

Extract from
**DIAMONDS OF DELAWARE AND MARYLAND'S EASTERN SHORE: SEVEN
BLACK MEN OF DISTINCTION**

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William Julius "Judy" Johnson (1900-1989)

Delaware's Folk Hero of the Diamond

William (Judy) Johnson was one of baseball's all-time greats, a product of the old Negro Leagues, and a legend in his time. To most Delawareans, he is a genuine folk hero, in the same tradition of the magnetic and controversial Jack Johnson, the calm but swift Joe Louis, and the "steel diving" John Henry.

Judy Johnson was born October 26, 1900 in Snow Hill, Maryland. Around 1905, his parents moved to Wilmington, Delaware, where he spent most of his youthful years rushing to get his chores done, so he could play baseball. Johnson's own recollection is that he "played baseball morning, noon, and night." Sometimes he and his teammates would pack up their equipment and walk miles to play games at sites in Buttonwood (New Castle), Eden Park, and Marshallton. As a youngster growing up in Wilmington, he had occasional the opportunity to play football and baseball on integrated teams.

Because Judy's father was a licensed boxing coach, he obviously preferred boxing to baseball. But he realized his son's love and passion for the game and provided the necessary encouragement for development.

By his late teens, Judy had already been in the lineup of the Madison Stars of Philadelphia, a semi-pro outfit, and the Chester Giants. He made his professional baseball debut playing for the Hilddale (Upper Darby) baseball team, a charter team of the Negro Eastern League in 1922. Hilddale made it to the first Negro League World Series against the Kansas City Monarchs in 1924. Hilddale lost, but Johnson led his teammates with a batting average of .341. And, until 1929 he had more hits than any batter in the American Negro League. In 1925, however, Hilddale won the series assisted by the ample hitting of Johnson.

Johnson remained a key to the Hilddale team until he departed in 1929 to manage the Homestead Grays (1930) and the Darby Daisies (1931). Between 1932 and 1937, the Pittsburgh Crawfords benefitted from Judy's excellent fielding, consistent hitting, and all-around sportsmanship.

The Sunday afternoon baseball game in Delaware's black community was a familiar sight, and it became common tradition that immediately following church, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, young and old alike, would come well-prepared and anxious to cheer on their favorite team and players. Judy Johnson was a favorite, and his feats on the field became legendary to many of the fans. Although the tradition has decreased in fervor, there are still many black Delawareans who remember those who couldn't wait for "the season" to open, to don their uniforms for a Sunday afternoon game of "stick ball."

The former great Negro League infielder was signed as an assistant coach by the Philadelphia Athletics in February 1954. The first of his race to serve in this capacity for a major league baseball club, Johnson assisted veteran Eddie Yost in coaching first basemen and pitchers. As a scout for the A's, he missed the chance to sign future home run king Hank Aaron from the Cincinnati Clowns because of club finances. In scouting for the Milwaukee Braves, Johnson signed Bill Bruton, who later became his son-in-law. Additionally, he also served as scout for the Philadelphia Phillies.

Although a major portion of his time on the diamond was spent playing for such teams as the Madison Stars, the Chester Giants, and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Judy--like many all-time Negro greats--"never received a chance to compete in the higher echelons of the game." Nine years after Johnson stopped playing, Jackie Robinson became the first black player to compete in the major leagues, when he became a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

At age 75, Judy Johnson achieved his greatest ambition--to be inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame at Cooperstown, New York. Izzy Katzman, staff correspondent for the *Evening Journal*, comments on the February 10, 1975 event:

The one-time great third baseman from Marshallton, Del., was voted into baseball's Hall of Fame by the Negro Baseball Selection Committee. The committee selects players from the old Negro leagues era before the major league color line was broken by Jackie Robinson in 1947.

Judy is the sixth player to be selected by the Negro Committee. Others chosen, in the order named, were Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Buck Leonard, Monte Irvin and James (Cool Papa) Bell.

Delawareans recognize the importance of the contribution of Judy Johnson and pay tribute to his legacy--on the field and off. His consistent performance in the old Negro League was sufficient enough to pave the road for future players such as Jackie Robinson, Roy Campanella, and Jim Gilliam.

William (Judy) Johnson was the first Delawarean to enter baseball's Hall of Fame. He was loved and respected in the community where he lived. His triumphs in life and on the baseball field made him a legend in his own time.

William Julius "Judy" Johnson died in Marshallton, Delaware in 1989. The field at the home of the Blue Rocks baseball team at Frawley Stadium (named after the former Mayor of Wilmington) is known as Johnson Field. A statue in his honor is also at that location. He will always be fondly remembered as "Delaware's Folk Hero of the Diamond."

["Postcard of Judy Johnson Baseball Hall of Fame plaque"](#) by National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, American, founded 1936 is licensed under [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)