

September 13, 2004

Baseball Assistance Team (BAT)
c/o James Martin, Executive Director
245 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10167

Dear Mr. Martin:

Recently, after reading a newspaper article captioned "*Pension Fund Set for Negro Leaguers*", I contacted your office regarding the contents therein, which consisted of Major League Baseball (MLB) providing more than \$1 million in pensions to former Negro League players through a new charitable program.

In further reading the article, I learned that the fund was earmarked for 27 players, whom performed after the advent of Jackie Robinson in 1947. Commissioner Bud Selig – in announcing this news to the nation – stated he was pleased that MLB was able to come to the aid of former players in need. He added that MLB and Baseball Assistance Team (BAT) would conduct the order of business in this new venture, which follows a similar affair set up in 1997 to benefit players who played before 1948. Upon conclusion, Selig conceded the new fund would benefit additional players who spent "parts" of at least "four seasons" in the league starting before "1958".

However, after contacting your office and being told I was required to submit an application – which I did – I eventually received a rejection response concerning the personal information I disclosed in my application that left me completely in dismay. It is hard to reconcile how MLB, an organization that Negro Leaguers pointed in the right direction of becoming Major League calibre after entry, would belittle itself by hoodwinking the American public by using electronic and print media to convey how "benevolent" it presently is towards former Negro Leaguers, following the destruction of this once powerful economy within the Black community.

Despite such catastrophic consequences – a predicament beginning in 1947 – I applaud MLB for the unconditional financial help provided former Negro League players beginning in 1997. Unfortunately, I am unable to say the same about the latter goodwill gesture that – as far as I am concerned – smells of scam. As a former Negro Leaguer – having begun my career in 1950 with the Memphis Red Sox (*two years after Robinson entered the White baseball leagues*) – I am appalled by the line of questioning found in the application I received, which was regarded as "Grant Application" of which I suppose is tantamount to that designed for an ex-convict.

Though I left Memphis after the 1951 season to enter so-called organized baseball – with conditions similar to that Robinson encountered when entering the Dodgers' organization – according to Selig in the newspaper article, the new fund would benefit players who spent "*parts of at least four seasons in the Negro Leagues*", which automatically made me eligible. In short, however, Selig's press release to the nation regarding the latest fund designated as to provide assistance for 27 players did not exemplify the initial effort of considering former Negro Leaguers period.

In reference to the first group to receive pensions – those who played before 1947 – it is my understanding that these players received quarterly pensions of \$2,500 amounting to \$10,000 annually. This was later changed to \$833.33 monthly without duration in time. This I thought was truly genuine, especially since such names as Joe Black – whom I played against in 1950 – along with other players I heard about, worked diligently with MLB personnel to see this project reach fruition.

Conversely, the same cannot be said of the latest proposition regarding funds obtained to supposedly help existing players. Based upon Selig's statement and the disapproval of my application by you and your committee, the plan is saturated with loopholes that deny enumerable former players' participation in its being. If my recollection is correct, of the times I attended The Negro League reunions in Kansas City, Missouri staged by "*The Negro League Baseball Museum (NLBM)*", not only did I see and meet former players before my heyday but also players whom I played with and against, as well as those even remotely associated.

This position on the part of personnel at the "NLBM" demonstrated the true meaning of "*Liberty And Justice for All*". This pattern followed the tradition of the Negro Leagues, whose doors – during its time – were open to all members of Latin persuasion, as well as white owners and promoters, eventually to even patronize women. Unlike personnel at the "NLBM", who – without discriminating – exhausted its list by inviting every former Negro Leaguer to both gala affairs, which included players long prior to Robinson and those who played until the league officially ended in 1960 or 1961. Apparently, MLB and BAT representatives shrunk whatever list they had to 27 players to share in the \$1 million.

Obviously, like in my situation, numerous former players were not properly informed about the plan by neither MLB nor BAT. My knowledge of it stemmed from me reading the article published in the *Belleville News-Democrat*, a local newspaper, dated Tuesday, May 18, 2004. This led me to call your office regarding its authenticity. Following contact with your office, then after receiving and filling out the application you forwarded – only to hear later that it was not approved because of my income exceeding my expenses, which I felt was quite ludicrous.

