

The impact of Negro League players and other exceptional pros on the Intercounty Baseball League in the 1949-1959 period.



Paul E. Allen, Author
Bright Lights Black Stars

When I was a rookie playing the first of my nine years in the Intercounty Baseball League (IBL) my older teammates told me stories about the great Negro League players and other exceptional players who had played in the IBL. I'm going to tell you about the IBL and a few select players, particularly in the 1948-1959 era.

We Canadians have a rich baseball history. We have one of the earliest recorded games in Beachville and claim the oldest baseball grounds, Labatt Memorial Park in London, Ontario. I won't spend a lot of time on the history of baseball because others will cover that but let's just say that we've played baseball for a long time! There is evidence that games were played in 1793 in St. John, New Brunswick and in 1819 in Hamilton, and of course the Beachville game in 1838.

BASEBALL IN CANADA



1793 Saint John, New Brunswick **1819** Hamilton, Ontario



"Damn Good Good Baseball, Eh!"



 **CANADIAN BASEBALL**

1854 Teams in Hamilton

1855 Teams in London

1867 Woodstock, Hamilton and Ingersoll in Detroit for world baseball tournament.
Ingersoll Juniors Won

1868 London Tecumsehs and Woodstock Young Canadians, Guelph Maple Leafs

1876 London Tecumsehs, Hamilton Standards, Guelph Maple Leafs, Kingston, St. Lawrence and Toronto Clippers

1877

International Association 7 teams

- **London, Ontario, Canada (London Tecumsehs)**
- **Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (Pittsburgh Allegheny)**
- **Rochester, New York (The Rochesters)**
- **Manchester, New Hampshire (The Manchesters)**
- **Columbus, Ohio (Columbus Buckeyes)**
- **Guelph, Ontario, Canada (Guelph Maple Leafs)**
- **Lynn, Massachusetts (Lynn Live Oaks)**

The image above shows there were teams in Hamilton, London, Woodstock, Ingersoll, Guelph and elsewhere beginning in 1854. There were leagues in Ontario in 1868; probably the most well-known league at the time was the 1877 International Association where the London Tecumsehs and Guelph Maple Leafs played American opponents.



Here is Labatt Park, which is the oldest baseball grounds in the world as verified by the Guinness Book of World Records and by the Major League Baseball Historian. It's a great park and worth a visit.

1919 saw the founding of the IBL, with teams in Galt, Guelph, Kitchener, and Stratford. The league still plays today.



There are many great players in IBL history. Before I get to what I call the Glory Years of the Intercounty, let me tell you about the great Earl "Flat" Chase, who played for the London Majors for a short time in the 1944 season as London chased a Canadian Baseball

championship. Flat was the star player of the 1934 Chatham Coloured All Stars, the first all-Black team to win a provincial OBA championship. He was a terrific



pitcher and power hitter. In the OBA championship finals, he beat Phil Marchildon of the Midland team twice. Marchildon went on to play in the major leagues, while Flat, because of his colour, never played pro ball. Flat held records for the longest

home runs in at least seven southwestern Ontario cities. He hit mammoth homers in Chatham, Strathroy, Dresden, Welland, Milton, and Sarnia.

Here is a diagram that shows a home run Flat hit in Chatham. This is Rotary Park. When I played there it was Rotary and now it's called Fergie Jenkins Field at Rotary Park, of course fittingly because of Fergie's baseball accomplishments. The

right field fence is a short poke but Flat's hit cleared the fence and the width of the football field. There was a track around the football field and the ball bounced onto



the asphalt parking lot where the Kiwanis Auditorium stood and rolled to the wall of the Chatham Memorial Arena. It was a long way; is it possible to have a ball go that far? The answer is yes. Luke Easter hit a ball over the center field scoreboard in Buffalo's Offerman Stadium that landed on the roof of a house. The owner said it sounded like an atomic bomb. If Easter's home run had landed on the paved road it certainly would have rolled a considerable distance just like the ball that Flat hit in Chatham.

WHY?

1948-1958

THE GLORY YEARS

45 NEGRO LEAGUE PLAYERS

45 MINOR PROS


20 MLB

Arguably 🤔🤔??

