

THROUGH THE YEARS

AFRICAN - AMERICAN HISTORY IN CHAMPAIGN COUNTY

Fall 2007

Play Ball, Part II

"During the 50s and the mid-60s, this community was tied to the sport. Eagles Park was bordered by Bradley Avenue, Romine and Beardsley...it was a big old field. The Black community was so supportive of the Champaign Eagles".
- J.W. Pirtle

The Champaign Eagles team was one of the hottest teams in the Eastern Illinois League during the 1950s and 1960s. Sundays at old Eagles Park were something of a social occasion and the team's away games would draw a caravan of cars. Fans everywhere loved to watch the Eagles play. Newspaper articles noted their habit of making a strong bid for the championship in the final stretch of the season. They were good competition. The Eagles were the League Champion in 1957; shared that title with Buckley and Gifford-Flatville in 1959; with Buckley and Royal in 1960; and finally with Rantoul in 1966. They were Tournament Champs in 1960.



The Eagles were Eastern Illinois League Champions in 1957.

Left to right top row: Charles Kent, Sr., Roberto Lavador, James Lee, Jim Freeman, Robert Jordan, Pablo Labrador, Wardell Jackson, manager Middle row: Elsa Utley, J.W. Pirtle, Al Shelton, George Moreland, Jr., Isaiah Monrow, Wilbur Adkinson Front row: Billy Chambers, McGee, Terry Kizer, Hank March



Wardell Jackson formed the Eagles in the late 40s and they played at Illinois Field located at Wright and University Avenue. The Eagles competed in the Illinois-Indiana circuit in 1951 and debuted into the Eastern Illinois League in 1952. Jackson acquired land to develop the baseball diamond that became known as Eagles Park. From the December 1975 issue of *The Spectrum* covering an oral interview with Jackson, they quoted him as follows, *"I didn't have no pets. Each day I would go to practice to see who was playing the best ball. I didn't decide who was going to play until the last practice before the scheduled game. Just because a player did good in one game, that didn't mean that he would play the next game. If he was doing bad in practice, or didn't show up, I would play whoever looked good in practice"*.



**From Courier,
August 5, 1957**

Eagle Walt Moore leaps for throw to third base which enables Royal's Wayne Osterbur to slide in safely in the second inning of the Eastern Illinois League game at Eagles Park Sunday. But Osterbur over-slid the bag and was out on a tag by Moore. The Eagles eventually won, 5-4.

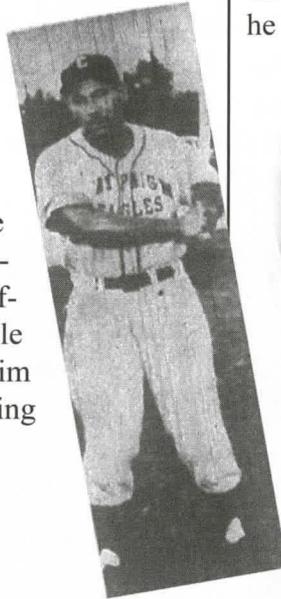


From the Courier, August 19, 1957

Champaign's Colts had a hard time getting Villa Grove's Chuck Thomas out Sunday - he made four hits during the Grovers' 14-3 Eastern Illinois victory at Eagles Park but here he is being retired by Colt Ebby Cook at third base.

**From Courier,
August 10, 1959**

Cliff Adkinson's ninth-inning homer kept the Eagles alive Sunday and led to their extra-inning win over the Champaign Knights. The victory enabled the Eagles to tie Buckley and Gifford-Flatville for the Eastern Illinois title - and Adkinson's homer also enabled him to share a three way tie for the EI batting title at .500.



J.W. Pirtle



"I grew up in Dyersburg, Tennessee. Everybody played baseball for 20 miles around....if there was a little filling station, they had a baseball team. Everyone wanted to play baseball....I played for the Champaign Eagles from '55 to '67 or '68. I could hit the ball pretty good." J.W. Pirtle had played the 1949 season with the New Orleans Eagles. The next year he started out with the Memphis Red Sox, both members of the Negro Baseball League.

Picture from Courier, August 10, 1959



"I was born in Cleveland, Tennessee. At the age of 9, I moved to Knoxville. Back in those days, it was baseball every Sunday....I started playing baseball because my uncles and cousins all played. I started playing with adult teams when I was 16. We traveled from Cleveland, Tennessee to Chattanooga to Athens playing baseball. That was my dream. The coach asked me to pitch, but I wasn't a pitcher - I was a regular third baseman because I liked to hit - pitchers don't hit. I pitched a game and threw a no hitter and after the game was over with, this black guy came out of the stands and he

said the Chicago Cubs wanted to sign me to a contract - his name was Buck O'Neil." (Buck O'Neil had a long career with the Negro Baseball League, was hired as a scout for the Chicago Cubs in 1956 and became the first African American coach in the Major League with the Cubs in 1962.) "During my stint with the Chicago Cubs, I went to Carlsbad, New Mexico, Albuquerque, and then to Morristown, Tennessee. I was released and returned to Knoxville - no other goals - my dream was to be nothing but a baseball player. I came back to Knoxville - a broken heart - because I hadn't made the Cubs team".

