

Major League Baseball and the Negro Leagues: Correcting an Injustice

Compelling Question: How can we correct the injustice that was done to the Negro League players and teams?

Grade Level		Time	Standards/Competencies	
K-2	3-5	45–60 Minutes	Common Core Anchor: Reading: R1, R2 Writing: W1, W7 Speaking & Listening: SL1, SL3 Language: L4, L6	SEL: Self-Awareness Social Awareness Responsible Decision-Making
MS	9			



Web Related Connections

Lessons

- [10 Ideas for Teaching Black History Month](#)
- [Athletes and Activism](#)
- [Experiences with Race and Racism](#)
- [Game Changer: Kyle Korver Speaks Truth on Privilege](#)
- [On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters](#)
- [What are Reparations and Should We Enact Them?](#)

Student Direct Resources

- [Major League Baseball and the Negro Leagues: Correcting an Injustice \(on Sutori\)](#)

Other Resources

- [Black History Month](#)
- [Civil Rights Movement](#)
- [How Should I Talk about Race in My Mostly White Classroom?](#)
- [Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism](#)
- [Sports and Social Justice](#)

Key Words

classifying
credited
disadvantage

LESSON OVERVIEW

In December 2020, Major League Baseball (MLB) announced that they will correct a longtime injustice in the game's history by officially elevating the Negro Leagues (of 1920-1948) to "Major League" status. For historical context, in the late 1800's, Black professional baseball players were banned from playing in the major leagues and were forced to form their own "Negro Leagues." In making this decision, Baseball Commissioner Robert D. Manfred, Jr. said: "All of us who love baseball have long known that the Negro Leagues produced many of our game's best players, innovations and triumphs against a backdrop of injustice. We are now grateful to count the players of the Negro Leagues where they belong: as Major Leaguers within the official historical record."

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about the Negro Leagues and the segregation that forced a separate league, reflect on their perspectives regarding the decision by MLB, and write an essay that expresses their point of view.

[NOTE: In talking about the Negro Leagues, explain to students that before the 1960's the term "Negro" was commonly used to refer to people who are Black/African American. Use of this term began to decline in the mid 1960's. While the term "Negro Leagues" is retained for historical purposes, the term "Negro" is now considered unacceptable and offensive. It is important to explain this distinction to students and emphasize that they should not use it.]

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will learn about some of the history of the Negro Leagues and the segregation of Black players.
- Students will reflect on their opinions about the MLB decision to make some Negro League player statistics part of MLB history.
- Students will express their point of view with evidence through the writing of an essay.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

- "MLB gives Negro Leagues 'Major League' status" video clip (2020, 1:48 min., Reuters, www.youtube.com/watch?v=v5d2VlvNyLw)

- Information about segregation of Black baseball players, the Negro Leagues and the current decision by MLB (for teacher)
- “MLB reclassifies Negro Leagues as major league” (Newsela, January 4, 2021, <https://newsela.com/read/negro-leagues-classified-major-league/id/2001017625>, one copy for each student. You will need to create a FREE Newsela account in order to access the article.)
- Create five signs with the following words: (1) STRONGLY AGREE, (2) STRONGLY DISAGREE, (3) AGREE, (4) IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE and (5) DISAGREE. Post the signs prior to conducting this lesson as instructed in step 1 of the “Here I Stand Activity.” (or prepare Mentimeter, see below)

Key Words (cont.)

estimated
exclusion
founding
incomplete
injustice
integrated
irregularities
notable
officially
prejudice
racism
reclassified
recognition
records
segregation
standard
statistics

PROCEDURES



Information Sharing: History of Negro Leagues and Segregation

1. Ask students: *What have you heard, or do you know about segregation in baseball's history?* Explain that in December 2020, Major League Baseball (MLB) announced that they will correct a long-standing oversight and injustice in the game's history by officially elevating the Negro Leagues (of 1920-1948) to “Major League” status. This means that the statistics and records of these players will become a part of Major League Baseball's history.
2. Play the video “[MLB gives Negro Leagues 'Major League' status.](#)” After watching, ask students: *What is your main takeaway from the video? What more do you want to know?*
3. Share some or all the [information about segregation of Black baseball players, the Negro Leagues and the current decision by MLB.](#)
4. Engage students in a brief discussion about this information by asking the following questions:
 - What are your thoughts and feelings about this information?
 - What is new information for you?
 - How does learning this information challenge your thinking about what you already know about baseball, MLB, the Negro Leagues and racism?