"THE BEST OF THE BEST"

Here's why I consider the 1948-1959 period to be the Glory Years of the IBL. There were 45 Negro League players, 45 minor pros, and 20 former or soon to be MLB players on IBL teams at this time. It was really good baseball and the "best of the best" played in

those years. Below I have listed the MLB players who appeared in the IBL in the 1948-1959 seasons.



MLB PLAYERS in IBL

1948-1959






Hank Biasatti	1948 London	Butch Garland	1953 Oshawa
Connie Creeden	1949 Galt	Dan Lewandowski	1954 Galt
Tommy Warren	1949 Galt	Bill MacDonald	1954 Brantford
Goody Rosen	1949 Galt	Eric MacKenzie	1958 St.Thomas
Tommy Padden	1949 Galt	Phil Marchildon	1952 Waterloo-Guelph
Tom Burgess	1950 London	Ray Ripplemeyer	1953 Oshawa
Frank Colman	1954 London	Bill Roman	1958 Listowel
Harry Fisher	1954 Brantford	Harry Schaeffer	1955 Oshawa
Pete Gray	1953 Guelph	Pat Seerey	1952 Guelph
Hal Keller	1955 Oshawa	Bob Thurman	1954 Brantford
Al Koch	1959 Kitchener	Bob Whitcher	1950 Brantford

George Copeland 1952 Brantford


Here are a few more former MLB players who were on IBL rosters. Buck Tanner played for and managed the Brantford Red Sox in 1952. Jim Bagby, who stopped Joe DiMaggio's hitting streak at 56 games, pitched for the Galt Terriers in 1949. Joe Krakauskas played for Brantford in 1935 and for Stratford in 1943. Alex Kavasnak, who played for the Washington Senators, came to the Waterloo Tigers in 1950. Bob Thurman played briefly for Brantford and then went to the Cincinnati

MLB PLAYERS in IBL



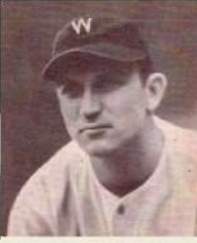

	Buck Tanner 1952 Brantford	
	Jim Bagby 1949 Galt	
	Joe Krakauskas 1935 Brantford & 1943 Stratford	
	Alex Kvasnak 1950 Waterloo	



MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL



Bob Thurman

Reds. Negro League stars Max Manning and Mel Duncan, who are now considered MLB players, pitched for Brantford and Kitchener respectively.

Here are some exceptionally talented IBL players, many of whom played in the minor leagues. Top row left to right: Tommy White, Russ Evon, Jimmy Wilkes, Pat Seerey. Bottom row left to right: Manny McIntyre, Goody Rosen, Vern Kaiser, Larry Cunningham.

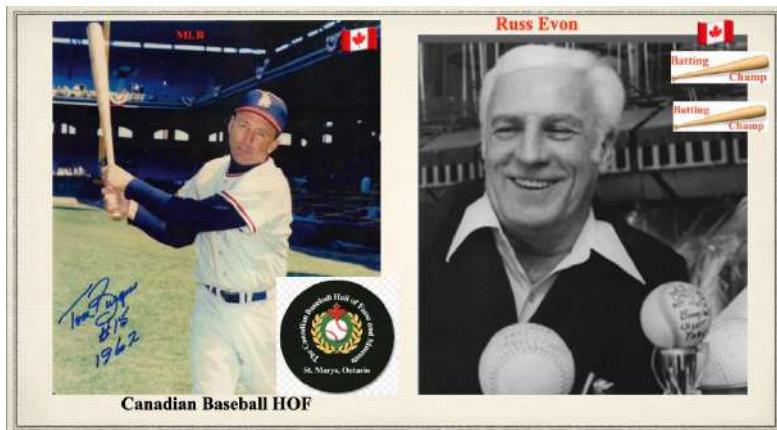


And here are a few more outstanding IBL players. Top row left to right: Wray Upper, Tom Parker, Wilmer Harris, Chuck Aleno, Harry Psutka, Harry Schaeffer, Bob Simpson. Centre row left to right: Joe Atkins, Bob Griffith, Gabby Anderson, Soddy Groat, Sherwood Brewer. Third row left to right: Arnold Earley, Tommy Warren, Roy McKay, Steve Wiley.



