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LAUGHING ON THE OUTSIDE THE GREATEST SLUGGER NEVER TO PLAY IN THE MAJOR LEAGUES, JOSH GIBSON, WAS A JOVIAL TEAMMATE BUT, IN THE END, A TRAGIC MYSTERY TO ALMOST ALL WHO KNEW HIM

JOHN SCHULIAN

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Picture this: a boy racing to the barbershop, reveling in his newfound freedom from his mother's hand, his pace accelerated by the thought that a black man's world is beckoning. There are no appointments at Scotty's, just three chairs and a wait that always eats up the clock. But the boy doesn't mind as long as the men are talking, and they always seem to be doing that, these cops, longshoremen and layabouts. Hour after hour they carry on as if there were no place they would rather be than here, where the only other sources of entertainment are a girlie calendar from Jet magazine and a transistor radio with a coat hanger for an antenna.

The men meander from topic to topic--politics, race, sex--and almost everything the boy hears is an education, especially about the action between the sheets. The one subject he feels fit to comment on is baseball. When the men ask him who his favorite players are, he has their names ready: Mays, Aaron, Clemente and, oh yeah, Richie Allen. Got to put Allen in there, because this is Philadelphia, and it's 1964, and he's hitting the ball so hard for the Phillies that he seems more an aspiring deity than a rookie.

Scotty gazes solemnly at the boy from behind the number 1 chair. He's the oracle of the shop, always has something certifiably intelligent to say, and when the boy looks back at him, Scotty seems as old as the blues, though he's probably only in his 40s. "You never heard of Josh Gibson?" the barber asks.

The boy is puzzled. Why, no, he never has. And that is when the deluge begins. At first it's just Scotty, but pretty soon all the men are chiming in with stories. About Gibson hitting more homers than anybody--black, white or whatever. About the way Gibson and Satchel Paige tuned each other up for the greater glory of the Negro leagues. About Gibson dying of a broken heart because he never got a chance to take a swing in the Jim Crow major leagues. About Gibson still having the last laugh because he pounded a home run clean out of Yankee Stadium, and nobody else, not even Babe Ruth himself, ever did that.

As far as the men are concerned, you don't put any other hitter in the same sentence with Josh Gibson, least of all some damn rookie. When the boy finally leaves the barbershop, still trying to wrap his mind around everything he has heard, his one overriding thought is, Man, if this guy's better than Richie Allen....

The boy will check for himself, for that is his nature long before he becomes known as Gerald Early, professor of English and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis and author of an award-winning collection of essays, *The Culture of Bruising*. He has a passion for books and a trust in the wisdom they hold. So he goes to the library and digs out every volume of baseball history he can find. In none of them is there so much as a word about Gibson. All the stories that the men at the barbershop offered up as gospel might as well be vapor.

We know just enough about Josh Gibson now to forget him. It's a perverse kind of progress, a strange step up from the days when the mention of his name drew blank looks. He has been a Hall of Fame catcher since 1972, so that's a start. And you can always remind people that he got the Ken Burns treatment on public television, or that he was a character in an HBO movie, or that he inspired Negro leagues memorabilia harking back to his old ball club, the Homestead Grays. Any of it will do to jog memories. Josh Gibson, sure. Hit all those home runs, didn't he? Then he's gone once more, gone as soon as he's remembered.

It happened again in the last two seasons as Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa woke the long-ball ghosts with their history-making thunder. Suddenly the Babe and Roger Maris were leading a parade out of the mists of the past, counting cadence for Hank Greenberg, Jimmie Foxx and Mickey Mantle. Baseball grew misty over the musty, as only it can, and a grand time was had by all--except anyone who cared about Gibson.

He drew so few mentions that if you didn't know better, you would have wondered if he ever really picked up a bat. His obscurity recalled that of Jackie Robinson, a mystery to far too many African-American ballplayers three years ago, on the 50th anniversary of his shattering of baseball's color line. But Robinson made it to the mountaintop, and in doing so he helped set the stage for Martin Luther King Jr. and Muhammad Ali, *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964. For Gibson, there was none of that, only booze and dope and busted dreams.