- Ernie Westfield

continued on page 3

Ernie Westfield later pitched in a game with the Birmingham Black Barons in Smoky Stadium and beat them. They asked him to move to Birmingham, Alabama, and he became their Number One pitcher.

Wardell Jackson purchased the Birmingham Black Barons and the Philadelphia Stars (both Negro League teams) in 1960 and he brought Westfield to Champaign to pitch for the Eagles in 1961.

In 1962, Westfield was one of three Champaign Eagle players selected for the 12th annual All-Star team by the Courier. The other three were Rochelle Broom and Charles Hursey. Westfield didn't make it as a pitcher, however, he made it because of his hitting. He was the league's batting champion that year. Westfield was again honored by the Courier in its annual selection in 1966 along with fellow Eagles Terry Thomas and Barry Moore.

Wardell Jackson was near fatally shot in 1969 and after spending a total of twelve months in different hospitals, he returned home partially paralyzed and in a wheel chair. Charles Hursey, his assistant manager, took over as manager of the Eagles for the 1970 season. The Eagles struggled, however, to get the monetary backing they needed and the team dissolved after the 1970 season.

Please help us identify these players.

The Champaign Colts, under the management of Eddie Glover, joined the Eastern Illinois League in 1956. The Colts had made an application to play but had previously been denied when the Commissioners decided to limit the number of teams. The vacancy that allowed them to join arose when the Tolono baseball team determined that they were not going to be able to field a team.

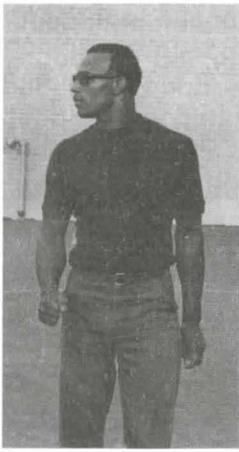


Photo courtesy of Hester Suggs



Eddie Glover on right

This was a return to the Eastern Illinois League for Glover and the Colts. They had played between the years 1940 and 1949 and were the Eastern Illinois League Champions in 1941. Glover was the only carry-over from the old Colts however; practically all of his new players were young graduates of the Little League, Jaycee teams, and the Teen Age Leagues in Champaign-Urbana. The Colts played from 1956 through 1960.



Bud Johnson - "After the Champaign Eagles dissolved, Eagles Park deteriorated into a dilapidated fenced in garden of weeds. There had been a noticeable lack of family sports entertainment or sports participation in the black community. This was due in part to the escalated gang activity and partially due to the city's lack of funding for recreational activity in the north end of Champaign. I was hired as Assistant Director of

Douglass Center and my role was to generate recreational activities and opportunities for youth (teens and pre-teens) and adults (men and women). We began with a softball league for youngsters; I think the ages of the boys were about 10-13. We had little or no money for basic equipment or uniforms. I can remember gathering the kids up on Saturday mornings to scavenge the neighborhood on a newspaper drive or tin can collection to raise funds to purchase gloves, balls and bats, and T-shirts. Shortly thereafter, we began both a women's and men's softball league which ironically, included a team comprised of recreation graduate students from the University of Illinois known as "The Nervous Recs." There were games played on alternating nights, nearly every day of the week. We would occasionally invite visiting teams from Danville and surrounding areas to compete in an all-star game. I remember on one occasion, we were pleased to have Billy "White Shoes" Johnson, of the Houston Oiler's football team here visiting his in-laws. He participated with the Douglass Center All-Stars. "White Shoes" revealed later that had he not received a professional football contract, his second career would have been professional baseball".

"The highlight of the weeklong activities in the park was the Sunday evening radio talk show, hosted by Ernie Westfield, in which I was afforded the opportunity to recap the preceding week's sports scene on the airways. I think the majority of the softball fans looked forward to it....The overall revitalization of the Douglass Park's softball sports program evolved out of the necessity to provide wholesome family entertainment. It was truly a labor of love".



"When I came here, I couldn't walk down the street - kids heard I could throw the ball and they just wanted me to throw it. After that I was sort of in a dual role, because I was playing softball at Douglass Center too. I was playing softball and baseball. When I discovered that black kids were not playing primarily because a lot of

baseball fields were no longer in the black community, I bought an old truck. I picked up players like Tracy Parsons and I would haul kids out to Prairie Field to play baseball. I also took some kids out to King School and worked with them before they went out in that area. When the coaches saw them play, they wanted them".

- Ernie Westfield



Tracy Parsons, back row second from left

"Ernie (Westfield) was an adult figure - a role model - for the young boys. We looked up to and admired him. He was instrumental in my development and it was an important time for all the kids in the neighborhood. Baseball built a sense of team and neighborhood for us - togetherness. We played all white teams in all white neighborhoods. I learned real life lessons, like how to handle conflict and how to handle disappointment. I learned to channel my energy to the baseball field. We still have a sense of camaraderie. Many are doing well professionally and personally and I believe it started at that time period in our lives.