The 1940s belonged to the London Majors. One of their biggest seasons was 1948 when they won the IBL pennant, the IBL championship, the Canadian championship, and the Can-Am championship, defeating the Fort Wayne General Electrics in the last of these. Fort Wayne was loaded with pros, but fell to London in seven games. London had really good players, including Hank Biasatti, who went on to play in the major leagues with the Philadelphia Athletics.





Two of my former managers, Tom Burgess and Russ Evon, played on the 1948 London team. Burgess played briefly with the St. Louis Cardinals and the California Angels, and served as a major league coach. Evon was offered a contract with the Detroit Tigers but turned them

down because he made more money in the IBL than the Tigers offered.

The star of the Can-Am series was Tommy White, who won three games. His 1948 overall record was 25-1 and he was the recipient of the Babe Ruth Award for Canada's Most Outstanding player in 1948.



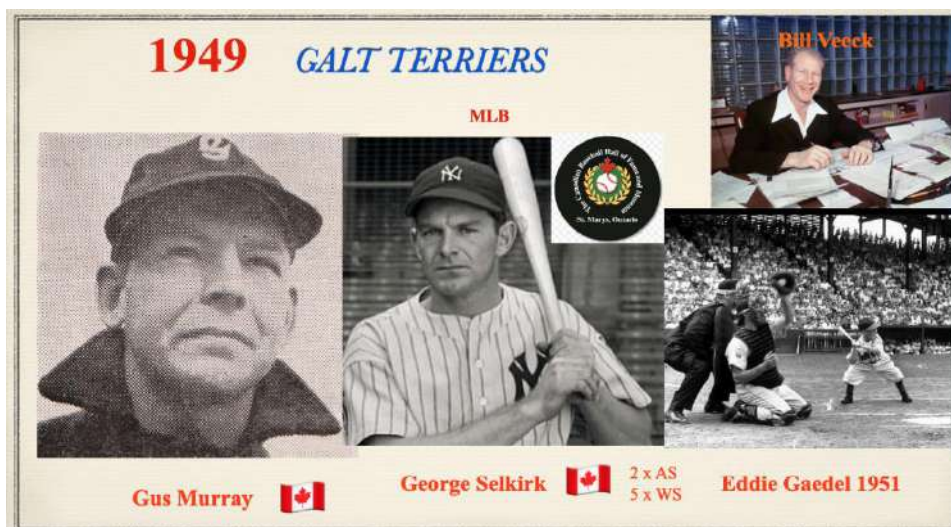
1948

25-1
 Won 9 IBL
 Won 4/OBA
 Won 4 Canadian
 Won Can-Am

*Babe Ruth Award
 Canada's Most Outstanding Baseball player*

London was dominant in the 1940s. They won five IBL championships between 1943 and 1948, an 83% success rate. As a result, the other IBL teams knew they had to improve so they took steps to build better teams.