Whatever pain he died with lives on in the Negro leaguers who played with him, against him and maybe even for him if they were fortunate enough to walk where he never could. "I almost hate to talk about Josh," says Hall of Famer Monte Irvin, who jumped from the Negro leagues to the New York Giants in 1949. "It makes me sad, for one thing, on account of he didn't get to play in the major leagues. Then, when you tell people how great he was, they think you're exaggerating."

But that's what greatness is: an exaggeration. Of talent, of charisma, of the acts that live long after the athletes we deem legendary have shuffled off this mortal coil. So it is with Gibson, who opened Irvin's eyes in 1937 by hitting a simple grounder so hard that it knocked the shortstop who caught it backward. Then there was the night in McKeesport, Pa., as Irvin's Newark Eagles played Gibson's Grays, when Gibson bashed a homer and the mayor stopped the game until the ball was found, because he'd never seen one hit that far. "I played with Willie Mays and against Hank Aaron," Irvin says. "They were tremendous players, but they were no Josh Gibson."

This is different from Roy Campanella telling one and all that he couldn't carry Gibson's mitt. Or Walter Johnson arguing that Gibson was better than Bill Dickey in the days when Dickey was the benchmark for catchers. Or Dizzy Dean, a true son of the South, wishing his St. Louis Cardinals would sign Gibson--and Satchel Paige--so they could wrap up the pennant by the Fourth of July and go fishing until World Series time. Irvin, with his proclamation, leaves himself no wiggle room. He doesn't just count Gibson among the game's greats; he ranks him first.

To help make his case, Irvin paints a picture of a ninth-grade dropout from Pittsburgh who grew up to become John Henry in baseball flannels: 210 pounds of muscle sculpted on a 6'2" frame, with the speed of a sprinter and a throwing arm that cut down would-be base stealers with lightning bolts. There is no mention of the fact that Gibson was less than artistic behind the plate--"a boxer" for the way he jabbed at the ball, in the estimation of his otherwise admiring former teammate, Ted (Double Duty) Radcliffe. Likewise, Irvin remains silent on Gibson's struggles with pop-ups. Dwelling on shortcomings doesn't burnish a legend, and Irvin knows it. Better to concentrate on Gibson at the plate. "You saw him hit," Irvin says, "and you took your hat off."

You might even use that hat to fan yourself, so overheated are the statistics Gibson left behind: a .354 batting average for his 17 years in the Negro leagues, .373 for two summers in Mexico, .353 for two winters in Cuba. "Lifetime .300 and a whole lot," croons Buck O'Neil, the old Kansas City Monarch with a gift for euphonious phrasing. "He come up there righthanded, kind of a wide stance, didn't take much of a stride. But great shoulders, great wrists. Hit that ball a long way all over."

Gibson's statistical pinnacle was the .517 average he parked in the middle of the Grays' 1943 lineup. It looks like a typo, but The Baseball Encyclopedia says .517 is really what the man hit. He did it using bats and balls that were inferior to the ones big leaguers used. More significant, he did it with people arguing that his average wouldn't be so fat if he had to hit against white pitchers. These same doubters, however, never would have dreamed of belittling the Babe's 60 homers or Ted Williams's .406 season or Joe DiMaggio's 56-game hitting streak because they faced nary a pitcher of color. So maybe Gibson delivered his most important message by batting .412 against the big leaguers on autumn barnstorming tours that the black teams dominated. Says O'Neil: "He wanted to prove he wasn't inferior to anybody."

Gibson made his point with his batting average, then made it again by hitting so many home runs that only the blind and bigoted dared ignore him. If you embrace everything you hear, there were 962 homers--including 75 in 1931, 69 in 1934 and, brace yourself, 84 in 1936. But not even the greatest Gibson advocate will try to convince you that box scores are available to document all the homers with which Gibson is credited. Nor are you expected to believe that every pitcher to whom he laid waste was prime beef. There were too many games against semipro and independent teams, too many games played for the sole purpose of making enough money to get to the next backwater town and the next rocky diamond. That was life on the fringe, where black baseball existed.

Yet when Negro league teams went head-to-head, the competition matched that in the big leagues--and Gibson, predictably, was up to the challenge. Witness his 11 homers in 23 games in 1936, his seven in 12 games in '37 and his 17 in 29 games in '39. "If you factored in what he did in league games over the old 154-game schedule," says Negro leagues historian John B. Holway, "he would have broken Ruth's record at least three times."

