Larry Doby: Greatness Overlooked in the Shadow of Robinson

6-20-2003

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Wednesday evening Larry Doby died at age 79 in Montclair, New Jersey. Thursday afternoon in Yankee Stadium there was a tribute to Lou Gehrig on the occasion of his 100th birthday. Sometimes there is an odd confluence of events, and this is one of them. Although they played in different eras and under very different circumstances Larry Doby and Lou Gehrig shared one characteristic. The exceptional careers of both men were played out in the shadows of those around them.

Lou Gehrig played on great Yankee teams, put up Hall of Fame numbers, but remained in the shadow of Babe Ruth and later Joe DiMaggio. Gehrig was a colorless team player who lacked charisma. He went about his daily routines with business-like precision and efficiency, at times hardly noticed by fans or teammates. He was reliable, dependable, Lou. Joe McCarthy just put Gehrig's name on the lineup card each day, and that was that. Gehrig went out each day and gave total effort and played nearly flawless baseball.

His great achievements all seemed to take place in the shadows. In 1927 the year Ruth hit a record breaking sixty home runs, Gehrig was the MVP of the American League. In the 1928 World Series Gehrig hit a whopping .545 only to be overshadowed by Ruth who hit .625. In the 1932 World Series Gehrig hit .529, scored nine runs, hit three home runs, and drove in eight runs. The was the World Series remembered for Ruth's "designated" home run. Also in 1932 Gehrig hit four home runs in one game, but the headlines in the New York papers the next day screamed out the news of the retirement of John J. McGraw as the manager of the Giants.

After Ruth was pushed out of New York in 1934 it might be expected that Gehrig would become the principal figure on the Yankees. Although 1934 was one of his best years as he won the triple-crown, the Gehrig led Yankees did not get to the World Series, finishing seven games behind the Tigers while Lou finished fifth in the MVP voting. By 1936 New York was talking about the new rookie sensation Joe DiMaggio, even though Gehrig had another of his monster years at the bat and was named MVP. Even Thursday's celebration of Gehrig's 100th birthday was diminished, this time by the rain that postponed the game.
In the end Gehrig is best remembered for two things: his consecutive game streak and his farewell speech in Yankee Stadium, while he should also be remembered for his overall greatness as a player.

Larry Doby had a similar career pattern as his achievements were overshadowed first by Jackie Robinson and later by Satchel Paige. Only a few months after Robinson's debut in Brooklyn, on the 5th of July 1947, Bill Veeck signed Larry Doby to a contract and that day he joined the Indians for a game against the White Sox in Chicago.

Both Robinson and Doby had been born in the South and raised outside the region. Both were raised by their mothers who worked as domestics. Both were talented athletes in many sports. Both attended integrated schools. Both served in the military and faced segregation for the first time there. Robinson was aggressive and self-confident. Doby was shy and soft-spoken. When confronted by segregation in the military Robinson struck back, while in similar circumstances Doby says he "just went into a shell."

Three hours after signing a contract Doby faced major league pitching as a pinch hitter, while Jackie had a year to prepare for his debut. Bill Veeck held a quick team meeting to prepare the Indian players for the second of baseball's great experiments, and when Doby came into the locker room most players greeted him politely, while one player from Texas turned his back on him. Doby faced the same range of racial insults and obscenities that had been rained on Robinson by opposing players. His first year he performed miserably under this pressure. The following season Larry Doby arrived at spring training a new man and quickly had those in training camp talking about his vast improvement.

Veeck moved spring training to Arizona to get Doby away from the segregation of Florida, but as it turned out the hotel in Tucson did not allow African Americans. The loneliness was still there. He had no one to share his off-hours as he was often forced into segregated housing. When a teammate hit a home run Doby was not sure if he should wait at home plate and shake his hand, so he retreated to the dugout where he could shake the hand of a white man out of public view.
Doby was a streak hitter and still had occasional problems in the outfield, but the addition of Satchel Paige at mid-season ending Doby's racial isolation seemed to steady his performance. With Paige taking the spotlight Doby went about his business. He hit .301 with 14 homers and 65 RBI's. In the World Series his .318 and was a key to the Indian World Championship. It was a remarkable resurrection that launched Larry Doby on his thirteen-year career primarily in Cleveland with stops in Chicago and Detroit.

Overshadowed from the beginning by Jackie Robinson, and then by the showmanship of Paige in Cleveland, it took Doby a few years to earn the recognition due him, but indeed he did. He led the league in home runs in 1952 and '54, RBI's in 1954, and Slugging Percentage and runs scored in 1952. He was a six-time American League All-Star.

Perhaps then it is fitting that both men were remembered on consecutive days, or perhaps it is just good to be prompted to remember them for their greatness both on and off the field no matter what the occasion might be.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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