Reading Activity

1. Distribute the article, “[MLB reclassifies Negro Leagues as major league](#)” and give students 10–15 minutes to read it silently or read aloud together with students taking turns reading.

Alternative: Have students read the article for homework the evening before.
2. Engage students in a discussion by asking some or all the following questions:
 - What happened?
 - What did you learn that you didn't know before? What was surprising? What information challenged your prior thinking?
 - What is the reason that Black players were not allowed to play with white players in the MLB?
 - How do you feel about the fact that these leagues were separated and segregated?
 - In the article and some of the quotes by officials, the exclusion of the Negro Leagues is referred to as an “oversight” and an “error.” What are your thoughts about use of these words to describe the segregation and exclusion? What other words could be used?
 - What more do you want to know about the Negro Leagues and the recent decision by MLB?

- Why do you think MLB made this decision now? What else is happening in society that may have prompted the decision?
- What are some of the pros and cons of this decision and its potential impact?
- What other ideas do you have for correcting the injustice?

Here I Stand Activity

1. Prior to conducting this lesson, select a large open space on a wall to indicate the position of an imaginary line. At the farthest left point post the STRONGLY AGREE sign and at the farthest right point post the STRONGLY DISAGREE sign. In between, post the AGREE, IN BETWEEN/NOT SURE, AND DISAGREE signs along the continuum.

Note: If you are teaching virtually, use [Mentimeter](#) (Type “Scales”) to have students respond to the questions along a continuum of strongly disagree to strongly agree.
2. Explain to students that they will listen to statements about this topic and then decide to what extent they agree or disagree with the statement. Instruct students to position themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with each statement.
3. Read some or all of the statements below—one at a time—inviting students to decide where they stand in the continuum. Have them move silently to that place and observe where others choose to stand. After everyone has chosen their spot on the continuum, have students spend 2–3 minutes discussing amongst themselves why they are standing where they are. If time permits, have one student share their thinking with the rest of the class.
 - Major League Baseball (MLB) made the right decision to elevate the Negro Leagues into MLB Status.
 - MLB should have done this a long time ago.
 - The reason MLB made this decision in 2020 is because there has been much more public conversation and awareness about racism in our country.
 - MLB should do more than what they did.
 - The MLB statistics were never real or accurate because they didn’t include Black players from the Negro Leagues.
 - Negro Leagues players or family members should be compensated (i.e., paid) for this injustice.
 - There is no way to completely correct this injustice.
 - Because the Negro Leagues played fewer games than MLB and had inferior working conditions, a different kind of adjustment should be made.
4. After the activity, lead a whole group discussion using the following questions:
 - Was it easier to decide where to stand for some statements and more difficult for other statements? How so?
 - How did it feel when most people had the same response as you? How about when most people were standing somewhere else?
 - Did you shift or change your opinion when you heard other student’s points of view?
 - What did you learn from this that made you either change your point of view or made you feel more strongly about your position?
 - Do you think MLB made the right decision or should they have done something else?
 - What other remedies or solutions could MLB have made?

Writing Activity (Optional)

Have students select one of the statements from the “Here I Stand” activity and write a short essay on their point of view about that statement. They should gather and provide evidence for that point of view such as statistics, historical information, quotes, polls, facts, etc. They can also include the counter argument to their position and why they disagree with that stance. Because students may need to do additional research, that should factor into the decision of how much time you will give them to complete their writing. Provide the additional reading and resources below and encourage students to find their own sources.

Closing

Have students share with the class the opinion or point of view that will be the focus of their essay.

ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [“Baseball is finally addressing its racist past, but its work can’t end there”](#) (*The Washington Post*, December 16, 2020)
- [“Baseball Rights a Wrong by Adding Negro Leagues to Official Records”](#) (*The New York Times*, December 16, 2020)
- [“In The Wake Of Its 100th Anniversary, The Negro Leagues Will Be Officially Recognized By Major League Baseball”](#) (Blavity, December 17, 2020)
- [“MLB Announces It Will Recognize Negro Leagues As Major League”](#) (NPR, December 16, 2020)
- [“MLB Elevates the Negro Leagues to Major League Status After Decades of Racial Exclusion”](#) (*The Root*, December 16, 2020)
- [“MLB’s Move to “Elevate” the Negro Leagues Risks Diminishing Them”](#) (Slate, December 23, 2020)
- [MLB officially designates the Negro Leagues as 'Major League'](#) (MLB, December 16, 2020)
- [“MLB Recognizes Negro Leagues As 'Major League' — Correcting A 'Longtime Oversight’”](#) (NPR, December 16, 2020)
- [“M.L.B.’s Records Were Never Real. But the Racism Was. Ask Satchel Paige.”](#) (*The New York Times*, December 21, 2020)
- [“MLB to Designate Negro Leagues As Major Leagues, Adjust Record Books”](#) (*Sports Illustrated*, December 16, 2020)
- [Negro League](#) (Britannica)
- [Negro League Baseball](#) (History)
- [Negro Leagues Baseball Museum](#)
- [“Negro Leagues are elevated to major league status. What does it mean for baseball?”](#) (PBS News Hour, December 16, 2020)

