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'Black Stars' loaded with facts, engaging detail

Tallahassee author Rick Swaine fills in history of black baseball players

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DEMOCRAT SENIOR WRITER

Title: "The Black Stars Who Made Baseball Whole," by Rick Swaine

Publisher: McFarland & Company Inc., 296 pages, \$35

Black History Month may be ending. But there is no better warm-up for baseball season than Tallahassee author Rick Swaine's wonderful new book: "The Black Stars Who Made Baseball Whole."

The book is a well-researched history of the entire wave of black ballplayers who broke major league baseball's color line from 1947 to 1960. Though Swaine devotes a chapter to the iconic pioneer, Jackie Robinson, the book is mainly the story of the next 121 black ballplayers - famous and obscure - who followed through the door Robinson broke down.

Swaine profiles more than 50 of those players individually, as he guides the reader through the integration of baseball, year by year. He lists all of them in one of the four appendixes that make "Black Stars" an indispensable reference source.

First black pitcher in the major leagues? Dan Bankhead, 1947. First black pitcher to win a game? Satchel Paige, 1948. Last Negro League player to appear in a major league game? Minnie Minoso, 1960.

Dozens of other forgotten firsts are scattered through the text. The first black manager for a major league organization? Former infielder Gene Baker, who managed a Pirates Class D team in 1961. The first black pitcher to throw a no-hitter? Sam Jones, 1955. The first black left-handed pitcher? Jehosie Heard, 1954.

But the book has far more strengths than a simple encyclopedia. This is the second book for Swaine, a retired state government finance officer and longtime member of the Society of American Baseball Research. In 2004, he published "Beating the Breaks," the story of 30 baseball players who overcame physical and mental disabilities to play in the major leagues.

As he showed in "Beating the Breaks," Swaine is an adept explorer of baseball's pioneers of diversity.

One of the strengths of "Black Stars" is Swaine's chronological approach to the integration of major league baseball. Most fans know Robinson broke the color line with

the National League's Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 and that Larry Doby became the American League's first black player the following year. But Swaine chronicles the ever-so-slow trickle of black players that followed. It took five years after Robinson before the number of black players reached double digits. It took seven years before a majority of teams (9 of 16) had their first black player. It was 1955 before baseball's premier franchise, the New York Yankees, had their first black player (Elston Howard). And it was 1960 before the Boston Red Sox (Pumpsie Green) became the last team to have a black player.

A second strength is the engaging stories of the early black stars. Swaine writes great primers on all the well-known stars: Willie Mays, Hank Aaron, Ernie Banks, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe and Larry Doby. But he also crafts engaging profiles of players fans may have forgotten (Vic Power, Monte Irvin, Minnie Minoso, Sam Jethroe, Luke Easter) or barely remember (Dave Hoskins, Bob Thurman, Bob Boyd).

Maybe the greatest strength is Swaine's tone: objective but sensitive. He explains how players such as Vic Power and Ruben Gomez suffered for being outspoken athletes in an era when white owners expected grateful subservience. He details how dozens of black ballplayers, not just Satchel Paige, had to fudge their ages to get a crack at the majors. He discusses how many black athletes had to play out of position in order to win a major league job. He makes the case for the Hall of Fame credentials of so-far-ignored players, such as Elston Howard. The result is an inspiring reminder of the challenges faced by baseball's first black athletes and a must-add to the bookshelf of any baseball fan.

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