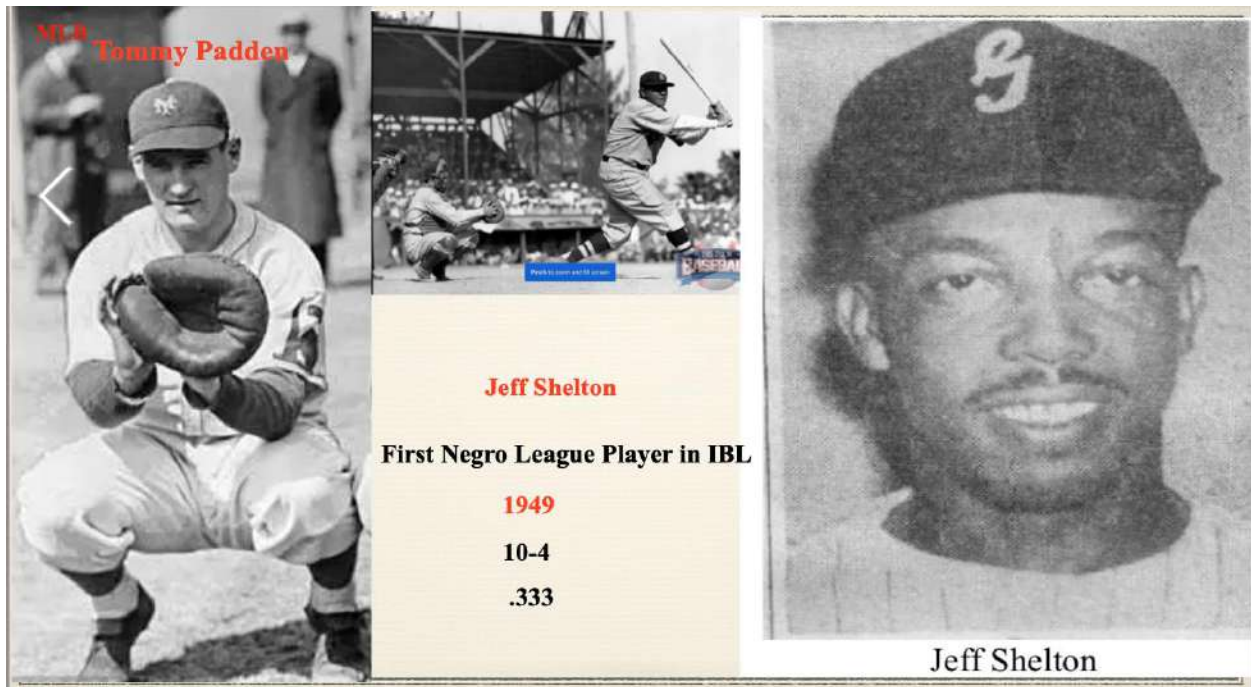
Galt Terriers' owner Gus Murray set out to build a really competitive team to



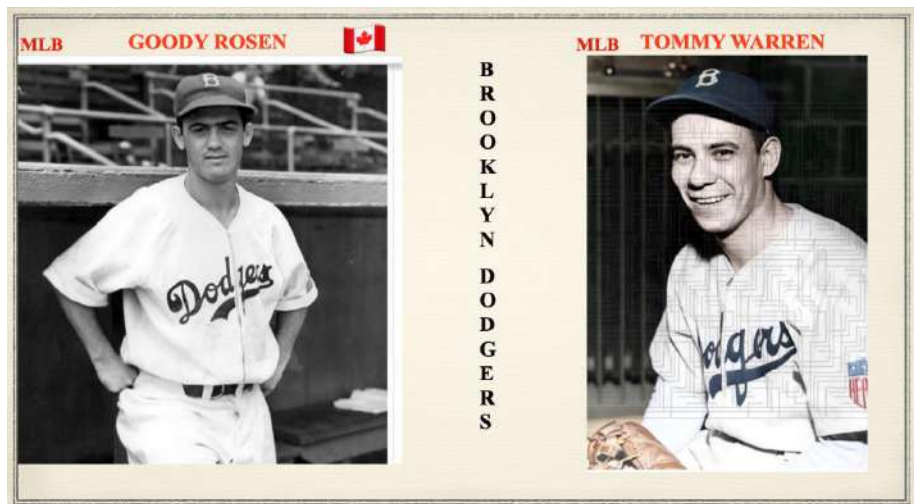
challenge the London Majors. He was quite the promoter and I consider him to be Canada's Bill Veeck. Veeck introduced a fireworks display when his team hit a home run and signed a

really small Eddie Gaedel to pinch hit in a game. His promotions brought people to the park as did Gus Murray. Gus signed the first Negro League player into the IBL in 1949. Gus befriended George Selkirk, the Canadian who replaced Babe Ruth in the New York Yankee outfield, and through Selkirk, Murray brought in former Pittsburgh catcher Tommy Padden to manage and build the Terriers.