It is doubtful that any of the old-timers at Scotty's barbershop knew that or would have put much stock in it if they had. Statistics were for kids and white people. The barbershop regulars wanted something more out of baseball, something they could feel the way they felt a Charlie Parker saxophone solo. "They were like African-Americans everywhere," Gerald Early says. "They connected to baseball in a different way from white Americans. They built stories, they built myths, and those tended to become the sole reality."

Thus the tale of how Gibson, alone among men, hit a home run out of Yankee Stadium. It would have been in September 1930, just months after he joined the Grays at age 18. They were playing the Lincoln Giants when he caught hold of a pitch thrown by the estimable Connie Rector and sent it soaring into never-never land. "I heard it bounced off the subway train," whispers Orlando Cepeda, sounding more like the awed child whose father played with Gibson in Puerto Rico than the slugger whose own plaque is in Cooperstown. Everybody has heard something about the homer--that's the problem. Nobody has ever found a shred of documentation, not even in a newspaper story about the game. The best guess is that the ball landed in the far reaches of the left-centerfield bullpen. Not that saying so will stop anyone from telling the story. Not that anyone will cease using it as a springboard to all the other home runs that fueled Gibson's mythology.

Some homers you can document, like the one he launched out of Forbes Field in Pittsburgh, a feat duplicated by only a select group that includes Ruth and Willie Stargell. Other shots are forever confined to folklore, like the one that supposedly knocked a public-address speaker off the grandstand roof in Washington's Griffith Stadium. "I didn't see it," confesses Don Newcombe, a workhorse righthander for the Newark Eagles and the Brooklyn Dodgers, "but that's what the other players said." Of course they did.

Ninety-seven-year-old Double Duty Radcliffe--nicknamed by Damon Runyon after he pitched one game of a doubleheader and caught the other--is still telling people about an old lady who thought she was safe watching Gibson from the rocking chair on her front porch. "Wasn't no fence in this particular park," Radcliffe recalls. "Someplace in Pennsylvania, I think it was. She's way out there in centerfield rockin' away when Josh hits one. And...and..." Radcliffe erupts in laughter made raspy by a lifetime of cigars. "Josh made that old lady jump."

But of all the stories inspired by Gibson's homers, one resonates most memorably about his life and times. It comes from an article his son, Josh Jr., clipped out of the Pittsburgh Press years ago. In it the retiring mayor of suburban Dormont talked of the day in 1933 that he saw Josh hit a home run out of the local ballpark, over a flagpole and across a street, 470 feet if it was an inch. There were 500 people in the stands, but when they passed the hat, \$66 was the best they could come up with in the heart of the Depression. The umpires and ball-chasers got paid first, and the two teams had to divvy up the \$44 that remained. Josh's share was \$1.67.

It was a life on the run, and in the days when he could get away with ignoring real-world complications, he thrived on it. Didn't matter how many whistle-stops he rolled into in the dead of night, or how many bug-infested hotels he slept in, or how many times he was turned away in restaurants by the same white people who cheered his slugging. Josh was going to be Josh: a muscle-stuffed scamp who teased opposing batters by throwing dirt on their shoes and who menaced pitchers by rolling up his sleeves to show off his biceps.

He never said much, but talking wasn't his game. Hitting was. When he had finished another day's work at the plate, he would climb back onto the bus that was his cocoon. It seemed as if nothing could touch him there. All he had to do to keep his teammates happy was lean out the window when they passed another ball club's bus and say what he always said: "Same team won today is gonna win tomorrow." Hell, it even kept the other ball club happy. This wasn't just anybody needling them. It was Josh Gibson.

They called him "the black Babe Ruth," but he was more than that. He was a 1,000-watt celebrity in the parallel universe that spawned him, and his star shone brightest whenever he rolled into one of the big cities on the Negro leagues' endless caravan: New York or D.C. or sweet home Pittsburgh. He would hit the jazz clubs then, places that were to black players what Toots Shor's was to the Yankees, and he would rub shoulders with Lena Horne, Duke Ellington and the Mills Brothers as if they were old friends. After a while maybe they were, because they let Gibson get up and sing with the band, sing something smoky or swinging in that rich voice of his.