This feeling is based on the fact that I am a former Negro Leaguer of the early fifties (*mainly 1950 during a time when 10 teams were yet prevalent*) who not only played with and against an overflow of players – both before and after Jackie Robinson dating back to 1948 up to 1950 – having names the likes of Junior Gilliam, Joe Black, Willie Mays, Ernie Banks and even the venerable Satchel Paige just to name a few – notwithstanding firsts like Willard Brown (*St. Louis Browns*), Sam Hairston and Bobby Boyd (*Chicago White Sox*), Curt Roberts (*Pittsburgh Pirates*), Ernie Banks (*Chicago Cubs*) and Elston Howard (*NY Yankees*).

It is also because I am a player, who – after sustaining a career-ending knee and arm injury during a two-year stint in the Mississippi Ohio Valley League in 1952 and 53 – returned to Hank Aaron's alma mater, the Indianapolis Clowns, in 1955 and with bad knee and arm played the game while originating every on-the-field gimmick ever witnessed on the surface of a baseball diamond. From this undertaking, I became known as "*Prince Joe Henry*", baseball's clown prince. As a result of this transformation, notoriety surrounding its showmanship soared to a national high.

I am also a player who, after completion of the 1956 season with the Indianapolis Clowns, decided to sit out the 1957 year only (*in early 1958*) to receive numerous offers from the

Clowns and Ted Rasberry, a stellar Black owner of the Detroit Stars about returning to baseball. The choice was made in favor of Rasberry's team because of it being in the league, which was transformed into Goose Tatum's Detroit Clowns. "Goose", along with Nathaniel "Sweetwater" Clifton, composed the fun-making trio aimed to bolster attendance being that both he and "Sweetwater" were former Harlem Globetrotter Basketball stars: "Goose", the team's original showman as well as a former player for the Indianapolis Clowns and "Sweetwater", one of the first of three Blacks to enter the National Basketball Association (*NBA*), however, after the '58 season, a player who called it quits. But in 1961 while retired, I received a telegram and letter from Tatum and Satchel Paige about performing with them on Paige's team. Although a very humbling experience to be approached for such assignment by two of the world's greatest showmen ever, the offer was declined.

As time progressed from 1959 into the early 90s, an idea shared by several former Negro Leaguers became a reality. It surfaced in the form of a baseball library, better known as the "*Negro League Baseball Museum*" (*NLBM*), located in Kansas City, Missouri. There, housed in this structure, is a history relative to some of the greatest Black baseball players ever to set foot on American soil. Before advent of the NLBM, many of these players were unheard of by the American public, due to being denied the opportunity to showcase their ware, in white baseball circles because of skin pigmentation.

But with the ever-growing popularity of the NLBM, so was that of former Negro Leaguers, whose image became a household icon. Along with this belated fame, rose an industry of books, collectors, hobbyists and an assortment of Negro League memorabilia (*etc.*). Additionally, MLB team owners capitalized on this notoriety by staging games, whereas their respective teams wore uniforms symbolic to names of teams in the Negro League. Often, former Negro Leaguers were in attendance. Sadly, in spite of this financial market, former Negro Leaguers have only received a meager amount of profits.

Though, in relation to MLB, it too has seized the opportunity to project its image in a positive manner to the American public, this by making it appear as if the organization is a financial donor to the cause of former Negro Leaguers. However, other than supposedly collaborating with BAT in securing the initial group of former Negro Leaguers' lifelong pensions, those of who played before Jackie Robinson, by lending the MLB name and logo to groups such as Major League Baseball Properties (*MLBP*) and BAT, during the last two outings in their so-called charitable contributions to former Negro Leaguers, have badly damaged MLB's reputation by misleading the American public.

Prior to Selig's recent statement about \$1 million being targeted for the aid of 27 players in need, in late 1998 a glimmer of financial hope invaded the minds of many former Negro Leaguers, after receiving checks from MLBP in excess of \$300. The checks, purportedly money from royalties due to sales of Negro League memorabilia, was said to be an ongoing event to take place every six months – this move following the initial group's lifelong pensions beginning in 1997. In the year 2000, following dissipation of the initial amount of money, which took place in approximately three additional checks, I – like numerous former Negro Leaguers – received a last check from MLBP amounting to \$3.26. This embarrassing "donation" by MLBP motivated me to cast it aside as useless, only to reactivate it following recent disapproval of my application.

