

JUDY JOHNSON: DELAWARE'S INVISIBLE HERO

*Ellen Rendle*

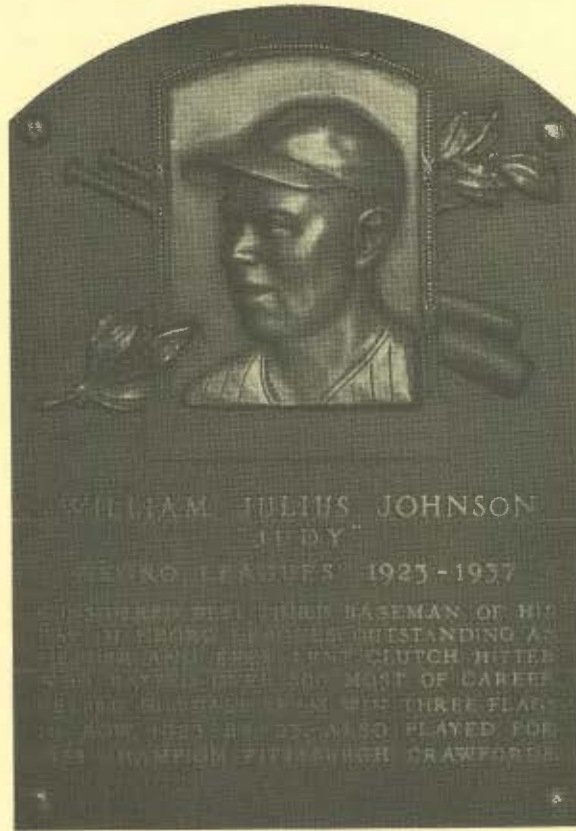
*Wilmington, Delaware*

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## LOOKING BACK

Judy Johnson beamed with pride and joy as he and his wife, Anita, sat in Bowie Kuhn's office, at the head of a long table with the Commissioner of Baseball. When they heard Kuhn compare Judy to Brooks Robinson, they felt they might burst with happiness. "When Joe Richler told me I had been picked, (for induction into



*Plaque of Judy hanging in the Hall of Fame Museum. (Courtesy of the National Baseball Hall of Fame.)*

the Hall of Fame) well, if you had cut off my feet, I think I would have floated right up through the roof. I felt so good I could have cried."<sup>1</sup> Judy's path to the Hall of Fame was an unlikely one: that he ever sat in the commissioner's office is a remarkable story.

Certainly when he played baseball, that office was the last place Judy thought he would ever be. As a professional, the game he played was divided along color lines. Only white men played in the major leagues. Because his skin color excluded him from the majors, he played in a nearly invisible league. In the Negro Leagues players received low pay, no media coverage in the newspapers, and miserable living accommodations on the long roads between games. These conditions characterized the Negro Leagues just as their exceptional play set them apart from the rest.

First on the sand lots of Wilmington, Delaware, then in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, Johnson played his way into baseball's greatest company, the Hall of Fame. Gaining experience as a young man he never doubted that he was good. He knew his skills were commensurate with the big leaguers. He also knew that he loved the game as much as anyone could. But why he never received national recognition while he played, and how he came to receive its greatest honor fifty years after his career ended is a wonderful, sometimes heart-wrenching, yet ultimately triumphant story.

Judy's success cannot be told by recounting only his achievements on the baseball field. Judy was more than an exceptional baseball player. He decided as a young man what mattered most to him in life and lived by his own high standards—honesty, love and a desire to show respect and to find joy in every living thing. A natural role model, Judy's life both on and off the field stands as a testament to the enormous good one man can do if he lives wisely and sincerely.

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## WILLIAM JULIUS JOHNSON

Born to William and Annie Johnson in Snow Hill, Maryland, a beautiful tiny town along the Sassafras River, William's birthdate is October 26. Though, like many of his contemporaries who did not want to lose their spot on the roster, or the confidence of their teammates as they aged, there is some confusion about what year he was born in. Johnson himself gave both 1899 and 1900.

William was the third and last child in the family following John, Jr., known as Johnny and Mary Emma. As a young boy, William probably saw many negro teams as they barnstormed through the Eastern Shore. His father was a very athletic man, and over the years coached local baseball teams. But his daddy was not planning a life of baseball for his youngest son. Mr. Johnson had a license to train boxers and wanted his son to become a prize fighter.



Above, Annie Johnson, and (right) William Johnson, no dates. (Courtesy of the Bruton family.)

