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ONE OF BASEBALL'S GREATEST CATCHERS

Of all the positions on a baseball diamond, none is more demanding or harder to play than catcher. The job behind the plate is without question the most difficult to perform, and those who excel at it rank among the toughest players in the game.

To catch effectively, one has to be a good fielder, have a good throwing arm, be able to call the right pitches, be a good psychologist when it comes to dealing with pitchers, know how to engage tactfully with umpires, how to stave off injuries, and have the fortitude to block the plate and to stand in front of speeding or sliding runners and risk serious injury.

Catching is not a position for the dumb or the lazy or the faint-hearted. To wear the mask and glove, players have to be smart. They have to be tough, fearless, and strong. They must be alert, agile, and accountable. They are the ones in charge of their teams when on the field, and they have to be able to handle that job skillfully.

There are many other qualities required of a good catcher that, put together, determine whether or not players can satisfactorily occupy the position. If they can't, they will not be behind the plate for long.

Rare is the good team that ever took the field without a good catcher. And yet, while baseball has been richly endowed with talented backstops, only a few have ever made it to the top of their profession.

Indeed, of all the 246 players inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, there is only one position—third base—represented by fewer players. As of 2017, there have been only 18 catchers and 16 third basemen elected to the baseball shrine. The reason there are so few catchers is obvious. Typically, in the case of catchers, the Hall inducts those who can both hit and field. Most catchers can play defense well, but few are good hitters, too. So the number of inductees is low.

James Raleigh (Biz) Mackey was a catcher who played both offense and defense superbly. And his place rests securely among the best at Cooperstown.

When the great catchers of the game are discussed, the names first mentioned usually include Bill Dickey, Mickey Cochrane, Yogi Berra, Roy Campanella, and Johnny Bench. These players are known for their vast all-around abilities as hitters, fielders, and leaders on the field. But that group also includes Biz Mackey, even though he never played in the same surroundings as the others.

"You really got paid for your defense," said former Los Angeles Dodgers catcher John Roseboro, who learned much about his position from his teammate Campanella, a native Philadelphian. "Early in my career, I was told, 'Kid, you're paid to get behind

the plate and catch the ball, keep the runner from scoring, and throw him out at second. Any offense you give is a plus," he once told the author.

Echoing that sentiment, Dickey, the New York Yankees' great backstop of the 1920s and 1930s, once exclaimed in an interview with the author: "I loved to make a great defensive play. I'd rather do that than hit a home run."

Born in Eagle Pass, Texas, in 1897, before baseball became popular in that area of the country, Mackey developed all the qualities identified with being a great catcher. Although he spent his entire career playing Negro League baseball, it is not stretching the truth to rank him with the great backstops from Major League Baseball as well as to name him the greatest all-around catcher in Negro League history. Even the great Ty Cobb, who was not known for his racial tolerance, once told a now-unknown source that Mackey ranked among baseball's all-time best.

"I couldn't carry his glove or bat," said Campanella, who was originally a member of the Baltimore Elite Giants before he became one of the first African Americans to play integrated Major League Baseball and had a Hall of Fame career with the Brooklyn Dodgers in which he was named Most Valuable Player three times.

As a young player, Campanella learned the art of catching from Mackey. "When I was a kid in Philadelphia," he said, "I saw both Mackey and Cochrane in their primes. For real catching skills, I didn't think that Cochrane was the master of defense that Mackey was."

Ironically, Cochrane and Mackey both played much of their careers in Philadelphia, with the former leading his team to three American League pennants and two World Series cham-

pionships in three years, between 1929 and 1931. But the predominantly white baseball fan base was largely unaware of Biz's spectacular ability, directing most of its plaudits to the Philadelphia Athletics' backstop.

Mackey is one of three catchers who spent their whole careers in the Negro Leagues and have been inducted into the Hall of Fame. The others are Josh Gibson and Louis Santop. Gibson, an awesome power hitter who led his league in home runs nearly every season throughout a 17-year career that was eventually cut short when he suffered a stroke at the age of 35, is a unanimous choice as the best batter of the three and probably the best power hitter in Negro League history. But Mackey is in a class by himself when it comes to overall ability.

In his book *Josh Gibson—A Life in the Negro Leagues*, William Brashler (1978) writes, "Biz Mackey of the Baltimore Elite Giants was the pro Josh looked to as a catcher when he broke in in 1930. No man in Negro baseball surpassed his ability to handle the position."

