

The Measure of Failure

Atlanta Baseball and Community Development in the 1930s and 1970s

THOMAS AIELLO

A case can be made that the Negro Leagues of the early 20th century were equivalent to its Major League counterpart, especially after a close examination of the talent and quality of play in both organizations. However, such comparisons can also be problematic because they establish the Major Leagues as the signpost of greatness, the measure of what quality should be, ignoring that much of Major League talent, teams, and towns were defined by failure. A profound lack of success defined many black teams as well, and their failure looked similar to that of comparable Major League squads. In some instances, the failure of a city's Negro Leagues club served as a bellwether for its later Major League team, an omen of what would be.

Such was the case in Atlanta, Georgia. The city's most notable Negro Leagues team was the Atlanta Black Crackers, founded in 1919 and appearing intermittently from the 1920s to the 1940s. That intermittence was the result of a lack of victories and a resulting lack of community interest from a black population that was, relative to time and place, thriving. The team's eighth, ninth, and tenth seasons, from 1935 to 1937, would witness both success and failure for the club in the Negro Southern League, ultimately leading to its entry in 1938 into the Negro American League. Thirty-five years after that move, the city's only Major League team, the Atlanta Braves, began its eighth, then ninth, then tenth seasons in the city, from 1973 to 1975, which would witness both success and failure in the National League. Hank Aaron would break Babe Ruth's home run record during the period, but a lack of victories would result in a lack of community interest from a population that was, relative to time and place, thriving.

The eighth, ninth, and tenth seasons of each team's tenure in Atlanta would demonstrate remarkably similar results both in play and in the city's general apathy toward professional baseball. What demonstrated the functional equivalency between the Black Crackers and the Braves was not the quality of their play or the enthusiasm of their constituencies. Rather, it was the inconsistency of their play and the apathy of their constituencies that made them so similar. It was a likeness built on mediocrity, one first modeled by the Black Crackers decades before the Braves moved to the South. And thus, Negro Leagues teams could also demonstrate major league equivalency in lack of success, and they could also be the bar for that equivalency, rather than the ones having to demonstrate that they could reach it.

The development of black baseball in Atlanta was fundamentally independent of the cutthroat business practices of a black elite class who were able to build empires in the early 20th century that fueled rivalries throughout the Auburn Avenue business district, the core of the community's economic viability. Still, the social separation among Atlanta's black population did not create an alliance among white and black elites.

In fact, a political movement among white activists in the early century led to a push to disfranchise black men to ensure that black elites would not assume any kind of approximate equality with whites. The racial line had to be maintained at all costs. Such race-baiting came to a head during the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, in which dozens of black Atlantans were killed and many more wounded. Despite the restrictions on black voting and other white retrenchments that followed, the fear of further violence led civic leaders of both races to establish a line of communication, aiding racial cooperation to some degree, but simultaneously deepening the divide between upper- and lower-class black residents of Atlanta. It was, for the city's black elite, an attempt to find the order of a system to replace the "order" maintained by racial violence.¹

"There are also certain psychological and social factors that must not be overlooked," admitted journalist Frank Marshall Davis. Black-white contact within class or profession was possible in Northern cities. "In Chicago an artist may associate with whites of similar interests," for example. "A Harlem physician may mingle with white doctors; a Bostonian may be the only Negro in his class at Harvard." Such wasn't possible in the South. "In hostile Atlanta, Negroes must turn to other Negroes. 'Race consciousness' develops as a defense mechanism," Davis explained. "If a Negro institution can satisfy the needs of the people, then it is no longer necessary to patronize inimical whites."²

Race consciousness was also an undeniable part of the development of black baseball in Atlanta. As historian Tim Darnell has noted, for example, the Black Crackers were founded in the wake of the Red Summer of 1919 and the racial violence that it generated. "In many ways," explained oral historian Clifford M. Kuhn, "the Black Crackers mirrored life in a segregated society. Finances were often shaky, scheduling and transportation uncertain, pay low, accommodations poor, and equipment inferior to that of white professional teams."³

Still, black boosters in the city wanted to bring legitimate baseball to the city and the region. An ownership group that included Sol Rivers, Robert DeReef, L.R. Lautier, H.L. Johnson, and Edgar Buckner ran the Atlanta Cubs in 1918, and the following year they responded to the idea of Crackers general manager Frank Reynolds, who was hoping to use a black baseball team to allow Ponce de Leon Park to make money when the Crackers were idle or away. Rivers and his partners recruited players from local black colleges, including Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Clark, to field a new team. They were named the Cubs as well, but throughout the season many fans began calling them the Black Crackers.⁴

"Way back there in the early twenties, there was a ball club here called the Atlanta Dependens," remembered former player Gabby Kemp, of that original semi-pro team comprised largely of students. "From that, they organized into the Black Crackers because they wanted to be a team like the white Crackers had then." The squad spent most of its time barnstorming as a way to compensate for poor local attendance. "Most of the time we was on trains," said Arthur Idlett, a player for the team in the 1920s. "The Atlanta white Crackers would let us have their old uniforms. They would buy uniforms every year and they'd give the Black Crackers the old uniforms."⁵