Shortly after 1905 the Johnsons left Snow Hill for Wilmington, Delaware. Apart from his job at the shipbuilding company, Mr. Johnson was athletic director for the Negro Settlement House there.<sup>18</sup> The Johnson backyard was a fitness center with everything one would expect to find in a gym including monkeybars, barbells and plenty of other equipment. William and Mary Emma remember learning tricks that they saw in the circus. Johnson remembers:

*Daddy kept telling me to be a prize fighter but I couldn't fight a lick. Daddy kept telling me I could fight, but I knew he was wrong. My dad made my sister my sparring partner. She was twelve and I was about eight or nine. Well my daddy said, 'Son, don't hit her in the face or chest or in the stomach,' so I had no place to hit her. We'd train every night and we were using horsehide gloves just as hard as this wall. She would bang me and bang me but one day she dropped a glove. She bent over to pick it up and I kicked her right in the pants. My daddy whipped me but said I wasn't for fighting.*<sup>19</sup>

Because of segregation, Mr. Johnson did not see a future in baseball for his son, but it was what William loved more than anything else.

When he was not at Frederick Douglass School, Johnson remembers playing baseball morning, noon and night. "It was my first love." It was just a short walk out the back yard from the Johnson's house on the west side of Delamore Place over to the park at Second and DuPont streets, the park that now bears his name.

That park was where William got his first taste of the game that would become more than a way of life for nearly eighty years. In the early 1900s that part of town was on the very outskirts of the city. "A gentleman lived a few blocks away, who had cows and horses that grazed there. We would clean it off. When we came home from school, we'd play there until dark."<sup>20</sup>

Among Johnson's best friends was a boy from the Italian section of town just to the north. The two boys shared a passion for baseball and after their games, went to each other's house for dinner. It was on integrated fields then that they learned the game but it

would not always be so easy. Johnson's longtime friend, Handy Hayward remembers playing on integrated teams. Skin color was not as important to the young players then as talent was. "If you were good," recalls Hayward, "you were invited to play on most any team."<sup>21</sup> Boys would walk for miles to play in games at Buttonwood, New Castle, Eden Park at Second and Adams streets, at Fourth and Church streets, Rockford Park and Marshallton.<sup>22</sup>

Johnson never forgot his first uniform. His mother sewed a big blue "D" on the shirt for him. He was so proud.

*I was strutting around in it at 5:00 a.m.—we didn't play until 2:00 p.m. My first glove was my father's. He used to have a*



*Photograph of a very young and dapper William J. Johnson. (Courtesy of The Bruton family.)*

baseball team called the Royal Blues; they played only on Saturdays. I could hardly hold the glove on my hand there was so much dry rot. I kept it until it just about fell apart. Finally he bought me a glove; it looked like a dress glove alongside the ones they use now. The first baseball shoes I had, I bought spikes and had a shoemaker put them on a pair of shoes of mine. They were metal spikes. I thought I was the big-leaguer then— few boys had baseball shoes. But I forgot to take the heel off first, and he nailed the spikes to the heel. I had to walk tipped forward.<sup>23</sup>

Baseball meant everything to William. During his school years at Howard High School, he found every way possible to get near or in a game. He convinced his teachers to let him out of school early so he could be scorekeeper for a six-team league whose games started before school let out for the afternoon. Paid ten cents per game, he confessed he usually spent five on a fishcake sandwich.<sup>24</sup>

Sunday afternoon baseball games were very popular in Wilmington, especially with the black community. The entire city seemed to rally around them. Coming straight from church, mothers, daughters, fathers and sons, young and old alike went to the games to cheer on their favorite player. As Johnson began to make a name for himself, he attracted many local fans. Eventually he would be legendary for his feats on the fields around town.<sup>25</sup>

Johnson dropped out of school during his third year at Howard. He started work at the docks at Deepwater, New Jersey in 1918, commuting back and forth from Wilmington.

*High School wasn't for me either. I never finished at Howard High. Since my father couldn't afford the clothes I liked, I got a job for \$3.00 a week... We had to work hard. I thank God for it because it made me a better man.*

But clothes were not quite as important to him as playing ball.

*One thing I worked hardest at was playing ball. When I became good sized I joined a Wilmington team called Rosedale. We played on Saturdays against other white and negro teams from*

*around town. All of us, white and black played every chance we got at the ballpark at Second and DuPont. People came early with crates to sit on. By game time they'd be packed around that square field. We were dedicated. You'd always have a good crowd and we'd pass the hat around to get a couple of balls for the next game.<sup>26</sup>*

Newspaper announcements, posters and word-of-mouth spread the news about upcoming games. Johnson quickly began his rise up the ladder of negro baseball.

