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Clyde Parris, Negro Leaguer and Panamanian baseball great passes away at 93

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Jonathan "Clyde" Parris, an alum of the Negro Leagues and later a minor league MVP and batting champion in the Brooklyn Dodgers organization, passed away Saturday July 9, 2016 due to complications from liver cancer at Franklin General Hospital in Valley Stream, NY. He was 93.



Clyde Parris at his home in 2011 / N. Diunte

Born September 11, 1922 in Panama's Canal Zone, Parris quickly emerged as a rising star in the country's rich baseball scene. Following the footsteps of his predecessors Frankie Austin and Pat Scantlebury, Parris came to the United States in 1946 to play for the Baltimore Elite Giants of the Negro Leagues after being recruited by a local talent scout.

"As a kid I played softball, and then I played in the community leagues," Parris recalled during our 2007 interview. "I played infield; shortstop and third base. I could always hit the ball hard. That's how I came to be recommended to play in the United States. ... I can't remember the man who brought me to the Negro Leagues. I played in Panama and he saw me play so well, he recommended me to play with Baltimore."

His stay with Baltimore was brief, as he was released from the team early in the season to make room for future Hall of Famer Willie Wells. He was quickly signed by the New York Black Yankees, giving him another chance to prove himself in the Negro Leagues.

"We played in Yankee Stadium while the New York Yankees were away," Parris said. I remember approaching the stadium, guys said, 'Parris, this is Yankee Stadium!' I went inside to the lobby to see the pictures of the stars. It was something unreal. The field was just so nice to play on, thinking about all of the greats that played there."

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Despite being on a last place club, Parris still had to compete against all of the great talent that was in the league in 1946, including Hall of Famers Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige, Leon Day, and Buck Leonard.

"I had to face guys like Satchel Paige, Leon Day, and Bill Byrd," he recalled. "Byrd only pitched at home. I batted against Day the first and second year and he was hard to hit. It wasn't anything outstanding like [Bob] Gibson or [Don] Drysdale. I played with Drysdale too. I think his [Day] better years were behind him like [Josh] Gibson."

At the time of our 2007 interview, Parris was one of the few living players to have gone up against Gibson, facing him during the famed catcher's final season in 1946. Even though Gibson was slowed due to his declining health, Parris remembered Gibson as a threat at the plate.

"I played against Josh Gibson," he said. "When I played against him, he couldn't even stoop down; he stooped down about halfway. Yet every time we played against him, he hit a home run or two. I remember I was playing back at third base and he hit a dribbler like a bunt, and I'll never forget that. I thought I had to play back! They also had Buck Leonard too. They were on the same team, Homestead Grays. We were the doormat of the league. What were you gonna do? We had no pitching."

Parris also went up against Satchel Paige at Yankee Stadium. He clouted a home run off of the famed hurler, though not without controversy.

"We were facing Satchel Paige in Yankee Stadium" Parris recalled. "They had him pitch there because he brought in huge crowds. It was near the end of the game when I hit one to right field. The right fielder in Yankee Stadium went to field the ball near the fence and it hit off of him to go over the fence. They started arguing about it. The umpire said it didn't make a difference; it was a home run."

After getting through his first year in the Negro Leagues, Parris didn't want to come back. The low pay, the unforgiving schedule, and segregated conditions wore greatly on the Panamanian; however without the prospect of a job, he returned to the Black Yankees in 1947.

"After my first year in the black leagues, I didn't want to go back, but I didn't have a job," he said. "We went barnstorming to make some money, but we didn't make anything substantial. I made \$275 per month."

Just as Parris was getting ready to return to the United States in 1947, the Brooklyn Dodgers, who were stationed in Panama for spring training, faced a team of Panamanian All-Stars before they headed north. History unfolded right before Parris'eyes.

"The first time Jackie took that first baseman's glove was against our team in Panama," he said. "They had Newcombe, Campanella, Robinson, and Partlow."



Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Roy Partlow in Panama 1947 / Clyde Parris Collection

He stayed in the Negro Leagues through 1949, playing with the Black Yankees and Louisville Buckeyes. He returned home to Panama, starring in their winter league, where he would eventually set most of their career batting records.