There were, of course, still problems for many of the players. Segregation and low pay

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dominated life on the road. "In those days the hotels owned and operated by Negroes were few," explained Kemp. When the team was able to find one, it would "maybe ask the manager of the hotel for maybe two or three rooms. And the ballplayers would go in, as many as they could, and just lie across the bed and go to sleep. Sometimes in the big, larger cities, we stopped at the YMCA." That combination of racial and financial hardship conspired to make life and baseball play even more difficult for the players. When the Black Crackers played a team on the road, the host team would "take out for the baseballs, they take out for the umpires, they take out for the park. Deductions, and we nicknamed it 'de ducks.' All them ducks got the money. So if there were anything left over, then you would divide it equally among the players."⁶

The goal, however, was participation in a larger organization. Atlanta hosted the first meeting of the Negro Southern League in March 1920, and the Black Crackers were a constituent part of its genesis. They were also, however, a constituent part of its early demise, as the team's owner, Sol Rivers, proved a thorn in the side of his counterparts, arriving late to meetings and disagreeing with the decisions of other owners. Ultimately, they voted the Black Crackers out of the league, and the loss of the South's largest city would spell the league's first of several demises.⁷

But the Black Crackers struggled on in fits and starts throughout the 1920s and 1930s. According to historian Allen Edward Joyce, "A succession of owner-promoters tried to establish a Black Cracker team, and most of them through ill-luck or bad management lost in the process the small amount of money they had." "When one entrepreneur lost interest, however, there was usually another there to finance the team for another year." The talent was never part of the team's problem. "Black players of major league caliber," Joyce explained, "barred from the white major leagues not because they lacked ability but because they were black, played for and against the Black Crackers at Ponce de Leon Park." Earl Mann, president of the city's white Crackers, even encouraged Black Crackers first baseman Red Moore to join the white team. "Mr. Mann said I ought to go to Cuba and learn how to speak a little Spanish, you know." Moore could "change my nationality, you understand, from black to some other. I said, 'No, it wouldn't do for me to do nothing like that, people in Atlanta know me.'"⁸

Though no Black Cracker joined the city's white counterpart, the team did often play home games in the white Crackers' Ponce de Leon Park. "We didn't have a permanent place. When the white Crackers were out of town, we would play out at Ponce de Leon. But sometimes, because of the cost of the park, it was more economical to play at Morehouse or Morris Brown, to cut down expenses." Even when playing at Ponce de Leon, however, "we weren't allowed to use the dressing facilities or the showers, so we'd dress at home before the game and take a shower at home after the game," explained Norman Lumpkin. E.B. Baynes described the bleachers at Ponce de Leon Park as rife with gambling. "At that time they had some kind of law in Georgia that you couldn't convict a man for gambling unless he was in a gambling house, and the house had to have a roof. And those bleachers did not have a roof over them."⁹

As the 1934 season closed, it was clear that black baseball in Atlanta had not been a financial success, but there were signs that improvements could change those fortunes. Crackers management had become far more willing to grant access to the Black Crackers. Automobile travel was far cheaper and more convenient than train travel. And Ponce de Leon Park was by that time equipped with lights, allowing for night games, which consistently drew larger crowds. "Baseball is banging on the door ready to come back," touted a

team press release. "Your 1935 Black Crackers are indeed fortunate," as the club was "assured of support of white magnates."¹¹

The team had also been hurt by the city's blue laws, which did not allow ballclubs to play on Sunday. As Arthur Idlett later explained, road games, usually played in a weekend series, were always more profitable. "They could play Sunday baseball in Mississippi," he said, "but they couldn't play Sunday baseball in Georgia." But to help the Black Crackers, in 1935, Atlanta mayor James L. Key changed the law for Ponce de Leon Park to allow Sunday baseball, on the condition that attendance demonstrated popular interest and justified the change. The team's first Sunday game drew 4,700 fans, a strong crowd, but the team continued to struggle financially because of constant ownership changes and financial mismanagement. "You'd have to do what you could do," said Idlett, "you couldn't carry a big team. We didn't carry but twelve players because of the economics. Pitchers had to play outfield and the catchers had to alternate at first base."¹¹

Prior to the 1935 season, Atlanta's interest in a new incarnation of the Negro Southern League was represented by W.B. Baker, a Booker T. Washington High School teacher and sports promoter who managed over the rest of the decade, according to historian Allen Edward Joyce, to lure "a succession of owners into investing their money in the risky enterprise."¹²

"Baker called us in and he was going to make a business of it," said player Leroy Idlett. "He was going to give each man a contract. Well, we wanted to know, where was the money coming from after we signed the contract? He said he was going to try to get it from the gate receipts. Well, we knew that wouldn't work."¹³