*I thought I was pretty good. There were a lot of fine ball players in Wilmington then, like Eddie Stone, he was a home boy, like some of the other really good players, he just didn't want to leave Wilmington and travel. But I figured I was the best around, and I just wanted to move up. So I signed with the Stars in Chester. They were a good team with a good park, and I was paid a couple of dollars and trolley fare for each game.<sup>27</sup>*

Shortly after joining the Stars, the manager of a professional Philadelphia club called the Hilldale Giants asked William if he would play with them on Thursdays and Saturdays at their field in Darby. Naturally, Johnson accepted the offer. On Sunday the team donned a different uniform and played in Atlantic City as the Bacharach Giants. Soon Johnson was playing three days a week, earning \$5.00 per day. "In those days that was really good money."<sup>28</sup>

There were only eleven men on the Madison Stars of Chester whose league played in small towns around Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Farm team players today lead a spartan life, but for the players on the Stars, it was more austere. The team offered its players no arranged transportation, accommodation or meals. Many small towns in the late 1910s did not have a restaurant or hotel that served African-Americans. If their game ran late and the players missed the last ferry back to Philadelphia for the night, they waited at the slip until the first ferry out in the morning. The oldest player on the team made an impression on Johnson. He went by the name of "Greasy" Swigot. "He never bought a pair of baseball shoes in his

life. If you threw away a pair of old shoes, he'd wear 'em! He wore size ten and a half but if they were a size six, he'd cut the toes away and play in them like that. But he could hit the ball." Eccentric or not, the players wanted to collect their pay for their efforts. "Money was on everybody's mind." Johnson laughs. "We used to call Saturdays and Sundays our 'get away' days because whenever it looked like it was going to rain, we all prayed for those clouds to 'get away' so we could make some money."<sup>29</sup>



*Johnson takes a break with his brother Johnny (left). (Courtesy of the Bruton family.)*

One trip to a small coal town in Pennsylvania stuck in Johnson's memory for the remainder of his life. The children of the town had never seen African Americans before. And Johnson's natural attraction to youngsters made him want to go talk with them. "We were regular freaks. When we played in one town we went for dinner and kids were around the front of the hotel just as though it was a circus or something. And if you walked up to some of those kids they would run away from you. They had never seen a Negro before."<sup>30</sup> All in all the Madison Stars gave Johnson a well-rounded education that he could never have received at Howard High School.

Johnson thought his waiting for the big time was over when Ed Boulden's famous Hilldale Club asked him for a try-out for the regular team. But unfortunately, because he was too small, he did not make the cut. He was encouraged to try again after another year. Instead, he returned to the Madison Stars where he played through the 1920 season. Still a wiry man and weighing only 145 pounds, Johnson stood 5'11" tall. Knowing he was so close to making it big made Judy work like never before. "I worked hard all winter, I would get anybody to hit me a ball, or have a catch." It paid off, in 1921 Johnson earned a spot with the Hilldales.<sup>31</sup>

## LAYING ASIDE HIS GLOVE

It was time for Judy to retire and return home. Loretta was nearly ten years old, and both she and Anita were glad to have him back home. In 1934 they purchased a two story home in Marshallton with a spacious yard for Judy's garden and fruit trees. It was not an easy transition from traveling baseball player to stationary husband and father. Determined to make it work, Judy set about to adjust, at times with more success than others. Loretta remembers asking Anita why her dad seemed so quiet and sad. Anita answered her with the only words she knew to be true, "Daddy misses baseball." And so it was. The saying goes that there is no taking baseball out of a player, there being no division between man and player, and that is what Judy found to be true. He would always be a player.

He quickly became coach for a local team the Alco Flashes where he met and befriended the young bat boy, Gill Jackson. Jackson was only a teen at the time and remembers Judy as a very demanding coach for the players. "Everything came so easy to him, and he thought it should be that way for all the players." He admired Judy's style and passion for the game. "He was a no-nonsense fellow, always demonstrating how plays should go, teaching by showing." Judy took Gill to many Phillies games, teaching Jackson all the while about the game. Years later, after college, Jackson became a coach himself, following in his friends footsteps. As coach for the Dunleith Junior High School team in Wilmington Jackson remembers that there was too little money for uniforms for the team. He let the players take what uniforms they could afford, and wore physical education clothing to their games. Judy, upset that the coach did not look like a part of the team, let Jackson wear the Milwaukee Braves uniform he had worn as scout for the team. "That's the kind of man he was."<sup>79</sup>



Judy had a number of jobs in retirement from baseball. He was a supervisor at Continental Can Company. He and his brother Johnny bought and operated a variety store in Millside for a while. He drove a school bus for a while and worked at Mullin's Department Store in security where he met another great friend. James Knott did not know that Judy was a great ballplayer until years after they met, he loved Judy because he was a soft-spoken, gracious, kind-hearted friend.