"For combined hitting, thinking, throwing, and physical endowment," Homestead Grays owner Cumberland (Cum) Posey once said, "there has never been another like Biz Mackey." Posey—whose catcher with the Grays was Gibson—noted that Mackey was also a "fierce competitor." Mackey, not Gibson, Posey said, "was the best all-around catcher in black baseball history."

In the same vein, Hall of Famer Cool Papa Bell once told Bob Broeg of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "As much as I admired Campanella as a catcher and Gibson as a hitter, I believe Biz Mackey was the best all-around catcher I ever saw. Gibson was certainly the most consistent power hitter, but he wasn't that good

on defense. If I had both him and Campy on the same team, I'd put Roy behind the plate and Josh at first base." Once, Mackey threw out the lightning-quick Bell four times in one game.

In 1952, the *Pittsburgh Courier* took a poll among former Negro League players and sports writers in which it ranked the top Negro League players of all time. The *Courier*, which often took polls among its readers, was one of the leading African American newspapers in the country and, with Pittsburgh being the home of the legendary Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, was published in what had been one of the nation's leading areas for Negro League baseball.

Along with players such as Jackie Robinson, Satchel Paige, Buck Leonard, Oscar Charleston, and Monte Irvin—all future Hall of Famers—both Gibson and Mackey won spots as Negro League baseball's greatest catchers, with 23 votes going to Josh and Biz getting 15. Some disagreed with this ranking. "He [Mackey] was the best receiver I ever saw," said Leonard, who played with Gibson with the Grays.

The great Judy Johnson, another contemporary of Mackey's and also a teammate on both the Hilldale Daisies and Philadelphia Stars, often talked about the man he seemingly regarded as his brother. "He was the best catcher I ever saw," said the Hall of Fame third baseman from Wilmington, Delaware. "When he played for the Hilldale Daisies, he was the one responsible for their success. I also liked Santop, but felt that Biz was the better catcher."

Some records say he caught in as many as 1,876 games—a figure that would rank him seventh among Hall of Fame catchers. Mackey played professionally in 28 seasons, performing from

1920 to 1947, most notably with the Indianapolis ABCs, Hilldale, and the Stars. Mackey was a key member of both the Daisies' and Stars' only championship teams.

He was still playing at the age of 50, having also served for all or parts of nine seasons as manager of the Baltimore Elite Giants and Newark Eagles. But by then, he was mainly focused on being a teacher and a leader, and he played in only 26 games in his final three years in professional baseball.

Although Negro League records are incomplete and often inaccurate, a detailed study by historians Dick Clark and Larry Lester (1994) determined that Mackey had a lifetime batting average of .327. He played in six All-Star games and was one of the Negro Leagues' all-time leaders, with 702 RBI. In 3,326 Negro League at-bats, Mackey lashed more than 1,087 hits, with 68 home runs. Some other studies say that he posted a .353 batting average against Major League Baseball teams.

While he was obviously not a home run hitter (he hit two home runs in one game only three times and never hit more than seven in one Negro League season), Mackey had four hits in one game 16 times. In 1922, he had five hits in one game three times.

The six-foot-two Mackey, who weighed in the neighborhood of 220 pounds—but who sometimes came to spring training weighing as much as 250 pounds after some heavy off-season eating (it was said that he "never met a calorie he didn't like")—was a switch-hitter who usually batted third or fourth in his teams' lineups and was regarded as a dangerous hitter from both sides of the plate. Few catchers have ever batted that high in the lineup and even fewer have ever been switch-hitters.

Mackey was considered a slow base runner: in his later years, infielder Lenny Pearson, a teammate of Mackey's in Newark, said he "couldn't run a lick." He was once called "a tortoise on the basepaths." Yet he was an excellent bunter, described by Baltimore Black Sox pitcher Frank Sykes as "one of the best bunters the league ever had."

At the plate, though, Biz was regarded as an extremely dangerous, clutch hitter who seldom hit under .300 until his career started to decline in the late 1930s. Mackey won the first Eastern Colored League batting championship in 1923. The Clark and Lester study lists Mackey with a .415 batting average in 1921 with Indianapolis and a .408 mark in 1923 with Hilldale. Once, he was given a base on balls four straight times by Satchel Paige.

Although Paige's walks call into question the full validity of the statement, Biz's former teammate and opponent Johnson once recalled that Mackey would "sting the ball, but pitchers didn't fear him. They wouldn't walk him to get to somebody else."

Irvin recalled that Mackey "was not a power-hitter"; in 1925, he hit his career high of seven home runs. "But he was a very good hitter, mostly a singles and doubles hitter. He hit line drives, and he could hit to any field."