The *Atlanta Daily World's* Ric Roberts was glad the Black Crackers had been reconstituted in 1935, but knew that Atlanta fans "must be dragged back to baseball by various and sundry mechanisms." He was confident that ownership "plan to get you out to Ponce de Leon Park opening day if they have to swoon you with stimulants." That was the idea. Mayor James Key declared the day of the Black Crackers' home opener a holiday and encouraged employers to give workers time off to go to the park. There were more than 3,000 fans in the stands for that opening day, but only 1,700 for the following game. "Two more successive losses here and Atlanta will turn her back on the Black Crackers," wrote Roberts. "This is a funny town. Either you look like a million bucks or you are no good." Or, as a frustrated letter-writer to the *World* complained, some black fans were sitting in segregated grandstands for white Cracker games at Ponce de Leon, but "when their own Black Crackers are playing they are permitted to sit anywhere in the Park, and yet they will not patronize the Black Crackers."¹⁴

The 1935 team was managed by second baseman Sammy "Runt" Thompson, an accomplished journeyman who was the Southern League's Most Valuable Player during the 1931 season, and featured players like George "Jew Baby" Bennett, "one of the south's best and most noted baseball geniuses," who also served as a manager for part of the season. "When I first started out back in 1935," Red Moore explained, "I believe I was making a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month." It was clear, according to Clifford Kuhn, that "black ballplayers made considerably more money than the average black Atlantan, though generally less than their white counterparts." Among the stars of that 1935 team was Felix "Chin" Evans, who would go on to a long and successful black baseball career. Donald Reeves would hit .571 in games with available box scores, and two of the team's pitchers averaged more than a strikeout per inning, with Norman Cross striking out 31 hitters in 24 innings and "Rider" Brown amassing 29 strikeouts in 28½ innings.¹⁵

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The crowds coming to see those players held steady through May and early June. A June 2 crowd of roughly 3,500 led Earl Mann, general manager of the white Crackers, to proclaim, "You played to far more fans than Little Rock or Knoxville are able to draw when they play the white Crackers here. We pledge you these grounds any day you have games billed and hope you can come out on Sunday dates when our team is out of town."

By August, however, the crowds had dissipated. The fickle Atlanta fans were not attending games, with the average home attendance hovering around 300. Combined with white teams protesting black play in Ponce de Leon, the mayor threatened to eliminate the ability to play on Sunday if the team did not start drawing crowds. "It seems that some of the lesser white nines from some of the wards are rather disgusted with the idea of handing Ponce de Leon Park over to people of our race for Sunday games," explained the *Atlanta Daily World's* Ric Roberts. "Numerous charity and borough baseball outfits are aching to play at Poncey when the Crackers are away. Especially is this true of Sunday dates." Their pitch to Crackers management was that poor attendance at Black Crackers games meant that those white charity teams had a built-in audience that could make the park more money. It was a real fear for the team, which used the park as a mark of legitimacy.

Local insurance companies responded to the ultimatum, however, and in early June a game with the Birmingham Black Barons drew close to 5,000, as the "fans respond nobly to gestures of civic pride" in the team. "It's stuff like this that causes revolution," Roberts proclaimed. The revolution, however, never really materialized, but the team's newfound success, however brief, in turn convinced Percy Williams, an Auburn Avenue café owner, to invest in the team.

It also kept the insurance business involved. In late July, for example, Atlanta Life Insurance, founded by Alonzo Herndon in the twilight of the 19th century, gave away more than 2,000 Black Crackers tickets to policyholders, with the goal of "increasing the attendance to the game and helping those who are not able to pay the general admission."¹⁶

Atlanta apathy, however, did not prevent the rest of the state from finding identity in the team. Gabby Kemp, who joined the Black Crackers in 1935, described a trip that season to Thomasville, in south Georgia. "They had a beautiful parade, and a big old beautiful park and barbeques, they would start running barbeques and parades, and oh, down in those small towns, they had good race relations down there and those folks just go in there and say, 'Hey, John,' 'Hey, there,' 'Hey, ballplayer.' Oh, the food, they would have tables spread out like a family reunion or something like that for our ball club." On an early August trip to Anniston, pitcher and outfielder Donald Reeves threw a no-hitter against the locals. "Owner Percy Williams made Donald Reeves a promise," went one report, "that he would give him a quart of the choicest wine that Percy keeps in stock at his new Luncheonette establishment on Auburn Avenue if he would beat Anniston." And he did.¹⁷

But attendance in Atlanta never matched the regional enthusiasm, and ultimately the team lost access to Ponce de Leon toward the season's end. "The Ponce de Leon Park owners and administrators have decided that we are fed up on Negro baseball festivals," wrote Roberts. "They have essayed being very cordial and gentle about the matter though and have offered an excuse for the sudden exclusion of you and you and you from the premises. In the first place, they are a bit peeved over the poor fan backing that we have given our Crackers." The team ended its regular season on September 3, never again reaching the kind of attendance it had managed in early June, and there were doubts that the team, which ran at a financial deficit all season, could field a roster the following season.¹⁸

It was a frustrating endeavor to sports boosters like Roberts. He relayed the story of

one confused fan. "I have wondered why these Atlanta people always pull against each other. When the White and Black Crackers play Memphis or just any outsider, the stands are always full of Atlanta born fans who root and shout for the visitors," he said. "It is sickening," Roberts agreed.¹⁹

The Black Crackers, however, would return the following season nonetheless. W.B. Baker had convinced Cum Posey's Homestead Grays to have their spring training in Atlanta, and the day after the Pennsylvania team arrived, Williams, James Andrews, Baker, S.M. Humphreys, and Louis Means met to field a 1936 Black Crackers team.²⁰