Baseball was never far from Judy's heart. He showed up at local games and kept in touch with old teammates. Shortly after World War Two ended, more serious rumors began to circulate about African-American men making it into the majors. The war started a push for recognition of African Americans as equal citizens. President Roosevelt's administration was the first to seek the advice and participation of blacks, giving rise to still higher hopes. But as of yet, no rumors could be validated.

Finally, in 1947 the color-barrier crumbled to the ground. Branch Rickey, manager of the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson to play in the majors. Robinson, a gentleman and great player was a perfect choice for the job. In his rookie year, he outshone all his fellow rookies and captured Rookie of the Year honors. His disposition and grace in the face of trying circumstances paved the way for more African-Americans to be signed in the next few years. Robinson's signing led to the demise of the Negro Leagues. With players in the majors, gate receipts dropped at negro league games and players left whenever they had the opportunity. The Negro Leagues were forever defunct by the early 1950s.



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## SURROUNDED BY FRIENDS, BUT ALONE

Completely unprepared for this loss, Judy never recovered from it. Age had taken away his ability to play ball, and now the greatest love of his life was gone. He never understood why he was left behind. For what? At eighty-six years old all he had, except for Loretta and her family, were his memories. Despite his friends' best efforts to cheer him, Judy sat and cried for days on end. He had so many friends, especially in his neighborhood, but also friends like Dallas, who called to talk to him, and Ruly who stopped by, and James and Betty who cooked nearly every meal for him, and Charles who ran his errands and did his banking, and Joe whose family welcomed Judy for Christmas dinner. He could never have asked for more from his friends, they were wonderful to him. They all cheered him up, but it was always fleeting. He missed Anita.

After Anita's death, Judy could still charm nearly anyone. According to James, "when you met Judy, you loved him." In 1986 through the Knotts' Judy befriended a family of three from Lindenwold, New Jersey. Al, his wife Lo and son Joey Copsetta became so fond of Judy that they never missed his birthday or Christmas. Joey called Judy his grandpa, and the family was so enamored of him that they started a little league team in his name in Lindenwold. They even organized a "Judy Johnson Day," complete with a parade featuring Judy, a huge picnic and a game. Judy had a great time, and as he often did, got so excited about the game that in fun, he gave the umpire a "hard time." The umpire, playing along, threatened the Copsetta's that he was getting ready to "throw your Hall of Famer out!"<sup>95</sup>

*News Journal* reporter Matt Zabitka visited Judy in hopes of writing an anecdotal story of Delaware's Hall of Fame baseball star. What he discovered instead was a very lonely, sad man. Zabitka, deeply moved, wrote the article, which he remembers elicited a

great response. Judy had not lost his ability to charm people. Because of the article, Joe Mitchell, young enough to be his son, began to visit Judy, and he fell in love with the old player too. He wondered, how could someone so loving, so warm, so funny and so full of great stories and wisdom, be so lonely. Mitchell knew that Judy had regular visitors, and received phone calls from friends, but still he sensed that Judy was heartbroken and miserable. Once a month or so, the two men sat together looking over old photographs and talking about the Negro Leagues and baseball. Judy had a profound effect on his new friend who even today misses him deeply.<sup>96</sup>

On good days, Judy was chock full of joy and enthusiasm, his ability to make people feel loved and appreciated was the one characteristic everybody who knew him cherished. Ruly Carpenter described being with Judy: "It was just like sitting on your grandfather's lap." No matter how old or young a person was, Judy quickly became their favorite uncle, father or grandfather. Because he touched people so deeply, Judy never went a day without friends. Just when he needed it the most all the kindnesses he had given through the years were being paid back. Loretta, in close touch with a few friends, could rest assured that Judy was not alone.

Early in 1989 Judy suffered a stroke and never again returned home. He lived out the rest of his life at Tilton Terrace in Wilmington. Even though he never recovered enough to speak, Judy's visitors knew what he was feeling. He'd often tear up at the sight of a good friend, or their kind gesture. Judy usually had a baseball in his hand. An earlier newspaper article seemed strangely prophetic. In the article, Judy was quoted as saying: "I'll never get it (baseball) out of me. I guess I'll die with a baseball in my hand. I just love the game." On June 14, 1989, Judy passed away, and with him went one of the great baseball legends of our time. He left behind Loretta, four grandchildren and seven great grandchildren.<sup>97</sup>

In the early 1990s talks about bringing a minor league team to Wilmington began. When it was announced that the Kansas City Royals single A farm team would be moving to Wilmington, many

people felt that the new park would be a perfect place to honor Judy's memory. The team, the Blue Rocks, named after the last minor league team in Delaware (1940-1952) played on Judy Johnson Field at Legends Stadium. Seen from Interstate I-95 just south of downtown Wilmington, the field is a tribute to Johnson. Young men dream on that field today, just as Judy dreamed at the nearby sandlots of Wilmington generations ago. In 1994 the stadium name was changed to honor former Wilmington Mayor Daniel S. Frawley, who died suddenly at a young age.

