
In league with history

By **Natalie Southwick**

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ARLINGTON — Like many teenagers, Cam Perron spends most of his free time on the phone. But instead of texting or playing video games, he's talking to old guys like Paul Jones and Gilbert Black.

They are former Negro league baseball players, old enough to be his grandfather, and he may be their greatest fan, their unlikely but irrepressible advocate.

Perron, a shaggy-haired 16-year-old with a shortstop's lanky build, is one of the country's most prolific researchers into the leagues that gave black ballplayers a professional option when they were banned from the bigs. From his bedroom in Arlington, Perron has created baseball cards for players who never had any, discovered evidence to help former players earn pensions, and reconnected teammates who hadn't spoken in decades. This month he will help organize a reunion in Birmingham, Ala., for more than 50 former players.

"Most of the players just think I'm doing a school project," Perron said. "After they start speaking with teammates they realize, 'This guy's serious.'"

Growing up, Perron was always collecting something, from coins to concert tickets. His love for baseball drew him to cards, then autographs. Even then, Perron preferred pinch hitters to superstars.

"I would write to the retired players," said Perron, who has more than 40,000 baseball cards in his alphabetized collection. "It was the retired guys who didn't make any money and who really cared about the fans."

Perron is particularly proud of the work he has done to connect Negro league players to the pensions they are entitled to. His first such success benefited Paul Jones, a player whom Major League Baseball records had confused with a deceased former player with the same name. Jones played with several teams between 1947 and 1953, facing famous players such as Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige, but he did not have documentation to prove it.

To receive a pension from Major League Baseball, Negro league players must have played four seasons. To qualify, they must provide proof through published records, such as rosters.

Few players keep any record of their career, so the task of proving eligibility often falls to researchers.

Jones had evidence of three seasons, but he needed one more. Perron found evidence for the fourth one and gave it to the Center for Negro League Baseball Research, which forwarded it to Major League Baseball. Within a week, Jones, 83, began receiving money. He can receive a lifetime total of up to \$100,000 through the monthly pension.

"That's the reason why I'm getting my pension today — he did it," said Jones, who lives in Hamilton, Ohio. "He's done so much for all of us."

Perron's fascination with the Negro leagues began in 2007, when the card company Topps released a set that included several players from the alternative leagues for black players before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947. Perron wrote to the featured players, requesting autographs, and one player enclosed his phone number with his response.

"He gave me his teammate's phone number, and his teammate gave me another guy," Perron said. "They started asking, 'Do you know if this guy's still alive?' I ended up going online and going through old newspaper articles, looking for names and information on players."

Tracking them down was not easy. The Negro leagues, which started play in the early 1900s, had officially folded by the 1960s, and information on many players remains limited. Even when Perron did find the right number, some were not thrilled to be contacted by a teenager.

"I've had guys get mad, hang up on me," he said. "I've had guys tell me they're dead when they're not."

But his perseverance started to pay off. Through him, some players started to reconnect with the game they so loved, and with old teammates long lost to time.

Soon, players began calling him. Perron's mother, Lauren, often had to ask them to call back because Cam was at school. He sent them baseballs to autograph, and they requested copies of photographs and articles he had tracked down. Perron designed and printed informal baseball cards to send to players who never had any, and he contacted card companies to have some professionally made.

"It's almost like a nonprofit," said Perron, who paid for postage by selling cards at shows. "I take money out of my bank account so I can do this."

At age 13, Perron called and introduced himself to Dr. Layton Revel, executive director of the nonprofit Center for Negro League Baseball Research in Dallas, which locates former players, collects artifacts, and records oral histories. That call quickly grew into a professional partnership.

"Cam now finds more former ballplayers than anyone we have working with us," Revel said. "He's developed some very rich friendships and is very well respected amongst the ballplayers for the research he's done." He added: "Cam's research has been instrumental in getting these players their pensions."

Perron met Paul Jones in person last June, at the annual reunion in Birmingham. Perron and his mother attended at Revel's invitation, and Perron had the opportunity to put faces to already-familiar voices.

"It was just this big rush of joy," Perron said. "Some of the guys were almost crying with happiness that we'd finally met."

Perron estimates that about 15 of the more than 50 players in attendance were there because of him — and his contribution did not go unnoticed. On the last night, he was presented with an award for his research.

In January he received another award at the Arlington Martin Luther King Day celebration. Though he is honored by the recognition, Perron said he feels rewarded simply by connecting players with one another.

"I'm just this kid that calls them up," he said. "I think it's an experience for them when I get them in touch with one of their teammates that they played with 60 years ago."

For most of those players, the human connection is priceless.

"He comes up with some things that you don't even remember," said Gilbert Black, 76, who played for the Indianapolis Clowns in 1956. "My baseball past was only a distant memory for me until Cam called me, and then it became important."

They first spoke two years ago, when Perron called Black to ask about his playing career. Perron recently arranged for Black to attend an autograph-signing event in Woburn this May.

"He's done me a great deed," said Black, who lives in Litchfield, Conn. "I feel very close to him, even though I've never met him. I think he's amazing."

Perron hopes to meet more players at this year's Birmingham reunion, which he is helping to coordinate. It runs

May 30 to June 2, and this time he will attend by himself, as a colleague and friend.

“At the reunion, you’ll have ballplayers 70 years old, a 16-year-old still in high school, and a 60-year-old doctor from Dallas,” Revel said. “When we’re there, there’s no difference in age. We’re all on the same playing field.”

Still, Perron’s work has an expiration date.

“It’s a piece of history that’s overlooked, and I want to preserve it, but I can’t do it forever,” Perron said.

“Everyone’s going to be gone within 20 years.”

He does not know where he will redirect his talents when that day comes — after all, his current priorities also include the SATs and college applications — but for now, he is content with his place in history.

“Everyone likes the new, current players,” Perron said. “I like the old guys that no one really knows about.”

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