Williams had been the financial fuel that made the team go, but an illness kept him away and threatened the team's ability to start the season. "The recovery of Percy Williams has the keynote to baseball sealed in this city," Roberts explained. "If he recovers rapidly enough there may be a paying franchise in this town before July is here." He did not recover rapidly, however. He died before April had run its course, but his partners met at the Butler Street Y following Williams' passing and, in the words of Joyce, "decided not to let the Black Crackers die with him." Ultimately, however, it was Percy Williams' widow Marion whose financial backing saved the team. The Black Crackers paid their Negro Southern League dues and began their season in early May.²¹

The team's first home game of the season was a no-hitter thrown by Roy "Snook" Welmaker against Chattanooga. Welmaker struck out 11 batters and even hit a home run in front of 2,900 fans. But again, just as in 1935, attendance soon began to lag. After a well-attended series against the Black Barons at Birmingham's Rickwood Field brought a much-needed payday for the club, Roberts chastised the efforts of his city. "There are 20,000 more of us in Atlanta than there are in Birmingham, and yet our civic pride is so low that we turn out no more than 1,000 fans to see the same show that 5,000 Birmingham fans paid to see," Sportswriter I.P. Reynolds was more diplomatic. "The Atlanta populace owes the baseball team a great attendance as a tribute to their gameness," he argued. "Anytime that group of athletes will venture into a game where failure after failure they have met, they deserve some credit."²²

Welmaker, for his part, would continue his dominance through May. In another game that month, he struck out 14 in a one-hit victory over the Birmingham Black Barons. He would move to the Homestead Grays after several weeks in Atlanta. In games with available box scores, Henry "Red" Hadley hit .500, and the team's catcher hit .400, but there are not enough full box scores from the season to extrapolate those numbers over the full run of a summer. The team barnstormed through much of the season, their last home game coming on June 23 against the Memphis Red Sox. Even though they won that game, 29-2, and had 39 hits in the process, they could make far more money playing road games in the Midwest, and so spent much of July traveling. "Baseball is gone," lamented Roberts. "What became of the Black Crackers? The last time I heard of them they were in Knoxville but since that time they have faded out of the picture completely."²³

The failure of local interest made the prospect of a 1937 season precarious at best, but local theater owner Mike Schaine, a white man, took over the team and imbued it with new capital. "Atlanta in the past has been a Mecca for mediocre base ball in some instances and in others the game has suffered miserable," wrote the *World's* J.C. Chunn. "That is behind us now." Schaine purchased legal title to both the team and the Black Crackers name in early April. "There is a man in Atlanta called Schaine," wrote Roberts. "He has a few pennies to spend on a GOOD ball club that can play GOOD opposition."

One of Schaine's first and most important moves was the hiring of Harry "Squab"

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Jones as manager. Despite his race, Jones worked in the University of Georgia athletics department and was a respected man in Georgia who could help convince players to take a chance on a venture that was sure to be financially unstable at best. "Didn't nobody want to go to Atlanta to play no ball," remembered Jones. "Atlanta had been so rotten, rotten with ballplayers. Didn't nobody want to go to Atlanta to play ball."²⁴

Along with Schaine, however, John and Billie Harden, owners of a gas station on Auburn Avenue, also purchased an ownership stake in the club. "They wanted a real baseball team," said Billie Harden. "That's what we wanted to give them. We bought the uniforms, and of course we bought all the baseballs, bats and other headgear and all that stuff. My husband bought a bus" to replace the series of cars that the team had previously used. "Our bus was one of the best buses that money could buy," said Gabby Kemp. The Hardens "had a beautiful filling station in front of their home. Mr. and Mrs. Harden were two very nice people and their friendship with the ball club was astounding. Our ball club was more like a family, a close-knit family." The Hardens became sole owners of the team in 1938.²⁵

"Mr. Harden would buy the best equipment, the best protectors. We bought the same things that the major league ballplayers [bought]." As the team developed in the second half of the 1930s, Billie Harden claimed that "Ponce de Leon ball park used to be just overflowing. The enthusiasm was great! They just would pour out there to see them play the other teams coming here, because they were winning. And everybody likes a winner."²⁶

The team played incredibly well during the 1937 season. It was unaffiliated with a specific league and therefore barnstormed through the South. But the Black Crackers did feature talented, familiar Atlanta players like Henry "Red" Hadley, Jack Thornton, and Gabby Kemp, as well as foreign talents like Cuban shortstop Ormond Sampson. "Today the Atlanta Black Crackers have the best ball club they have had since the days of Bill Shaw a decade and a half ago," Roberts claimed.

