

# Negro Leagues baseball player's legacy lives on in family

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When racism and Jim Crow laws prevented black baseball players from playing on professional teams, they formed their own league to compete around the country. North Las Vegas resident Bernard Fernandez was one of the players who joined the Negro Leagues and forever changed the future of the sport.

Fernandez was a pitcher who most notably played in the 1940s for the Philadelphia Stars, New York Black Yankees and the Richmond Giants. He died on Nov. 19 at 96, but his memory lives on in his remaining family members.

"He was a pioneer," said his niece Sandra Ward. "He paved the way for many young athletes today, not only for African Americans but for all ethnicities and races."

Fernandez was born on March 5, 1918, in Tampa, Fla., to Birdie and Juan Fernandez. He was one of seven children.

Although not much is known about his early life, the Negro Leagues Baseball eMuseum's website, [coe.ksu.edu/annex/nlbemuseum](http://coe.ksu.edu/annex/nlbemuseum), states that his baseball career began in 1938, when he was on the spring roster for the Atlanta Black Crackers, but due to some control problems, he was dropped from the squad in early May.

He then played with the Jacksonville Red Caps the following season and did not appear in the Negro Leagues until after World War II, when he played with the new Pittsburgh Crawfords.

In a 2013 interview with Ward, Fernandez said he played with distinguished athletes that included Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige and Hank Thompson.

Although he experienced racism daily, it didn't stop him from falling in love with the sport.

"We were not allowed in certain restaurants," Fernandez said during the 2013 interview. "I encountered many racial problems. We usually had to go around to the back of the restaurant to get something to eat. It was a hardship, but we really enjoyed (playing baseball). We used to laugh at some of it."

One of Fernandez's favorite memories was playing in Yankee Stadium in New York in front of 20,000 people, he said during the interview.

"I played baseball from my heart because I loved it," he said. "Ever since I was little, I had a strong urge to play baseball."

During his 12-year career, the right-handed pitcher's teammates included Pee Wee Butts, George Crowe, Marlin Carter, Red Moore, Joe Greene and Parnell Woods, according to the book, "Cool Papas and Double Duties: The All-Time Greats of the Negro Leagues," by William F. McNeil.

On the field, Ward said her uncle was nicknamed "Big Train" and "Bernardo." She added that he continued receiving fan mail on a monthly basis, and he would often reply with an autographed photo.

"He had a great personality," said his niece Sheree Saffell. "He loved teaching young guys about baseball."

Fernandez said that the best salary he received was \$100 a month.

Although accurate records weren't kept during that time, he became one of the only pitchers in Florida to win 22 straight games during one season in the 1940s, according to Ward.

"He was one of the best pitchers in baseball during his time," Ward said. "But he never got the acclaim he deserved."

After he retired from baseball, Fernandez went to work in construction for 30 years.

He moved from Philadelphia to North Las Vegas four years ago to be closer to family.

Ward is planning a memorial to celebrate his life on March 8, 2015.

"I know he's gone, but it doesn't seem like it," Ward said. "It seems like he's still here. His energy still lives on."

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