Mahlon Duckett, who played with the Philadelphia Stars when Mackey was an opposing player-manager, labeled Biz "a terrific ballplayer who was just about as good as anybody in Major League Baseball. He was a great receiver and could hit the ball. What more could you ask of a catcher?"

It was on defense that Mackey won the loudest acclaim. Partly because of his spectacular throwing and fielding ability, he played every position, including pitcher, during his career. In

both his early days and later years, he was often positioned at shortstop, first base, or right field, playing those positions in 90 games. But when Mackey became a full-time catcher with Hilldale in 1924, it soon became obvious that his defensive skills were unmatchable.

As a backstop, Mackey was easily the best defensive catcher in Negro League history. He was known for his powerful and deadly accurate arm with a quick release and lightning-fast throws. "You didn't have to move your glove six inches off the ground," said third baseman Johnson.

In addition to his ability to catch balls, no matter where they were, with what were often described as "meat-hook hands," Mackey was also known for his unmatched success at throwing out batters who bunted, his agility, his expert handling of pitchers, his thorough knowledge of the game and the strengths and weaknesses of opposing hitters, and his tremendous stamina. Often, Mackey would station himself at shortstop while his team had batting practice, then go behind the plate when the game started. It didn't matter how many innings were played or how hot or cold the weather was: Mackey caught the whole game.

In 1955, Buck O'Neil, a Negro Leaguer in baseball's Hall of Fame and a scout with the Kansas City Royals, put together a retrospective report in order to highlight great players overlooked by Major League Baseball now that teams in "organized baseball" were paying attention to Negro League players. Evaluating players such as catcher Santop and outfielders Willard Brown and Turkey Stearnes, O'Neil characterized Mackey late in his career as being "cat quick defensively." The report added that Biz possessed "good hands [and] a strong arm with quick release

and could really control a pitching staff." He was also "quick with the bat, and a good base-runner." He would have been a "very desirable" player to have on the roster.

Pitchers were said to be thrilled to be on the mound when Mackey was behind the plate. That attitude was fueled by Mackey's talent at "framing" pitches, a tool of the catching trade that was and is often used to convince umpires to call a ball a strike. Biz could also catch virtually every foul ball hit anywhere near him. He never yanked off his mask when catching one. And he was aggressive.

"You have to be an intimidator," Roseboro told the author. "You have to be aggressive . . . to be a good catcher."

"As a catcher, he did everything a pitcher needed," said former Philadelphia Stars hurler Harold Gould. "He was a great leader. And you had such a comfortable feeling out there when you were pitching to him. He also had what I think was the greatest throwing arm of all time among Major Leaguers, Negro Leaguers, and every other league."

Mackey loved to snap the ball to first in often-successful attempts to pick off a runner. He threw overhand from a squatting position, even to second base, where his incredibly hard, knee-high throws buzzed past pitchers and often arrived at the bag much quicker than would throws from catchers who were standing. Although Mackey sometimes had to wait until the infielder got to the bag before he threw, rare was the runner who stole a base on him. His throws to second, said longtime standout pitcher Bill Foster, "would come by my mound knee high, and [they] stayed there all the way." After catching a slow curve, Mackey would usually even throw out a runner at second.

During his years at Hilldale, Mackey had a routine between innings with Daisies second baseman Frank Warfield. Biz would fire his blazing throws to the keystone sack, and Warfield would catch them and then yell, "Ow. Mackey, you're gonna kill somebody."

In 1925, Hilldale played the Newark Bears of the International League in a three-game exhibition series. The Bears' Snooks Dowd was his league's top base stealer, but Mackey threw him out seven times in seven attempts. In recapping that story, Hilldale shortstop Jake Stephens said: "Of all the catchers, Mackey was the greatest and the smartest. Nobody, nobody could catch like Mackey. Mickey Cochrane couldn't carry his glove."

In John Holway's (1988) book *Blackball Stars*, Daisies and later Stars pitcher Webster McDonald, who spent 21 years playing Negro League baseball and was one of the game's top hurlers for much of that time, said this about Mackey: "As a catcher, he was the best in baseball, bar none. He was an artist behind the plate. He was the master. It was a pleasure to pitch to him. Santop and Gibson could probably outhit him, but I didn't call them catchers. They were boxers as far as I was concerned. They dropped too many balls. They'd take strikes away from pitchers. Mackey could help a pitcher steal a strike with the way he received the ball. He fooled the umpires sometimes."

Campanella told Holway that nobody, not even Gibson, was as good defensively as Mackey. "I think Mackey by far—by far—in technique and in defensive catching could do it all," he said. To this, Ted Page, who played both the infield and the outfield for many Negro League teams, including the Stars, during his 15-year career, added that Mackey "had moves and everything back there. You had to notice him."

