

Book Review "The Making of Heroes"

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How the 1943 Black Phillies Broke Baseball's Color Line

by Wilt Browning

Alywn Featherston is a nationally recognized expert on military battles, particularly those of the Civil War and World War II.

Now Featherston, a sports writer for more than 40 years, must also be considered an authority on major league baseball history, thanks to his newest book, a novel entitled *The Makings of Heroes: How the 1943 Black Phillies Broke Baseball's Color Line* (Outskirtspress, 300 pages, \$17.95).

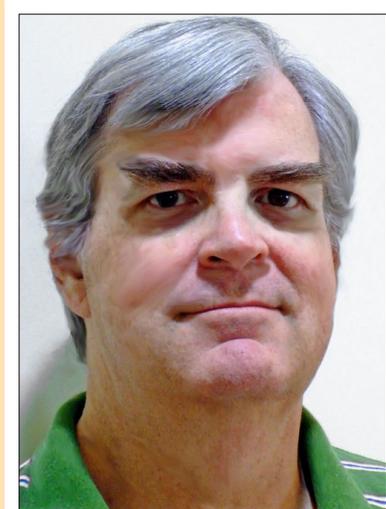
What makes *The Makings of Heroes* important is simply because the tale that Featherston skillfully spins is so believable. In an intriguing way, the old sports writer weaves his team of fantasy, the major leagues' first integrated big league club that includes some of the greatest stars ever of the old Negro Leagues, with the National League teams and the national and world events of the day.

Perhaps more importantly, his work gives voice to the racial prejudices of the day that doomed heroic baseball players such as Buck Leonard, Cool Papa Bell and Josh Gibson to a lifetime of exile from baseball's greatest stage, the big leagues.

All of it takes place four years before Jackie Robinson broke the color line as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In that way, the contrast between what actually happened (Robinson) and what Featherston imagines in his work is starkly different and, if anything, even more interesting. It begs the question of whether baseball and American sports would have been better served in this social transformation by one man (again Robinson), or by a team made up in large part by stars from the Negro Leagues such as the Black Phillies.

Though it all, there is a joyousness of almost seeing these grand disenfranchised athletes in big league uniforms, if only in make-believe.

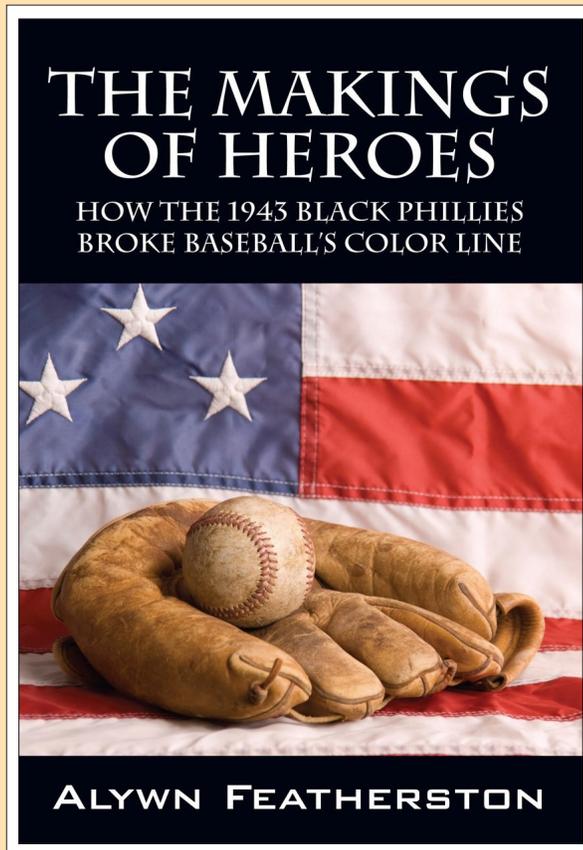
Featherston's premise rests upon an uncertain base historically, Bill Veeck's controversial claim that he had hoped to buy the Philadelphia Phillies prior to the 1943 season. In his autobiography, Veeck alludes to that thought. Veeck suggests it was his intention to stock the Phillies' roster with a mix of white players who could not contend for a pennant and the cream of the Negro Leagues who, Veeck believed, could. They would be managed by none other than Babe Ruth.



Couched in the true events of the mid-war 1943 season, Featherston indeed finds the Black Phillies in a season-long race with the St. Louis Cardinals for the National League championship.

In the novel, Featherston does not sugar-coat the racial divides of the time and deftly explores the common perception that white Americans were believed to have for black citizens, and how Negroes, frustrated by decades of being considered second-class Americans, frequently viewed suspiciously the white world of which they were not a part, especially in sports.

Featherston's choice of players for the imaginary Phillies is intriguing. Veeck would, in the fantasy, sign players who still had something yet to give to major league baseball. And each is portrayed in the book with personalities as different and distinct as their varying talents on the field. Satchel Paige is the Satchel Paige one would expect, and North Carolina's Buck Leonard, the "Black Lou Gehrig," was the quiet great talent we know him to have been. Others whose names appear in



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the pages are reasonably close to the personalities we have come to know, including the alleged racial leanings of Ty Cobb and others.

Perhaps Featherston's strongest character of them all is the legendary Josh Gibson, the great catcher and home run hitter who, by 1943, was considered almost over the hill even in the Negro Leagues. Gibson's pleas for a chance are captivating, and when he is given his opportunity he adds to his legend in powerful, thought-provoking ways while at the same time playing a major role in keeping the Black Phillies apace with the Cardinals.

Featherston takes the Black Phillies through the 1943 season using, for the seven other teams then in the National League, the events that actually happened while so many of the sport's stars were away fighting a war. Team owner Bill Veeck comes off as the genius he was, and Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis is portrayed as the obstinate judge and jury who ruled the major leagues with an iron hand. The behind-the-scenes give and take and one-upmanship by the various non-playing members of major league organizations is almost as appealing as what, in Featherston's fertile mind, took place on the field.

Without question, the author underscores his own understanding of the history of the sport and, in a sense, the country. The details are so true to history and to the players themselves that, through the book's narrator, he even takes exception to the inaccuracies in the movie "Pride of the Yankees." Indeed, *The Makings of Heroes* is worthy of movie consideration.

In final analysis, the book is about pride and teamwork and understanding the game and understanding others. But mostly about pride.

Because *The Makings of Heroes* is based almost entirely upon the names and accomplishments of men who actually played the game in the middle of the 20th century, it rings excitingly true. But it is important to remember in the reading that it is a mere novel.

Isn't it?