Pittsburgh's hot club was the Crawford Grille, up on what the locals still know as the Hill. Gus Greenlee ran it with the money he made in the numbers racket, and when he branched out into the Negro National League, he bought Gibson. And Paige. And fearsome, hard-hitting Oscar Charleston. They were the engine that drove the Pittsburgh Crawfords in the '30s, and surely they would have lasted far longer if Greenlee hadn't run afoul of the IRS. Then, in 1937, Gibson went back to the Homestead Grays, back where he had started and where he would finish.

There was heartbreak at both ends of his journey, though the focus usually falls on his premature death, at 35. Overlooked too often is what he faced 17 years earlier, when he was just a kid with a big future in baseball and a pregnant girlfriend who became his wife. The former Helen Mason was 17 when she gave birth to twins, then died before she could hold them in her arms.

From that day forward Gibson didn't stop running until he, too, was in his grave. Fatherhood scarcely slowed him. Indeed, it might have done just the opposite. Says James A. Riley, director of research for the Negro Leagues Baseball Museum in Kansas City: "Every time he saw those kids, he thought of his wife." The thought, if you accept Riley's theory, was more than Gibson could bear.

His wife's family fought to change his rambling ways. They were strong Baptists who had been lured out of the South by the clang of Pittsburgh's steel mills, just the way Gibson's family had. The Masons weren't about to stand by while Gibson chose a mere game over the son who bore his name and the daughter who bore Helen's. "There was incredible bitterness," says Ken Solarz, the Hollywood screenwriter who sent a love letter to the Negro leagues with his 1979 documentary *Only the Ball Was White*. "Can you imagine what it was like when his wife's family told him he had to quit baseball and raise those children? It must have been devastating." It was also ineffective.

Josh Jr., 69 and twice the recipient of a kidney transplant, approaches the issue gingerly, conceding only that he was raised by his maternal grandmother and that growing up he didn't see much of his father. "They used to say the Negro leagues never dropped the ball," Josh Jr. says, "so my father, he was always off playing somewhere." Big Josh spent his summers Stateside, coming back to Pittsburgh every two weeks or so. In the winters he set sail for Latin America and the paydays to be had there. When he returned, it was always with gifts. "Good leather stuff for me and my sister," Josh Jr. says. An empty, groping moment passes. "And we were glad to see him."

The awkwardness of those words is amplified when the son recalls how he and his sister romped in a field across the street from the house where their father lived with his common-law wife. "We never knew her name," Josh Jr. says.

He thought things would change when he turned 11 and big Josh invited him to travel with the Grays as their batboy for two weeks. This was to be the bonding mechanism for father and son, a ritual that would continue for the next three summers. When Josh Jr. thinks back, however, his memories run mainly to his father's home runs, the art of living on \$2 a day in meal money, and riding the team bus with the legend who begat him. They were supposed to sit together up front, Josh and Junior, but once the bus was on the road, the boy always found himself alone. His father had left him to play gin rummy in the back with the other Grays. It didn't matter where big Josh was; he couldn't stop running.

It's a different kind of crack of the bat. I'll tell you what, you listen to a .22 rifle, and then you listen to a .30-30. That's the difference right there. --BUCK O'NEIL

If you insist on calling the story that follows apocryphal, keep in mind that Buck O'Neil has been dining out on it for years, and he isn't about to stop. It begins sometime in the 1920s with Buck lurking behind the outfield fence in Sarasota, Fla., fresh out of the celery fields where he usually toiled, and surrounded by kids as hungry as he was. They were there to track down the balls that sailed over the fence and sell them to tourists eager for spring-training souvenirs. Never mind that the Yankees had rolled into town with their Murderers' Row. This was strictly business.

And then it wasn't. As the longest ball of the day soared into view and the take-no-prisoners race for it began, young Buck stood stock-still, mesmerized by the crack of the bat. "Oh, a beautiful sound," he says more than 70 years later, as rhapsodic as if he'd been the first to hear Heifetz or Hendrix. In an instant Buck was climbing the nearest pine tree, going up the wooden slats that kids had nailed into it as steps so they could watch games without paying. "When I got to the top," he says, "I saw this guy with a big barrel chest and skinny legs and a beautiful swing." Dramatic pause. "It was Babe Ruth."