Eighteen-year veteran Jesse Hubbard, who was a longtime pitcher and part-time outfielder, told Holway, "Mackey was the greatest player I ever saw. . . . He was the greatest shortstop, the greatest catcher, a great hitter. Any position you'd put him in, he'd be champ if he could stay there for a month or two."

Although Mackey was known as a catcher with "soft hands," his long years behind the plate were conspicuously displayed by his right hand, his throwing hand. According to Brashler's *Josh Gibson* (1978), "It had been broken at least a dozen times in his career. Every finger was at one time mashed, twisted, sprained, or fractured to the point where his fist became a mangled cluster of bumps and knobs. Still, Mackey did the job, and nothing Josh ever did as a catcher cut into Biz's sterling reputation."

Often playing as many as 10 games per week, Mackey was said to be a "fierce competitor." Biz was also noted by his opponents for his highly competitive spirit, positive attitude, jovial manner, frequent giggling, keen sense of humor, and willingness to banter with hitters, in many cases in an attempt to distract them from the job at hand. He was always talking on the bench, too, and could be somewhat pugnacious if the situation arose. "He was always laughing, always jolly, friendly, always full of fun," pitcher Leon Day, who played under Mackey at Newark, told Holway. "Did you ever hear a magpie chattering and jabbering?" an article in the *San Antonio Express-News* once asked. "Well, Mackey is the epitome of jah-beration. There is not a second when he is behind the bat that he is not chattering or jabbering, exhorting his teammates to show 'a little pepah ou' dere.'"

"You'd go up to bat," added Leonard in an interview with Holway (1988), "and he'd say, 'Well, you're hitting .400. Let's see how much you can hit today.' Or he'd say, 'You're standing too

close to the plate.' Or, 'What kind of bat are you using?' He'd tell the umpire, 'Look at his bat there. I don't believe his bat's legal.' He'd say, 'How'd you all do last night? Where'd you play? Aren't you tired? Don't you need no rest? Where'd you sleep last night? I know, you all slept on the bus. You mean you rode all last night and you think you're going to win this ball game?'"

Although barely literate early in his career, Biz, who sometimes signed his name J. Raleigh Mackey and other times just Raleigh Mackey, and who Gould claimed always wore a coat and tie off the field and an extra piece of gum behind his cap on the field, was a dedicated student of the game. "He was the smartest of them all," McDonald said.

In his book *Don't Let Anyone Take Your Joy Away*, Philadelphia Stars catcher Stanley Glenn (2006) added: "He was a big jovial guy, he really loved the game and was probably baseball's best catcher. He was never too busy or [too] occupied to talk baseball. And he was a super handler of pitchers and a clutch hitter."

According to James A. Riley (1994) in *The Biographical Encyclopedia of the Negro Baseball Leagues*, Mackey "had a good baseball mind and employed a studious approach to the game. The ballpark was his classroom, and inside baseball was his subject of expertise. He relied on meticulous observation and a retentive memory to match weaknesses of opposing hitters with the strengths of his pitching staffs. An expert handler of pitchers, he also studied people and could direct the temperament of his hurlers as well as he did their repertoires."

"The way he handled you, the way he just got you built up, believing in yourself, he was marvelous," said pitcher Hilton Smith in "Artist in a Face Mask," Holway's (1988) chapter on Mack-

ey. "I've pitched to some great catchers, but my goodness, that Mackey was to my idea the best one I pitched to. He had hitters looking like they didn't know what to do."

"He was sharp of eye, pugnacious of spirit, and enormous in the clutch," added Ric Roberts, a writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. "No better handler of pitchers ever lived."

All of that, of course, was what Mackey always considered to be a major part of the job. In fact, that attitude may have had something to do with how he got his nickname.

There is no certain explanation of how Biz became Biz. One theory is that he was noted as a "busybody." Two more probable explanations are that Mackey was widely known as someone who was especially adept at "taking care of business" or who usually "gave batters the business." Whatever the reason, "Biz" became Mackey's nickname early in his career, and it stayed with him the rest of his life.

Despite all the accolades that Mackey accumulated, there was also a less laudable side to him. He was a heavy drinker and often partied all night, showing up at the ballpark at 10:00 A.M. to shower and then go out to the diamond for some practice. "He often played drunk," Stephens once said, "with his eyes rolling around in his head. But it didn't affect his fielding or his hitting."

