Irvin achieved renown in the mid-1930s as an athlete at Orange High School, and he went on to the historically black Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, where he majored in history, planning to be a teacher. But he also played part time for the Newark Eagles, using a friend's name and appearing only in road games, where he would not be recognized, in order to retain his college sports eligibility. He left

Lincoln in his sophomore year to play full time for the Eagles.

Irvin played the outfield and the infield for Newark. He appeared in the Negro leagues' East-West All-Star Game in 1941, played in Mexico for most of the season that followed and then, after serving in the Army in World War II, returned to the Eagles and was an All-Star from 1946 to 1948. He was an Eagles teammate of Larry Doby, another future Hall of Famer, who became the first black player in the American League when he joined the Cleveland Indians in 1947.

Late in 1948, Rickey signed Irvin for a Dodgers farm team, evidently believing he was a free agent because the Newark team was being sold. But when the Eagles protested that Irvin was still under contract, Rickey renounced his rights. The Eagles then sold his rights to the Giants for $5,000 in January 1949.

Irvin split time between the Giants and their Jersey City farm team in 1949 and 1950 before moving to the Polo Grounds to stay.

He got off to a slow start at the plate in 1951 while playing first base, where he was not comfortable. But after Manager Leo Durocher moved him to the outfield early in the season, switching him with Whitey Lockman, Irvin's batting picked up, and he was a key figure in the pennant drive that came to be known as the Miracle of Coogan's Bluff.

Irvin remembered how Durocher and his teammates, including Southerners, welcomed him. "Back in those days, the race business was still a big problem for baseball," he said in an interview for Thomas Kiernan's 1975 book, "The Miracle at Coogan's Bluff." "And yet there was never any 'anti' feeling on the club. Everybody pulled for everybody, no matter the color."

Irvin's career suffered a jolt on April 2, 1952, when he broke his right ankle sliding into third base in an exhibition game against the Indians in Denver. He was carried off on a stretcher and was out of action until July 27. He favored his bad leg when he returned, throwing his back out of line. Although he hit .329 in 1953, his back problem hampered him for the rest of his career.

He retired in 1957 after playing four games for the minor league Los Angeles Angels.

The Giants retired Irvin's No. 20 in a ceremony in San Francisco in June 2010, although he never played there for the franchise, which left New York in 1958. When the Giants opened the World Series in San Francisco against the Texas Rangers in October 2010, Irvin threw out the first ball.

The Giants arranged for Irvin to attend President Obama's June 2015 reception at the White House for their 2014 World Series championship team when they learned that he had never met Obama, and Irvin sat alongside Mays at the ceremony.

"I am particularly honored to have a couple of trailblazing Hall of Famers here," the president said.

Irvin's survivors include his daughters Pamela Irvin Fields and Patricia Irvin Gordon. His wife, Dorinda, known as Dee, died in 2008.

When Irvin was named to the Hall of Fame, he reflected not only on his achievements but also on the missed opportunities.

"I wasted my best years in the Negro leagues," he said.

But he added: "I'm philosophical about it. There's no point in being bitter. You're not happy with the way things happen, but why make yourself sick inside? There were many guys who could really play who never got a chance at all."

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