A decade or so later, O'Neil was the Kansas City Monarchs' first baseman, and the first time he suited up in Griffith Stadium to face the Grays, he heard it again. That wondrous sound. "So I ran out of the clubhouse, through the dugout and onto the field," O'Neil says. "There was this beautiful black sucker. Big chest, broad shoulders, about 34 inches in the waist. That was Josh Gibson. Hitting the ball, making it sound just like Babe Ruth. I'm standing there taking it all in when I hear people laughing, people applauding. I look around, trying to find out what's the matter, and one of my teammates says, 'Buck, you got nothing on but your jockey strap.'"

O'Neil returned to the clubhouse embarrassed but wiser, for he knew he had the perfect standard for assessing sluggers. They had to match the Babe's sound, and Josh's. If you think it's easily done, be advised that when O'Neil traveled to St. Louis last year, McGwire flunked the test.

Oh, there were some players back in the day--Cool Papa Bell and Mule Suttles, Ray Dandridge, Leon Day and Martin Dihigo. Legions of them when you get right down to it, men who make you want to weep for having missed out on seeing the Negro leagues. Yet the two names you always come back to in any discussion of that star-crossed age are the same ones that were on the billboards that shouted, SEE SATCHEL PAIGE STRIKE OUT THE 1ST NINE HITTERS. SEE JOSH GIBSON HIT TWO HOMERS!

Satch and Josh were as big as the type that promised these heroics, for both of them had moved beyond mere greatness into walking immortality. "Emblematic," Gerald Early calls them. "They represented the mythology of the Negro leagues." But when they played together on the Crawfords, everyone had five years to study how different they were as human beings.

"Josh rode the team bus; Satch drove his own car," James A. Riley says. "Josh showed up at the park when he was supposed to; Satch might not show up at all. Satch was a modern ballplayer before there were modern ballplayers." Gibson was a mystery, no matter how good-natured and playful he was. He would win a game with a homer and have a beer with the guys afterward, but then, if there wasn't a bus to catch and another game waiting at the end of an all-night drive, he would be gone, off into a world all his own, a world he didn't share. Not that Satch ever noticed, as caught up as he was in his own magnitude. There were years when Satch won 70 games (by his count), and his singleness of purpose suggested that he was sizing Gibson up as an opposing hitter even when they were teammates. That was the only mystery Satch cared about.

He told Gibson as much, bless his heart, and both of them would sit there laughing, woofing, each promising to inflict unspeakable cruelty on the other. When these icons went head-to-head, in 1942, the showdown entered the mythos. It was mostly Satch's doing. That cunning rogue was pitching for Kansas City, and, according to legend, when he was one out from beating the Grays, he ignored the runner on third and walked the next two hitters for the express purpose of facing his old teammate. Gibson was so stunned that he watched three straight strikes, the last one on the fastball Satch called "a bee at your knee."

Satch acted as if that gave him bragging rights till the end of time. Josh never said much about it, but he did sidle up to Monte Irvin not long afterward and confide, "Satch is crazy." Publicly, that was all Gibson's pride would allow. Privately, it may have needed balm. Why else would one of the few newspaper clippings he kept be about the day that he went 4 for 4 against Satch at Wrigley Field? Gibson did the same against lots of pitchers, but this was special, this was the great Paige. While he was on base that day, Gibson might even have taunted his fellow legend by hooting, "If you could cook, I'd marry you." If he didn't say it that time, he said it later, or so the story goes. He always did enjoy beating Satch like a rented mule.

It was strange having Josh around that winter. In the past he had headed south on the first thing smoking as soon as the Negro leagues' season was done, not to return until winter was melting. But after he had taken his last swing for the Grays in 1946 and gone to Latin America, illness made him retreat to the row house on Pittsburgh's Bedford Avenue, where his mother-in-law was raising his kids. Once he was there, nothing could get him to leave.

Sam Bankhead, his teammate, drinking buddy and best friend, thought it was just a matter of time before Gibson caved in to the old lures of Caribbean rum, dark-eyed women and December sunshine. "You ain't going back, Josh?" Bankhead kept asking, teasingly at first, then with more and more dismay as he realized that no, Josh wasn't going back. He was getting ready to die.