During the years in between, my physical structure deteriorated to merely a shell of what it once represented. Exacerbated by the crippling effects of chronic arthritis – specifically osteo

and rheumatoid – which has reduced my mobility to such an extent that I need the aid of a wheel chair, walker, cane and most recently, Southwestern Bell Communications (*SBC*), my telephone provider, exempted me from having to pay for 411 calls to receive operator assistance, due to the arthritic condition of my fingers, which disallows me to manipulate the telephone directory.

Several years prior to reaching this state, I was introduced to high blood pressure and diabetes, illnesses I experience now along with arthritis. Thankfully, after joining the military in 1946 – the year Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers’ organization – the Veterans Administration has been my primary care provider with me only co-paying for most medications. Otherwise, I would be six feet under in debt. Many former players – who did not receive any of the fund money – having similar problems, were not as fortunate as I, because of not having a military background – those like Sam Taylor and Ira McKnight (*etc.*).

In reference to housing, for approximately 30 years, I have dwelled in a quite fashionable mobile home. Fortunately, until employment retirement in 1991, I was able to keep it intact. Since then – beginning with monthly social security benefits exceeding \$600 along with a pension of \$521.25 – I became a recipient of better than \$1,100 per month. By 2004, due to occasional increases in social security benefits to \$882, in addition to my pension, my monthly income escalated to over \$1,400 per month. Meanwhile, I was compelled to manage money frugally by living down to earth, at times “*robbing Peter to pay Paul*”, while at other times doing without. Because of such a strict budget, I was unable to properly care for my place, as I so desired.

Regarding the “Grant Application”, inserted therein was a section requiring the signature of applicant(s) to grant your organization (*BAT*) permission to investigate the truth about answers given pertaining to bank accounts, real estates and autos, along with being asked to itemize utility bills and medical expenses (*etc.*) – in other words, a conglomerate of requirements so aggravating it would discourage the average subscriber. Reluctantly, I acquiesced.

However, after adhering to your policy – only to have the application rejected due to being so candid – I became very disgruntled, especially when informed that according to your charter and by-laws, I was outside the perimeter of qualifying for that, which was being offered because my income exceeded my expenses. To make matters worse, it was indicated that a minimum of three years was necessary for me to be eligible. Thus, I found myself in a no-win situation, beginning with your statement regarding the “required” minimum of years. By declaring such provision, you contradicted Selig’s position relative to “*parts of at least four years*”. In so doing, I was automatically eliminated.

Additionally, Selig – by stating in his press release that the fund would benefit 27 players, who started before 1958 – substantiated my no-win situation, because during that year I played for “Goose Tatum’s Detroit Clowns” with teammates, such as Art Hamilton and Larry LeGrande, and playing against the likes of Ray Haggins, Charlie Pride, the Country Western singer, and others.

Prior to my teammates while with the Detroit Clowns, I played with guys like Clarence “Choo Choo” Coleman, Lou Johnson and Johnny Wyatt, while playing against others like Mike Smith and Reggie Howard, a Negro League Baseball Historian. Nonetheless, had the year 1958 been included – which would have satisfied the minimum requirement – I would have been denied anyway, due to my income exceeding my expenses.

In summarizing the affair, the Negro Leagues consisted of more than 27 players. Based on your decision regarding me, Selig – in announcing the news to the public about the 27 players and \$1 million – should have said, “*former Negro Leaguers applying for aid needs to be destitute*”. I say this because my yearly income is below poverty level, which renders me tax-free. Moreover, any player having at least one year in the league was as much a former Negro Leaguer as was Robinson, Mays, Banks and Aaron – all Hall of Famers.

