



(Written by KCBHS member Larry Lester)

The players called him Skip, for he was the captain of the mother ship that sent more Negro League veterans ashore to the major leagues than any other vessel. His crew included George Altman, Gene Baker, Ernie Banks, Willard “Home Run” Brown, J.C. Hartman, Pancho Herrera, Elston Howard, Connie Johnson, Sweet Lou Johnson, Hank Mason, Satchel Paige, Hank Thompson and Bob Thurman, to name just a few.

John “Buck” O’Neil was nicknamed after the co-owner of the semipro Miami Giants, Buck O’Neal, where he took his first baseball steps. He played briefly in 1937 with the Memphis Red Sox before joining the Kansas City Monarchs and made four appearances in the East-West All-Star classic. A 1944-45 tour in the U.S. Navy shipwrecked his chances for more playing opportunities. O’Neil succeeded Frank Duncan as manager of the Monarchs in 1948 and stayed until 1955. The ex-Navy Seabee guided the Monarchs to league championships in 1948, 1950, 1951 and 1953. In 1956, the Chicago Cubs hired O’Neil as a scout; at the time quite an honor for an African American. In 1962, the Cubs appointed him coach. As a scout, O’Neil discovered future major league stars Lee Smith, Joe Carter and Lou Brock, who named his son after Buck. Some players have candy bars named after them but not Buck. Cartoonist Darby Conley developed a strip called “Get Fuzzy.” It depicts a frumpy dog named Satchel Pooch (for Paige) and a wily, snaggle-toothed cat named Bucky Katt (for O’Neil). “Fuzzy” went into syndication in September 1999. After 33 years as a Cubbie, Buck returned home in 1988 to scout for the Kansas City Royals. Ten years later, he was named Midwest Scout of the Year.

Over the years, O’Neil earned a reputation for calming the rocky waves between players and management. Paige’s daughter Pamela, called O’Neil “a ripple smoother.” His tranquil personality had been Buck’s calling card for decades. Fact is, Buck never met a stranger he didn’t like. In 2001, a Kansas City street formerly known as 17th Street Terrace directly behind the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum was renamed John “Buck” O’Neil Way in recognition of his 90th birthday and contributions to the community. He and I are co-founders of the museum and long-time friends. Buck was an outstanding player, team captain, and dugout intellect. This natural leader with a toothpaste-ad smile, sincere handshake, puffy little Afro and twinkling eyes became my mentor and adviser and schooled my three daughters on the ABCs of life. The soft-shoe mediator never expressed any bitterness or remorse from his pilgrimage to the Negro Leagues. Conversely, in many chats with Buck, he saw every day game as

Christmas, every night game as New Year's Eve, every road trip as a Caribbean cruise, every bus ride as limo service and every meal as a banquet fit for a king. At times, he even proclaimed, "Baseball is better than sex." He was a lover of life and people. Buck had a zest for happiness that was truly unsurpassed. He loved to entertain audiences with many stories. O'Neil rose to national awareness and fame when Lynn Novick and Ken Burns made him a talking head in the 1994 Emmy Award-winning PBS documentary series *Baseball*. When Novick and her film crew visited our home to capture archival images for *5th Inning - Shadow Ball*, she asked if I could recommend former players to interview. O'Neil was at the top of my honor roll and an appointment was set up. Following the interview Novick proclaimed that Buck would be the next Shelby Foote, star of Burns's award winning 1999 PBS documentary *The Civil War*. Novick said her crew would return soon to Kansas City with Burns in tow for a more extensive interview, along with a plea for Buck and Ora (his wife of 51 years) to get an unlisted phone number because of his forthcoming fame. Would the viewing audience get reruns of the lazy, illiterate and simple-minded Willie "Sleep 'N Eat" Best and/or the eye-popping, raspy voiced Mantan Moreland? No! Instead, the "Shadow Ball" segment of *Baseball* eschewed any Jim Crow stereotypes as Buck, with his charming personality, transformed himself into the "Smithsonian" of black baseball. With his newfound fame, O'Neil did the chitlin' circuit, appearing at just about every Negro league function imaginable. The former celery field worker made guest appearances on *Late Night with David Letterman* and the *Late, Late Show* with Tom Snyder. Although this charmer failed to get on *Oprah*, Buck did embrace Hillary Clinton and Laura Bush during honored White House visits.

In his golden years, Buck became a spokesperson for the Kansas City Star, sold used cars for Superior Buick/Cadillac, greeted Price Chopper grocery shoppers, hawked chocolate chip cookies for Midwest Airlines, sold reverse mortgages for J.B. Nutter and peddled hearing aids for ECHO. He even had his own beverage at "Skies," once a rotating restaurant atop the Hyatt Regency in Kansas City. The "Buck O'Neil" concoction included a little Kahlua, a little Amaretto and a little Sambuca with a triple jiffy. This lifetime member of the NAACP was a dapper dresser with manicured fingernails and hands softer than a piano key tickler. Add a clean-shaven, glad face and a winning smile and Buck may have been the most recognizable fashion plate in his heyday. A knight in shining Armani, his talking-threads wardrobe was both conservative Wall Street, and fashionable GQ as he was often seen flashing the prestigious designer duds of a younger generation. During the last three decades of his life, O'Neil chaired the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum Board of the Directors and served on the Veterans' Committee of the National Baseball Hall of Fame. Although a fireside member of the Missouri and Florida Sports Hall of Fames, he certainly would have felt at home in Cooperstown. Despite missing out, he asked the public not to throw a pity party.

In his 1997 autobiography *I Was Right On Time*, O'Neil said, "Some folks are saying maybe I belong in the Hall, too. But I'm honest with myself about it. If people say it, it's probably because of the Ken Burns series, not because they saw me play ball. The truth is, I don't belong. I was a very good ballplayer, but very good ballplayers don't belong in the Hall of Fame. "Great ballplayers do." In late 2006, O'Neil trumped any Cooperstown selection by receiving the highest civilian honor this country offers, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It recognizes high achievement in public service, science, the arts, education, athletics and other fields. Buck's brother Warren accepted on behalf of the recently deceased honoree.

Another lasting tribute came in 2008, when the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum honored the legacy of the late John Jordan “Buck” O’Neil, whose baseball contributions spanned eight decades, with the creation of the Buck O’Neil Lifetime Achievement Award. It is presented by the board of directors not more than once every three years to honor an individual whose extraordinary efforts enhanced baseball’s positive impact on society, and broadened the game’s appeal, and whose character, integrity and dignity are comparable to the qualities exhibited by O’Neil — the award’s first recipient. Baseball’s “Big O” died on October 6, 2006, along with such other notable African Americans that year as Ed Bradley, Floyd Patterson, Lou Rawls, James Brown and Coretta Scott King. The talented man with the rare oratory gift to please any multitude could report like Bradley, deliver punch lines like Patterson, sing like Rawls, bust a move like Brown and quietly sneak in a campaign for equal rights like King.

O’Neil was a rare combination of humanity, strength and fortitude seldom seen in today’s role models. This gentle soul, Buck confronted hate with smiles of forgiveness and led the league of love with “Give It Up” hugs. Like me, so many others are so grateful for our time with Buck O’Neil. May you rest in peace, Uncle Buck.