He had puffed up to 235 pounds, his knees were shot, and the rest of his once-proud body was sending distress signals. He had high blood pressure and a brain tumor that periodically leveled him with headaches. He drank too much, and there was talk that he had found another escape route in drugs. He had woman problems and psychiatric problems. It was no kind of shape for a legend to be in as he turned 35.

How odd--and unfortunate--that even today there are those who want to blame Gibson's demise on the ascension of Jackie Robinson. It's so easy, so poetic to say Gibson died of a broken heart when he realized that baseball's color line would be broken without him in the spring of '47. "That," Early insists, "has been romanticized way out of proportion."

Josh Jr. agrees, and so do most of the Negro leaguers who remember his father best. Talk to them for five minutes, and without prompting, they'll bring up their chagrin at the 1996 HBO movie *Soul of the Game*, which portrays Josh, Satch and Jackie as friends and rivals. "My father didn't even know Jackie Robinson," insists Josh Jr. The inaccuracy is compounded when the movie shows the elder Gibson belittling Robinson as a "house nigger."

"I asked the producers where they got their information," O'Neil says, "and they said, Ernie Banks's son. I said, 'Ernie Banks's son? He wasn't even born yet.'"

If Gibson was crushed by anything beyond his own demons, it wasn't bitterness but disappointment. For too many years his hopes had been raised by the praise of big league managers who coveted his talent, then dashed by the cowardice of team owners afraid to be the first to challenge the game's racist status quo. When Leo Durocher, the Dodgers' manager, dared muse in the early '40s about the joy of writing Gibson's name on his lineup card, commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis dressed him down. The Pittsburgh Pirates and Washington Senators also backed off when confronted by the bushy-browed Landis, who preached that there was white baseball and there was black baseball, and never would they meet. The teams got the message, and so did Gibson. "Finally," Riley says, "I think he just said, The hell with it."

Gibson's beverage of choice changed from beer to hard liquor. "Sometimes you could smell him from the night before," Don Newcombe remembers. "It was coming out his pores."

Radcliffe carries the same memory of Gibson. "He was smokin' that reefer too," Duty says.

Many old-timers trace Gibson's problems to a D.C. mobster's wife named Grace. Her husband was in the Army, and Gibson had drifted apart from the woman who shared his bed in Pittsburgh. Things just went from there, drugs and passion fueling Josh and Grace's relationship until the mobster came home and reclaimed his lady. Then Josh was back on his own, and it must have been a scary place to be. There were stays at St. Elizabeth's, a mental hospital in Washington that let him out only for games on weekends. And there were myriad stories about his bizarre behavior, beginning with the one about the teammate who found him talking to a Joe DiMaggio who wasn't there.

Cepeda swears Gibson got arrested in Puerto Rico for running the streets naked. Newcombe remembers how bad he and the other Newark Eagles felt for laughing at a story imported from Latin America, about how Gibson slid in with a double and started looking for the potatoes he said he had planted under second base. "We wanted to be proud of Josh Gibson," says Newcombe.

By the mid-'40s, however, Gibson may not have even been proud of himself. The knees that had kept him out of World War II were so bad that it hurt to watch him trying to crouch behind home plate. Though he had won home run championships in 1944 and '45 and hit .361 in '46, the power and menace of old were gone. So he took refuge in the home where his children lived, and he even shared a bed with Josh Jr. "I'd get up in the morning and go to school," his son recalls. "He'd get up and go wherever he wanted to."

On Jan. 20, 1947, almost a month to the day after his 35th birthday and three months before Jackie Robinson played for the Dodgers, Josh went to his mother's house, and it was there that he died. Some say a stroke killed him, others a brain hemorrhage. Or maybe it was just life.

Death didn't treat him any better, letting him lie in an unmarked grave in Allegheny Cemetery for nearly three decades. Finally, commissioner Bowie Kuhn joined with one of Gibson's Crawfords teammates in 1975 to buy the headstone his family couldn't afford. It hails him as a LEGENDARY BASEBALL PLAYER, but the words seem too spare, too perfunctory. How much closer to the truth Newcombe comes when he says, "It's too bad Josh didn't get a chance to live the life he should have lived."