When home, the team's play encouraged more people to attend. On May 30, a doubleheader with Jacksonville drew more than 5,500 fans, and a July game against Cincinnati drew almost 7,000. It was the high-water mark for attendance, but the team drew well throughout the summer. "At last," notes Joyce, "someone was making professional black baseball in Atlanta pay." An August swoon on a Midwest road trip, however, lost money, and an angry Schaine abandoned the organization, only to return in mid-September.²⁷

It wasn't Schaine's only frustration. That crowded game in late July featured thunder-showers, which led to "the intermingling of white and colored patrons during the crowded game." That, in turn, led to charges filed against Schaine. The Black Crackers' owner, however, fought the charge, arguing that "no statute book in Georgia had a law which called for segregation at a baseball game." In an unusual turn for the Jim Crow 1930s, the judge in City Recorder's Court ruled in favor of the team, ruling that "future patrons to colored games will not see ropes and signs telling which way to go; that the men's rest room at the main entrance, heretofore excluded to colored men, will be used exclusively by them; that white men will be ushered to the rest room further from the gate by a directing policeman; and that a section to the far right end of the stand will be reserved for white patrons." It was a signal victory for black fans, and the *Atlanta Daily World* celebrated the decision. "Colored patrons of future Black Cracker games have been assured of better accommodations at Ponce de Leon park and the removal of evidences of segregation." For the white leader of the team, however, it was another in a series of frustrations that defined the late season.²⁸

Schaine's frustration combined with the strongest season in the club's history would ultimately create the opportunity for a 1938 season that saw the team join the Negro American

League and compete for championships, but it was the period of development in the three prior seasons that set the stage for the team's more studied success.²⁹

The 1938 club "was one of the best baseball teams with the best talent, man for man, that I believe has been put together in Atlanta, Georgia, up until the present day," said Gabby Kemp. That team won 19 straight games at one point and ultimately played the Homestead Grays in the Negro World Series. The Black Crackers took two games in Pittsburgh, "but the owner of the ball club refused to come to Atlanta to play us," said Kemp. "Therefore, the Homestead Grays were disqualified, and the Atlanta Black Crackers won the Negro national championship."³⁰

But the team was unable to parlay that success, as the cost of travel outside of the South prohibited the Black Crackers from continuing with the Negro American League. The team would continue in various forms throughout the 1940s in several different incarnations of the Negro Southern League.³¹

"The people lived in a marginal world. They had very little outlet," explained the *Atlanta Daily World's* Ric Roberts. "They lived in a sharply defined area. Baseball was an outlet. To sit where the whites sat—it was a moment of escape. It gave them something to look forward to. Blacks have always loved baseball. And so that was an outlet. And it gave them a chance to look at their heroes. They thought their boys could play anybody. They were sure that the black ballplayer was as talented as any other."³²

Atlanta had long struggled with race conflict. Gilded Age concentrations of black citizens created by black schools and churches early became segregated enclaves prior to the turn of the century. Such could be a help or a hindrance. In the 1920s, for example, Atlanta elected a Ku Klux Klan mayor and served as the headquarters for the newly-revived organization. In 1952, however, Rufus Clement, president of Atlanta University, was able to take advantage of that segregated voting bloc to win a seat on the Atlanta school board, becoming the first elected black official since the 19th century. His ability to win and the lack of overt, grandstanding racism by Atlanta public officials in the 1950s and 1960s was the result of a large black voting bloc that could prevent virulent racists from winning. That was good, but it provided Atlanta with an undeserved reputation for racial moderation that ignored the problems of employment discrimination, pay disparity, segregation, city services, and education.³³

Bill Russell, Harry Edwards, and so many other athletes and activists of the 1960s and early 1970s each in their own way gave lie to the myth that sports was a cure to the ills of society. At the same time, however, sports was also marshaled as a check against such countercultural messages by the likes of Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan. That check coincided with a rise of sports in the Sunbelt, as new cities like Atlanta in the expanding South and West sought to burnish their reputations with professional, major league teams. In turn, those teams would, at least in the popular mind, take on the conservative values of those cities.³⁴

They would also, in cities like Atlanta, feel the apathy of audiences not used to having such teams or such reputations. "The glory years of the Crackers had faded by the mid-1960s, and the arrival of a major-league baseball team seemed to most Atlantans as probable as the landing of a troop from Mars," explained former Braves executive Bob Hope. "When it happened, it was exciting, important, and almost mystical, something that big cities had and we could only dream about."

The courting of the Braves was a project, like the later effort with the Hawks, of Sunbelt civic development. Atlanta mayor Ivan Allen invested a substantial amount of time in bring-

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ing major league professional sports to the city. In 1965, a years-long freeway construction project was finally complete, and athletics was a way to validate the infrastructure efforts intended to bring the city into competition with other national metropolitan areas outside of the South. Allen had first attempted to woo the Kansas City Athletics, but after the deal fell through and the A's moved to Oakland, the mayor turned to the Milwaukee Braves.