Nevertheless, Duckett, who was the last surviving member of the Philadelphia Stars, described Mackey as "a very, very nice gentleman. He was well-liked by everybody."

Mackey also had the habit of arguing with umpires, often to the embarrassment of his teammates. Johnson recalled that in those instances, he would call time and walk over to Mackey, striking up a conversation about girls in order to distract him.

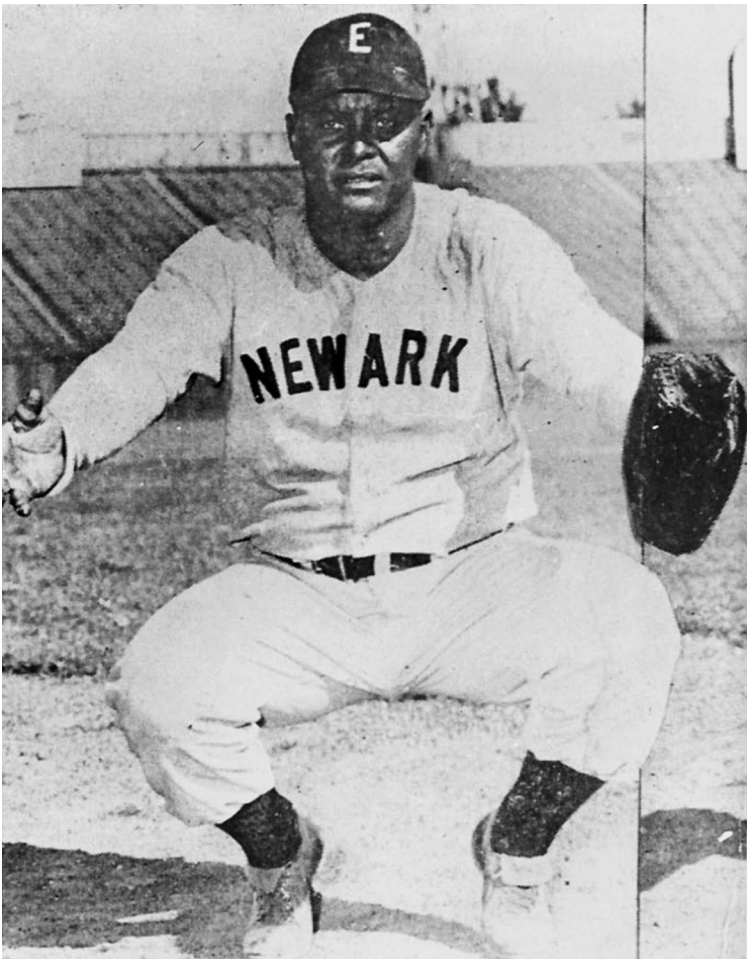
On occasion, Biz also exhibited unusual behavior at the plate. Once, for instance, during a 1928 game against the Lincoln Giants, his bat flew out of his hands while he was swinging at a pitch that was at least a foot off the plate. Highly irritated, Mackey called time, walked over to a patch of grass and pulled up a piece of turf, then put it back in the ground and walked back to the batter's box. On the next pitch, Biz clubbed a single to right field. The grass, he said, helped him get the hit.

During his 28-year career as a Negro League player, Mackey performed in a wide variety of circumstances. He caught most of the great Negro League pitchers, including Paige, who Mackey said threw such a hard fastball that "it could pound steak into hamburger."

Along with the Negro Leagues, Mackey also played against white major- and minor- league teams and toured in California, Cuba, Japan, the Philippines, and Hawaii. Traveling to Japan three times, in 1927 and the 1930s, Mackey and his teammates were said to have played a major role in building the county's interest in the game of baseball, exciting the fans and even Emperor Hirohito, who quickly became a big fan of Biz's.

Mackey performed in four of the first six Negro League All-Star games and on three championship teams, including one that won the Colored World Series. Even in the late 1930s, by which time he had become a player-manager, Mackey was still regarded as the best all-around catcher in the Negro Leagues.

As manager, he helped to send players such as Irvin, Larry Doby, and Don Newcombe to Major League Baseball and won the Negro League championship with the Newark Eagles in 1946. It was as manager of the Eagles that he had his last at-bat in 1947, at the age of 50.



As a catcher, Mackey handled every facet of the job with great skill.
(Negro Leagues Baseball Museum.)

In a fitting climax to Mackey's brilliant career, 100 percent of the baseball and Negro League historians who voted in the *Philadelphia Courier*'s poll said that he should be in the Baseball Hall of Fame at Cooperstown. In 2006, that endorsement came to fruition when Mackey was awarded a long-overdue induction into the baseball shrine.