They don't talk about Josh Gibson much in barbershops anymore. Too many years have passed, too many other great players have come down the pike, too many other shooting stars have flamed out. Even in Pittsburgh, the launching pad for his greatness, he remains little more than an afterthought. Mario Lemieux has a street named after him, and Roberto Clemente is honored by a park and a bridge. For years, all Gibson had was a blue-and-gold plaque designating the site where he played at Greenlee Field, up on the Hill. The plaque isn't much bigger than a NO PARKING sign, and the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania didn't get around to putting it up until 1996.

This year Gibson's likeness appeared on a downtown mural, but even so, all he really has going for him is his son. "I got to keep my father's name ringing," Josh Jr. says. From his Pittsburgh home he travels anywhere he is invited: minor league ball games, Negro leagues reunions, the Florida Marlins' Opening Day ceremonies last year and, most of all, baseball card shows. Alas, he doesn't have much to offer in the way of memorabilia, no bats that big Josh used, no catcher's mitts, no spikes with their toes curling.

"The only thing I have of my father's are old newspaper articles he saved," Josh Jr. says. So he puts the articles in a display case, signs autographs for \$25 a shot and tells stories about the father who died when he was 16 and left him with a name that has proved as much a burden as a blessing.

"It wasn't easy trying to be Josh Gibson," his son says. For Josh Jr. inherited his father's resonant voice and not much else in the way of gifts. He lacked size, power and a flair for the dramatic. The best thing he could do as a spindly third baseman was run, and that ended after he left the Homestead Grays in 1950 for Canada's Provincial League. He broke an ankle stealing a base and tried to keep playing by deadening the pain with novocaine. When he could run no more, he limped home to a city job slinging trash cans. The job lasted until one of his kidneys gave out 20 years ago, and his struggle intensified in 1985 when hypertension cut short his twin sister's life.

But keeping his father's name alive has given Josh Jr. a reason to soldier on. He travels with his grandson Sean, who, at 30, looks like big Josh: same heft, same round face, same easy smile. "He's learning the history," Josh Jr. says, "because he's going to take over when I die."

The two started a Josh Gibson League for kids in Pittsburgh last year, giving those youthful dreamers a place to learn about the Negro leagues and rack up their own hits, runs and errors. A place where they can hear Josh Jr. say, "The thing I don't like particularly is that people call my father the black Babe Ruth. I'd prefer it if they just called him Josh Gibson."

It is an understandable request, but the truth is, Gibson must be remembered before he can be called anything. In that regard, there is only so much reassurance Josh Jr. can offer himself. He can tell the story of how Johnny Bench stopped him at a card show and said he wished he'd seen big Josh play: one great catcher paying homage to another. Or he can pass along the tales told by the men who played with his father. Mainly it comes down to Josh Jr. sitting at the table in his cramped dining room, pulling something from an envelope and saying, "Here, I got to autograph this for you."

It is a picture of big Josh with the Grays in his prime, his arms thick, his smile shy, almost beguiling. Very carefully, Josh Jr. writes his name in blue ink across his father's shoulder. When a legend is on life support, you do what you have to.

B/W PHOTO: BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY [T of C]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPH BY PERRY CRAIG/LIFE HALL OF FAME A ninth-grade dropout from Pittsburgh who grew up to be a 6'2", 210-pound catcher, Gibson hit 84 homers in 1936 and batted .517 in '43.

B/W PHOTO: UPI/CORBIS-BETTMANN Hall of Famer Irvin doesn't just count Gibson (sliding) among the game's greats. He ranks him first.

B/W PHOTO: AP Paige and Gibson (second and fourth from right, respectively) and Charleston (far left) were the engine that drove the Crawfords.

SIX B/W PHOTOS: BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY He menaced pitchers by rolling up his sleeves to show off his biceps. Talking wasn't his game. Hitting was.

B/W PHOTO: DENNIS GOLDSTEIN COLLECTION Paige (left) and Gibson had moved beyond mere greatness into walking immortality.

B/W PHOTO: BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY "People call my father the black Babe Ruth," says Josh Jr. "I'd prefer they just call him Josh Gibson."

B/W PHOTO: ARCHIVE PHOTOS

His big league hopes were dashed by owners afraid to challenge the racist status quo.

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