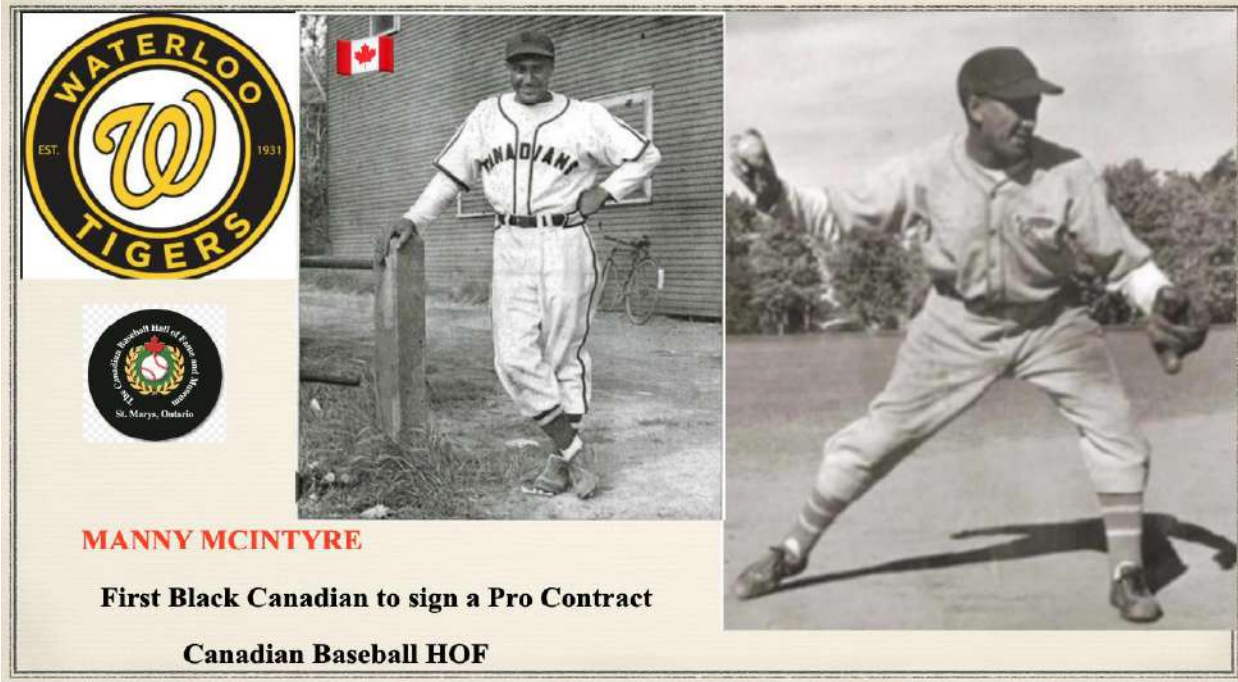
Here is Padden below left, and catching as Babe Ruth is at the plate when he played for the Boston Braves. Jeff Shelton is on the right. Shelton was the first former Negro League player to come to the IBL.



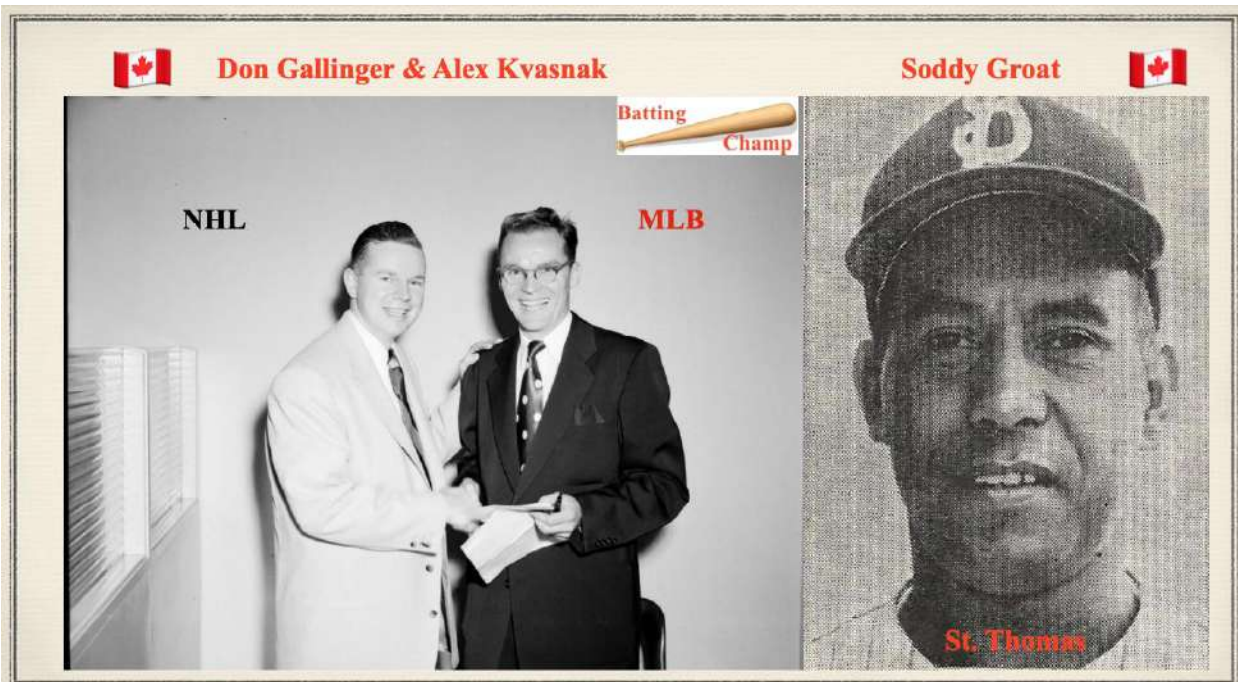
Here are Goody Rosen and Tommy Warren, both of whom played for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Murray signed them both to play for Galt's 1949 team.