The Braves had moved to Milwaukee from Boston in 1952, then won the World Series in 1957 with former Atlanta Cracker Eddie Mathews leading the way. But this was a high-water mark that would not be reached again, with attendance dwindling in response. Milwaukee was a small market near Chicago, a city with two teams. When the Washington Senators moved to Minnesota and became the Minnesota Twins in 1961, the Braves' position became even more precarious and helped encourage them to sell. "Life suddenly became different for Atlanta and the South," wrote Hope. "The city instantly became the unchallenged heart of the Southeast, a thriving metropolitan area about to jump over the remarkable one-million population mark."³⁵

Though baseball was not associated with blackness as was the NBA, the presence of black athletes in the sport had hindered any attempt at recruiting major league franchises for the Jim Crow South prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Race would most certainly play a role in the reception of the team, as the Braves did have on their roster one of the most famous black athletes in the country, Henry Aaron, himself a former Negro Leagues player with the Indianapolis Clowns.³⁶

More than 50,000 fans attended the team's first home game in April 1966, with Allen throwing out the first pitch, and attendance was healthy throughout the first season. "There was a novelty about the whole thing," said Joe Torre, the team's catcher. "At a game against the Giants, there were 45,000 fans in the stands, and you could hear a pin drop. The fans didn't know what to do at a ball game." And they were largely unwilling to come back to the stadium. The team was doing well, culminating in a 1969 National League Western Division championship behind stars like Torre, Orlando Cepeda, Phil Niekro, and of course Hank Aaron, but the stands were mostly unfilled. After 1969, the team's fortunes waned, as did the already sparse attendance. In 1971, for example, Hank Aaron hit his 600th homerun at home, but he did so in front of only 16,000 fans.³⁷

By 1973, the Braves had competed for seven seasons in Atlanta, as had the Black Crackers in 1935. Its tenure from 1973 through 1975 would be colored by basic mediocrity, tinged with bouts of legitimate success, as was that of the Black Crackers from 1935 through 1937. And the broader Atlanta community of the 1970s responded much as did the black community of the 1930s.

In 1973, Aaron was pursuing Babe Ruth's record, and the team became the first to have three players hit 40 home runs in one season, with Aaron joined by Davey Johnson and Darrell Evans. Late in the season, the *Atlanta Daily World*, which considered the slugger the premiere black Southern athlete and celebrated all of his milestones, noted that Aaron had set the record for most home runs in one league with 709, explaining that 708 of Ruth's had been hit in the American League, the last six in the National. The *World* begged fans to attend games for the team's final homestand. "A sell-out crowd for each game could push the Braves' 1973 attendance toward the respectable 1,000,000 mark and save taxpayers some possible grief in the future. How about it Atlanta?" Atlanta, however, chose not to attend, consistent with the behavior of its fans since the 1930s. The Braves' average attendance in 1973 was a paltry 9,885.³⁸

In the thick of Aaron's chase, with two weeks to go in the season, one Atlanta home

game saw only 1,362 fans come through the turnstiles. Aaron ended the 1973 campaign just one home run short of the hallowed 714 mark. On April 4, 1974, he tied the record in Cincinnati, and he broke it during the Braves' home opener four days later, with more than 53,000 fans, expecting to see history, in attendance. "A new edition of the baseball record book chapter dealing with home runs will be written and this time it will include a king," the *World* noted, "none other than King Henry Aaron, who owns the record for the most homers." It was the largest Atlanta crowd ever to see a Braves game, but it would be a substantial anomaly for the rest of the season.

Atlanta was "a city which has been the brunt of baseball jokes and sneered at by sports fans in major league cities as a city where the fans do not know how to watch a ball game." But on the occasion of Aaron's homer, "the fans rose to the occasion" and "gave the Hammer the respect which was overdue." Again, however, it was not to last. That 1974 season, pitcher Tom House led the league in ERA, Ralph Garr was the batting champion, and the team finished just out of the playoff running. Still, by September, another home game attracted only 1,562 fans, and again the team failed to reach the million-attendance threshold.

Aaron was traded to the Milwaukee Brewers during the winter, and the team regressed in 1975, but the one thing that remained consistent was the lack of fans in the stadium. "Recently the Atlanta Braves have been complaining about 'negative reporting,' so here's a positive report on the Braves," wrote the *Atlanta Daily World's* James Heath in 1975. "The Braves lead the major league in the number of lost fans compared with a year ago." During that 1975 season, the team averaged an attendance of 6,683. Atlanta placed 11th of 12 in National League attendance every year from 1973 to 1975, just edging the San Diego Padres in 1973 and the San Francisco Giants in the succeeding seasons.³⁹

"If failure in baseball were fatal," wrote Bob Hope in 1991, "the Atlanta Braves would have died a long time ago. Since moving to Atlanta from Milwaukee in 1966, the Braves have had the worst record in the major leagues." As Allen Edward Joyce noted in 1975, "The major league Braves in their ten year history have yet to capture the loyalties of the local fans the way the independent, locally owned Crackers did before them." Still, just as the Black Crackers' mixed success between 1935 and 1937 ultimately led to a 1938 Negro American League season and the team's most notable accomplishments, the Braves' mixed success between 1973 and 1975 ultimately led in 1976 to the purchase of the team by Ted Turner, who vowed to make the team winning and relevant.⁴⁰

There are comparative models for play on the field, as well, though such is a more difficult task because available statistics for the Black Crackers are limited. Using the numbers that do exist, however, and comparing 1973 to 1935, each team's eighth season, the Crackers' individual play far outpaced that of the Braves. No one on the latter team came close to Donald Reeves' .571 batting average. Hank Aaron, in fact, was the only 1973 Atlanta player to hit over .300 for the season. The 1935 Black Crackers had two pitchers averaging more than a strikeout per inning, while no one playing for the 1973 Braves even came close to such numbers. Even the great Phil Niekro averaged only a strikeout every two innings. Niekro did, however, pitch a no-hitter that season versus the San Diego Padres, matching Roy Welmaker's 1936 opening day gem against the Chattanooga Black Lookouts.⁴¹