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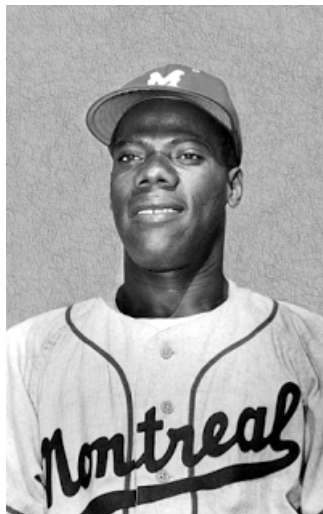
Parris made his way to the Brooklyn Dodgers organization in 1952, signing with by Dodgers scout Joe Cicero after playing for St. Jean of the Canadian Provincial League. By 1954, he earned Class-A league MVP honors with Elmira, besting future New York Yankees World Series MVP Bobby Richardson for the title.



Clyde Parris with Elmira / N. Diunte

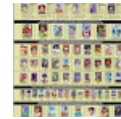
The Dodgers promoted Parris to AAA Montreal in 1955, pushing him ever so close to the major leagues. Making good on his promotion, **he led the International League with a .321 batting average in 1956.** Despite his outstanding performance, the Dodgers didn't bring him up to get even a taste of major league life.

"I went to AAA after leading Class-A in hitting," he said. "In 1956, I led AAA in hitting. A lot of people thought I was going to be called up. Deep down inside, I didn't expect to go to the big leagues, I guess because of my age. I was 34, kind of old, right?"



Clyde Parris with the Montreal Royals

For those that played with Parris, they knew that he deserved at a shot in the major leagues. Former teammate Evans Killeen, who played with the Kansas City Athletics, told Lou Hernandez in, "**Memories of Winter Ball**," that Parris first came when thinking of outstanding teammates.



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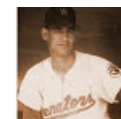
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“To me, he was one of the great hitters I have ever seen in my life,” Killeen said. “He would have been a great major leaguer. But he never got the chance. ... All Parris hit was line drives, and he was a tough out. ... What a hitter. ... Could you imagine him today? This guy was some hitter.”

Parris continued playing almost year ‘round in the minors and in the Panamanian Winter League through the age of 37 in 1960. For whatever rigors on the body the extended seasons had on Parris, he said it beat getting a job.

“As far as I thought, it was better than going to work,” he said. “A whole lot of time, I didn’t have a house of my own. I stayed with my folks, so I didn’t have to pay rent or a mortgage. I just kept playing. A whole lot of times, you only play six-to-seven months out of the year, five-to-six up in the USA, and two months winter ball. I didn’t work.”



A custom made card that Parris enjoyed / N. Diunte

During his post-playing days, he moved to Springfield Gardens in Queens. He purchased a home in the 1960s, where along with his wife Eugenia, they raised his three children (two sons and a daughter). He worked various government jobs, eventually retiring from the MTA in 1988.

His playing career went largely unnoticed in retirement, missing the entire Negro League renaissance of the early 1990s. It wasn’t until 2007 when I was put in touch with Parris that he spoke on the record for the first time since his 1960 retirement about his life in baseball.


“I haven’t been asked about my career since I was a player,” he told me during our meeting in 2007.





Clyde Parris (r.) with me during our first meeting in 2007 / N. Diunte




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What forged from that interview was a friendship lasting these past nine years, where I would drive out to his home every few months to have lunch and talk baseball. Through our conversations, I was able to get in touch with the Topps Company, **who promptly honored him with an official card in their 2009 Allen and Ginter Baseball Card set.**

"I felt honored for Topps to give me a baseball card. I thought they could have used a better photo, but it is nice to see one after all of these years," Parris said. "I had a good run in baseball, I can't complain."



Clyde Parris 2009 Topps Baseball Card / Topps

The more we met to talk, the increasingly energized he became about sharing the stories of his playing days. For almost every significant player of the 1940s and 1950s, Parris had an exciting story of either playing with or against them. From some of the aforementioned icons of the Negro Leagues, to minor league Dodgers teammates such as Don Drysdale, Sparky Anderson, and Tommy Lasorda, Parris spun vivid yarns about many in the game.

I will remember the many afternoons spent at his kitchen table listening to him openly share his experiences with his trademark laugh after recalling a lighter baseball moment. I feel fortunate to have shared that special time with him. Checking through some old messages on my phone, I found one saved from Clyde. He kept it short and sweet as usual, saying, "Hey, this is Parris, give me a call back."

On Saturday, Clyde finally got the call back to the big show in the sky. I'm sure he went there major leagues all the way. Rest in peace my friend, you will be missed.

Ed. Note - Parts of this articles are excerpted from a Times-Ledger story I wrote about Parris in 2011, "Batting average? You are thinking about surviving."

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