- Tracy Parsons



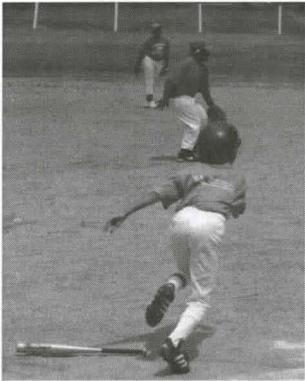
I first played with the Boys Club when I was 13....The Boys Club was right around the corner from our house and it was very important to me.

I was always able to do the things I wanted to do growing up in the Boys Club....

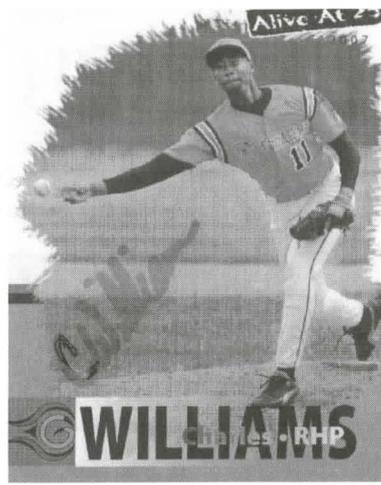
You represented not only your family, but the Boys Club as well....A lot of that has to do with what I do now - someone helped me. I need to try to help someone else.

In the early '90s, people were complaining about the area (Douglass Park) being run down and corrupt with young kids causing problems. We decided that we shouldn't just complain so we began cleaning up the area and invited kids to come play baseball. We named the teams after early Negro League teams. It started growing. The (Champaign) Park District helped with fixing up the field. Kids became more respectful. People began taking better care of the area and they were no longer afraid of being outside....You don't just see us in the summertime. We go to schools and do a lot of things in the area. We don't plan on stopping - it's the consistency. It feels like family.

- Peter McFarland



Each year, First String organizes a league that gives children from northwest Urbana and northeast Champaign the chance to interact with children their own age and adults who are positive role models. During the games, the ball field comes alive with activity as the community comes out to share in the game.

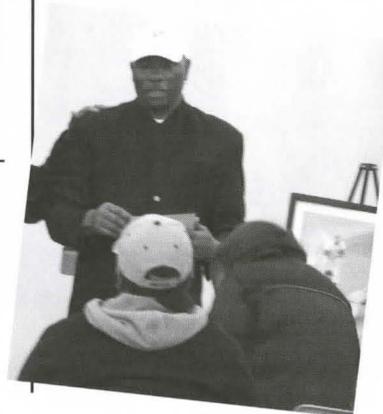


My history with baseball began with my dad. My dad coached - and his sister coached in East St. Louis. I was never a baseball player...but I have a daughter, Maureen, that loves baseball.... so, the grandchildren picked up the baseball connection.

My daughter played baseball...She is very aggressive in sports and fortunately, C.J. (her son) loves baseball....He played T-ball and has progressed through all the levels...And, of course, C.J. doesn't want to do anything but baseball. He got a four-year scholarship, but decided he didn't want to stay because the coach wanted him to play another position and he wants to pitch".

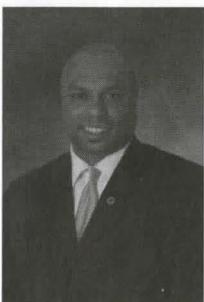
"Ernie has encouraged C.J. The fact that Ernie takes time to talk to C.J., to call him is important. He has Ernie's cell phone number and he knows he can call Ernie at any time and Ernie will check on him periodically. He is a role model for him - someone he can actually touch - talk to and connect with as a minority role model. C.J.'s dream is baseball, but I've told him he has to determine what he will do until that comes along".

- Alicia Lowery



"When you make it, you have to return the favor. That's what I'm trying to do. Sports gives you a drive.... teaches you teamwork and that you can't quit. Baseball taught me that you lose sometimes and you win sometimes, but you stay in the game".

- Ernie Westfield



First String is in a unique position. First String plays in their neighborhood - it is home. They use sports as a vehicle for motivation and educational success. Baseball is as much intellectual as it is physical - strategy as much as physical performance - the right decision at the right time.

- Tracy Parsons

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Please help us identify these players.



Photo courtesy of Hester Suggs

Note:

C.J. Williams returned to Jackson State University in Mississippi on a baseball scholarship and is currently a pitcher on their team. He will graduate in May with a Bachelor's Degree in Psychology.

The Through the Years newsletter is a semi-annual publication of the African American Network of the Early American Museum. The Doris K. Hoskins Collection and material at the Urbana Archive provided the foundation for our work. Co-Editors: Cheryl Kennedy and Alicia Lowery. If you live in Champaign County and would like to be on our mailing list, please call 217-586-2612 or email ckennedy@ccfpd.org. We thank the National Council of Negro Women for their help with family connections.

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