The Braves' eighth, ninth, and tenth seasons in Atlanta were remarkably similar to those of the Black Crackers in their own eighth, ninth, and tenth seasons, both in play and in the city's general apathy toward its teams. Atlanta was beset by race and class issues in the 1930s and the 1970s, its sports teams were mediocre in both decades, and the respective communities of supporters for each club thus used them as a mirror for their broader social

concerns. The Braves and Atlanta provided

Such was the reality, one first moment. And while the team that was built on every team but the pennants was its

Despite the people in the city did not turn to racial tension, still response. Nothing

Notes

1. For more Dorsey, *To Build On* of Georgia Press, 20 *Failure* (Baton Rouge of 1906 as an arbiter Race Riot and the Re and Gregory Mixon Press of Florida, 2001).
2. Frank Marshall.
3. Tim Darnell, 124-125; Clifford M. 1914-1948 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975).
4. Allen Edward Joyce.
5. Kuhn, Joyce.
6. Darnell, Tim.
7. Heaphy, Tim.
8. Joyce, "The Braves."
9. Darnell, Tim.
10. *Atlanta Daily World*.
11. Heaphy, Tim.
12. One of the insurance business in the Crackers," 17, 33; Heaphy, "The Crackers," in *The Negro American* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).
13. Joyce, "The Braves."
14. *Atlanta Daily World*.
15. Kuhn, Joyce, *History, 1920-1951* (Pittsburgh: Courier-Post, 1951).
16. *Atlanta Daily World*, 37-38; Plott, Tim.
17. Kemp des Georgia town of Thomas, 127; *Atlanta Daily World*.
18. Despite the *World's* Ric Roberts October series with August 28, 1935, 5; *Atlanta Daily World*.
19. *Atlanta Daily World*.
20. Plott, Tim, "The Atlanta Braves."

concerns. The Black Crackers were not a great baseball team, but neither were the Braves, and Atlanta proved a largely disinterested baseball city in both instances.

Such was the nature of their functional equivalency. It was a likeness built on mediocrity, one first modeled by the Black Crackers decades before the Braves moved to the South. And while the teams themselves were not overwhelmingly successful, they played a game that was built on failure, where the best hitters recorded outs the majority of the time, where every team but one lost the annual championship. So their inability to fill stadiums or take pennants was itself at the heart of what made the game so fascinating to so many.

Despite the Sunbelt growth of Atlanta from the 1930s to the 1970s, there were many people in the city who also felt failure, whether from racial or economic wounds, but they did not turn to their baseball team in large numbers to salve them. Thus we are left with racial tension, structural economic inequality, mediocre play, and community apathy as a response. Nothing could be more major league than that.

Notes

1. For more on the postbellum divisions of black Atlanta by social and economic status, see Allison Dorsey, *To Build Our Lives Together: Community Formation in Black Atlanta, 1875–1906* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004); and Edmund L. Drago, *Black Politicians and Reconstruction in Georgia: A Splendid Failure* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982). For more on the role of the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906 as an arbiter of exacerbating those divisions, see David F. Godshalk, *Veiled Visions: The 1906 Atlanta Race Riot and the Reshaping of American Race Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); and Gregory Mixon, *The Atlanta Riot: Race, Class, and Violence in a New South City* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).
2. Frank Marshall Davis, "Negro America's First Daily," *Negro Digest* 5 (1946): 87.
3. Tim Darnell, *The Crackers: Early Days of Atlanta Baseball* (Athens, GA: Hill Street Press, 2003), 124–125; Clifford M. Kuhn, Harlon E. Joye, and E. Bernard West, *Living Atlanta: An Oral History of the City, 1914–1948* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 266.
4. Allen Edward Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers" (MA thesis, Emory University, 1975), 13–15.
5. Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 266.
6. Darnell, *The Crackers*, 129–130.
7. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues, 1869–1960*, 42.
8. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 2, 5–6; Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 272.
9. Darnell, *The Crackers*, 136; Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 184, 266–268.
10. *Atlanta Daily World*, March 31, 1935, 5; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 32.
11. Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 145; Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 161, 266.
12. One of those owners was William J. Shaw, who had moved to Atlanta from Brunswick. Shaw ran an insurance business in the city and owned a local restaurant known as the Roof Garden. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 17, 33; Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 98; Darnell, *The Crackers*, 125; Leslie Heaphy, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," in *The National Pastime: Baseball in the Peach State*, no. 30, Ken Fenster and Wynn Montgomery, editors (Lincoln, NB: Society for American Baseball Research, 2010): 30–36.
13. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 34.
14. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 5, 1935, 1, May 19, 1935, 5; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 36.
15. Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 273; William J. Plott, *The Negro Southern League: A Baseball History, 1920–1951* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 127, 133–134; *Atlanta Daily World* March 10, 1935, 4; *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 29, 1935, A6; Darnell, *The Crackers*, 133.
16. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 29, 1935, 5, June 3, 1935, July 26, 1935, 1; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 37–38; Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 128–129.
17. Kemp describes the south Georgia town of Thomaston, but it seems likely that he meant the south Georgia town of Thomasville, as Thomaston, Georgia, is not in the south of the state. Darnell, *The Crackers*, 127; *Atlanta Daily World*, August 3, 1935, 5.
18. Despite the end of the Black Crackers' regular season, an all-star team selected by the *Atlanta Daily World*'s Ric Roberts and comprised of players from the Crackers and the Jacksonville Red Caps played an early October series with a Northern all-star team. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 40; *Atlanta Daily World*, August 28, 1935, 5; Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 132–133.
19. *Atlanta Daily World*, November 21, 1935, 5.
20. Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 136; *Atlanta Daily World*, January 6, 1935, 5, March 13, 1936, 5; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 41–42.