Common Core Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
R2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
W7: Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects based on focused questions, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric.
Language
L4: Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
L6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Information about Segregation of Black Baseball Players, the Negro Leagues and the Decision by MLB

- During the second half of the 19th Century (late 1800s), baseball started gaining in popularity and amateur clubs began forming. According to records, there was a game between two Black baseball teams as far back as 1855. By the end of the decade, there were several Black baseball clubs in the New York area.
- In 1867, the National Association of Amateur Baseball Players rejected Black players from becoming members. Nine years later, in 1876, owners of the professional National League adopted a “gentleman’s agreement” to keep Black players out. By the 1890s, Black players increasingly faced exclusion from organized baseball and found more opportunities with traveling teams.
- In 1920, Rube Foster started the Negro National League. It launched with eight teams: Chicago American Giants, Chicago Giants, Cuban Stars, Dayton Marcos, Detroit Stars, Kansas City Monarchs, Indianapolis ABCs and the St. Louis Giants. Negro League baseball enjoyed periods of success in the early 1920s and again after the Great Depression.
- The Negro Leagues teams and players were at a disadvantage compared to those who played in the Major leagues. They did not have permanent ballfields on which to play. The teams struggled with financial problems. The Negro Leagues teams played fewer games than the MLB teams; they played an average of 80-100 games compared to MLB which played 154. Though there was a great deal of record-keeping in the Negro Leagues, they couldn’t afford to hire the kind of record-keepers the major leagues had and therefore the Negro Leagues records are incomplete. Unfortunately, this inconsistent record-keeping will impact the integration of their statistics into MLB records.
- Among some of the best Negro Leagues players were: Satchel Paige, Oscar Charleston, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and John Henry “Pop” Lloyd. To learn more, see [Ten Greatest Negro Leaguers](#) and [Ranking the Greatest Negro League Players Who Never Played in MLB](#).
- In April 1947, Jackie Robinson officially integrated MLB by playing first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers. To understand some of the context in which he played, Jackie Robinson was selected by a white manager to be the first Black player to play on a white team. He played in front of a white crowd and faced myriad obstacles and bias on a regular basis. Despite his talent and success as a player, Robinson faced racism from baseball fans and fellow players throughout his career. Segregation laws prevented Robinson from using the same hotels and restaurants as his teammates while playing in the South. Because of the commercial success and acclaim of Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the integration of baseball in 1947 prompted a slow influx of talented Black players to MLB. By the 1960s, the remaining Negro League teams folded.
- On December 16, 2020, MLB Commissioner Robert D. Manfred, Jr. announced that the seven Negro leagues would be recognized as official major leagues, with their players' records and statistics counted in baseball's record books, prompting a reclassification of the records. Those who played in the Negro Leagues from 1920-1948 (more than 3400 players in total) will now have their statistics and achievements recognized by MLB. Players who participated in both the Negro Leagues and MLB will have both sets of statistics counted. Baseball Commissioner Robert D. Manfred, Jr. stated (or read aloud the [MLB Press Release](#)):

“All of us who love baseball have long known that the Negro Leagues produced many of our game’s best players, innovations and triumphs against a backdrop of injustice. We are now grateful to count the players of the Negro Leagues where they belong: as Major Leaguers within the official historical record.”
- John Thorn, the official historian of Major League Baseball, acknowledged that MLB’s racist legacy continued long after the Negro Leagues folded. The Undeclared, a sports and culture website, stated: “Thousands of players, like Josh Gibson—considered to be one of the best hitters baseball has ever seen though he wasn’t allowed to play in a single MLB game—are now officially considered Major Leaguers.”
- In 2020, Black players made up just 7.8% of the total in MLB, and that was an increase over the previous year. Some believe the history of institutionalized racism contributes to this disparity.