As for the 27 players, who started before 1958, neither MLB, BAT nor any other source – without producing evidentiary documents regarding the last vestige of the Negro League – has the authority to determine the ineligibility of players beyond that point. To do so would set back the hands of time. As a matter of fact, before Robinson, denial was based on color. Now, this is over a measly million dollars. The only difference between the two is Blacks being pitted against Blacks, which has created a deep division in this once proud dynasty.

For reasons aforementioned, if by chance I were offered four years compensation at \$833.33 per month, I would readily refuse it. Even if offered \$40,000 in a lump sum, I would do likewise. The offer I would seriously consider is a lump sum of \$50,000, and that would be contingent on if every other former Negro Leaguer received the same – those who produce documented evidence validating their Negro League authenticity. At least this would serve as a rewarding end for every former player, beginning with those who held the Negro Leagues Foundation together until the arrival of Jackie Robinson and up to those who performed under its banner until vestige was wiped away.

Fortunately, many players of the initial group have received \$50,000 and beyond, mainly because of having lifelong pensions. Unfortunately, several have died along the way – the latest being Wilmer Fields – who from my understanding worked with others to bring this project about. Falling in this category were several former players, who grew to become my closest friends; they were: Verdell Mathis, Casey Jones (*a Memphis Red Sox teammate*) Josh Johnson (*who influenced me to play baseball*) Lee Moody (*Robinson’s Kansas City Monarchs roommate*) and Cowan “Bubba” Hyde. This closeness stemmed from the autograph circuit.

In the case of these players, when the plan was initiated in 1997, no time limit was assessed, nor was there any strings attached. Contrarily – almost seven years later – the recent plan – barring application rejection – called for a four-year limit. Had my application been accepted prior without my knowledge of the controversy involved, in all probability I would have acknowledged the aid. Afterwards – due to conditions previously mentioned – I changed my viewpoint to \$50,000. This amount, based upon five years, would shorten the financial gap between the initial group and the existing former players.

It would also void the previous four-year system of application eligibility to receive monthly benefits. Furthermore, it would heal the rift between the 27 players receiving funds and those who have been denied, and – not to omit – by using this method, it would test the sincerity of MLB by wiping the slate clean. In doing so, it could truly be said that MLB is a benevolent donor rather than a pretentious deceiver.

Thereafter, every player receiving money – if spared by death prior – could share it proudly in one small way or another with children, grandchildren and greats, so they – from generations hence – may keep the great legacy alive. This, without doubt, MLB can indeed do.

It must be remembered that MLB at one time was only so-called “Major”. Not until Negro Leaguers became participants did the previous title change. During this era, salaries were so meager that white players like Danny Gardella, Vern Stephens, Mickey Owens and Max Lanier jumped the league to play for more money in Mexico, where Negro Leaguers had been welcomed for years. However, after becoming a part of the so-called “Majors”, the ‘Major League’ title was eventually legitimized, because the best players possible competed.

Once the barrier was broken, the presence of other Black players – offsprings of the Negro Leagues – was felt. One such person was Curt Flood, who – in addition to being a sensational baseball player – was the orchestrator of breaking down the barriers white team owners had established to control white players indefinitely, similar to how Blacks were controlled by whites until the arrival of Abe Lincoln. With the crumbling of this kind of rule, followed by bargaining of free agency, MLB transcended just being “Major”...It became big business.

Therefore, MLB should take a page out of the book of Joe Louis, the late great heavyweight-boxing champion. Louis, while in the military, defended his title on separate occasions for the Army and Navy relief funds without discriminating. MLB can do likewise, because it has the vehicle, which would be to stage a charity baseball game for the benefit of former Negro Leaguers. Subsequently, it could sit back in the sun and bask in its glory.

Otherwise, I am requesting copies of your charter and by-laws and the list of players receiving monthly benefits, the list from which they were chosen and their respective applications. If I am not ashamed to reveal my application nationally, then you should not have anything to hide. I applaud former MLB Commissioner, Fay Vincent, for mailing checks in excess of \$200 to every former Negro Leaguer he could locate, following the publishing of his book relevant to the Negro Leagues. By doing this, he did not discriminate.

Respectfully,

Joe Henry

JH/srm

cc: *Bud Selig, Commissioner - Major League Baseball (MLB)*
Negro League Baseball Museum (NLBM)