21. *Atlanta Daily World*, April 27, 1936, 4; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 43.
22. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 11, 1936, 5, May 26, 1936, 5, May 27, 1936, 6.
23. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 29, 1936, 5, August 28, 1936, 5; Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 138–140; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 43–45.
24. "Financial backing for the Black Crackers of 1937 is at the highest peak since the fat post-war days," Roberts claimed. "Even the genial and baseball loving late Percy Williams, a man who spent a thousand bucks or so backing his team, is overshadowed by the sort of dough President Schaine is dishing up for a first class ball club." *Atlanta Daily World*, April 12, 1937, 5, April 13, 1937, 5, April 20, 1937, 5; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 46–48.
25. Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 270; Darnell, *The Crackers*, 134.
26. Darnell, *The Crackers*, 135; Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 272.
27. After Schaine returned to the team, he sent it to Houston to play in a \$10,000 tournament sponsored by the *Houston Post*. *Atlanta Daily World*, May 5, 1937, 5; *Chicago Defender*, May 29, 1937, 14, July 31, 1937, 21, September 4, 1937, 20; *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 29, 1937, 17; Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 145; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 48–53; Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 143.
28. *Atlanta Daily World*, August 12, 1937, 1.
29. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 54–57; *Chicago Defender*, December 18, 1937, 8.
30. Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 265–266, 272–273; Darnell, *The Crackers*, 141–151.
31. Kuhn, Joye, and West, *Living Atlanta*, 273; Heaphy, *The Negro Leagues*, 222.
32. Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 5.
33. Ronald H. Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth-Century Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 6–7, 12, 27, 29; Larry Keating, *Atlanta: Race, Class, and Urban Expansion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 41–44.
34. Benjamin G. Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Televised Sports*, 6th ed (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2009), 240–242; See also Bill Russell, *Go Up For Glory* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966); Harry Edwards, *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (New York: The Free Press, 1969); Dave Meggyesy, *Out of Their League* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970); Jim Bouton, *Ball Four: My Life and Hard Times Throwing the Knuckleball in the Big Leagues* (New York: World Publishing, 1970); and Jack Scott, *The Athletic Revolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).
35. Bob Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You: An Irreverent Look at the Atlanta Braves, the Losingest Team in Baseball for the Past 25 Years* (Atlanta: Longstreet Press, 1991), 6–8.
36. The best biographical treatment of Hank Aaron's life in and out of baseball is Howard Bryant, *The Last Hero: A Life of Henry Aaron* (New York: Pantheon, 2010).
37. Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You*, 8–9.
38. Baseball-Reference.com, "Atlanta Braves Attendance, Stadiums, and Park Factors," accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/attend.shtml>; Baseball-Reference.com, "1973 Atlanta Braves Schedule and Results," accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1973-schedule-scores.shtml>; *Atlanta Daily World*, September 11, 1973, 2, September 21, 1973, 4; Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You*, 9; Michael E. Goodman, *The Story Of the Atlanta Braves* (Mankato, MN: Creative Education, 2008), 27–33.
39. *Atlanta Daily World*, April 11, 1974, 1, 4, October 6, 1974, 10, July 20, 1975, 6; Baseball-Reference.com, "1974 Atlanta Braves Schedule and Results," accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1974-schedule-scores.shtml>; Baseball-Reference.com, "1975 Atlanta Braves Schedule and Results," accessed August 28, 2016, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1975-schedule-scores.shtml>; Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You*, 9; Michael E. Goodman, *The Story of the Atlanta Braves*, 27–33.
40. Hope, *We Could've Finished Last Without You*, 1, 9; Joyce, "The Atlanta Black Crackers," 1.
41. Baseball-Reference.com, "1973 Atlanta Braves Batting, Pitching, and Fielding Statistics," accessed September 6, 2016, <http://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/ATL/1973.shtml>; Plott, *The Negro Southern League*, 133–134; ESPN.com, "MLB Team History—Atlanta Braves No-Hitters," accessed September 6, 2016, http://www.espn.com/mlb/history/teams/_/team/Atl/history/no-hitters.

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On April 18 against the Jersey pitcher to a full men on base, Ro for a three-run b that stunned the stole second bas Giants relief pitc attempts to steal Robinson's debu director. In five scored four runs

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Edited by TODD PETERSON



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