Ellen Rendle

## JUDY'S LEGACY TO US

It is easy to describe Judy's legacy to baseball. A versatile and dependable player, he gained admiration and respect from players, management and everyone who watched him play. Judy knew the game as well as any man could, and had the skills to do what he had to—offensively, coming up with critical hits when his team needed him he offered steady, fundamentally sound defense, great leadership, both in calling plays and offering support and encouragement to teammates. Many of his contemporaries feel that had he played in the major leagues, he would be considered among the very best third basemen. Judy will always be remembered by baseball.

After his playing career was over, Judy continued to quietly and passionately exert his influence in the baseball world. He coached local teams and attended countless games talking with players, coaches and parents. As both a scout and an enthusiast, if somebody wanted to hear about baseball, Judy never walked away. As a scout he took more time to watch and to offer advice to young players than most scouts. Friends remember Judy becoming very upset when a young man was not working up to his potential. Judy said it was his responsibility to teach and coach as many young players, passing on the knowledge of baseball and life that men like Pop Lloyd, Cum Posey and Connie Mack had passed on to him.

Aside from baseball, there is so much about how Judy Johnson lived that we can appreciate. Despite the hardships he endured because of his race, and maybe because he was forced to endure them, he believed that he should love everyone. He lived in a color blind world surrounding himself with good friends from all races. He certainly regretted never having the chance to play major league ball, but held no one responsible.

Considering this ability to rise above hardships his greatest strength, Loretta Bruton feels we all can learn from the quiet dig-



Judy poses (with Buck Leonard) at an old timers game in Comisky Park, early 1980s.  
(Courtesy of the author.)

nity and honor that her father displayed. His benevolence seemed to swallow up his bitterness and anger, and in its place, allow kindness and generosity.

Judy had a heart full of goodness. He could not tolerate or understand hatred or mean-spiritedness. "He had a determined streak, but not a mean streak," describes James Knott. He never shied away

from saying that something was wrong when it was appropriate to do so. Sports journalist Hal Bodley of USA Today recalls that Judy "had a scowl that could stop a cobra." As kind-hearted as he was, he was stubborn. The Brutons and Knotts tell us that if Judy took offense at something, he'd say so!<sup>98</sup>

Furthermore, Judy kept a special place in his heart for children. Bill Bruton feels that Judy set a fine example of caring for children, and by doing so, caring for the next generation. Judy felt responsible for teaching children right from wrong, and to care for one another. He kept signed balls on his porch, in the trunk of his car, under the counter in his store, or somewhere nearby. Whenever a child came to him, after they had talked, Judy offered a ball. James Knott remembers how Judy handled a group of children waiting for his autograph. "He made them form a line and wait their turn. Whenever he saw a child wearing a ball cap, he'd bend down to see the child's face and ask, 'Who's that under that cap?'" If ever a child, or adult wanted an autograph, Judy took his time to make sure he wrote his name clearly, and made sure he gave the person a kind word to go along with his signature.<sup>99</sup>

He always took time for people, no matter what the circumstances. If you asked for Judy's attention, he gave it to you. Judy kept things in perspective, setting his priorities and never wavering from them. As a player, manager, scout, school bus driver, or Hall of Fame superstar, others came first.

Judy's life shows us the virtue in being strong both mentally and emotionally. Loretta believes that Judy showed us how to accept hardships gracefully. Relegated to a second class citizen at the same time as he was proving himself a first class athlete and gentleman, Judy chose not to complain. He strove to do his best, and, in the end beat the system. His life's journey took him from obscurity to greatness. As a member of the Hall of Fame, his story of strength and poise in enduring hardships, stands as a testament to his character, and the potential in all of us to do the same with our own life. All those who knew Judy personally will never forget him because of his tremendous joy and appreciation for life. James Knott says: "I

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wish God could have arranged to make a whole lot of Judy Johnsons. I don't think he made enough. I think he thought one or two would be enough. He needs so many Judy Johnsons now. If we had some, where would we be?"<sup>100</sup>



*Judy relaxes on the back bumper of a car in his old neighborhood in West Wilmington, early 1920's. (Courtesy of the Bruton family.)*