In 1950, the Waterloo Tigers signed the first Canadian Black player to sign a pro contract, Manny McIntyre. Manny knocked in the winning run in the 1950 IBL championship game.




This is a picture of Don Gallinger and Alex Kvasnak. Gallinger was a former Boston Bruins hockey star who was banned for life from the NHL for betting on his team. He was however also a talented ball player so he switched from hockey to



baseball and actually bought the Kitchener Panthers. He signed Kvasnak who proceeded to win the IBL batting championship in 1950. The picture on the right is a full blooded Cherokee, Soddy Groat, who was born on the Brantford Reserve and went on to be a very good AAA player in the Brooklyn Dodgers organization. Groat played with the great Gil Hodges and was a roommate with Hodges in minor ball. Soddy may have been the originator of the “basket catch” later made famous by Willie Mays. Groat also played with Jackie Robinson on the 1946 Montreal Royals.

The picture below demonstrates that IBL teams loaded their rosters with former minor league pros. The St. Thomas Elgins won consecutive IBL championships in 1954 and 1955; of the 16 players on the team, all but one were pros. Note that Negro League stars Doc Glenn and Wilmer Harris are in the picture.

1954 St. Thomas Elgins, Intercounty Champions




Front row - Barry White (Ballboy) and Ron Pronger. Second row (left to right) - Ted Morrison, Roger Breard, "Doc" Glenn, Tommy White MGR, Ray Urban, Jim St. Louis and Bruno Casanova. Back row (left to right) - Butch Lawing, Harmi Mason, Willie Casanova, Don Butler, John Ambrose and Wilmer Harris. Absent were Eddie Drapcho, Cam Church and Jack Caffrey



15 of 16 Pros


- Breard**
- Glenn**
- White**
- Urban**
- St. Louis**
- Bruno Casanova**
- Lawing**
- Mason**
- Willy Casanova**
- Butler**
- Ambrose**
- Harris**
- Missing
- Drapcho**
- Church**
- Caffrey**

This is Wilmer Fields, without question the IBL’s greatest player of all time. He was a Negro League star who played for the Homestead Grays and then played three years in the IBL. Wilmer won the IBL batting


1951 sabr.org **WILMER "THE GREAT" FIELDS**





championship twice, and missed a third title by two points. Here is a summary of his statistics in three IBL seasons and one with the Brandon Greys in the ManDak League.




WILMER FIELDS


1951 BRANTFORD RED SOX
.381 Batting Average **2nd by 2 points**
 Led IBL - 70 Hits, 10 Hrs, 47 RBIs
 9-1 Pitching Record


1953 BRANDON GREYS
.379 Batting Average
 8-2 Pitching Record

1954 BRANTFORD RED SOX
.379 Batting Average * **Batting Champ**
 Led League - 87 hits, 24 doubles, 14 Hrs * Tied with Steele and Fisher
 9-3 Pitching Record

1955 OSHAWA MERCHANTS
.425 Batting Average * **Batting Champ**
 Led League - 77 hits, 12 Hrs, 55 RBIs, 131 Total Bases








SHANTY CLIFFORD

1955 hit .346 10 Hrs

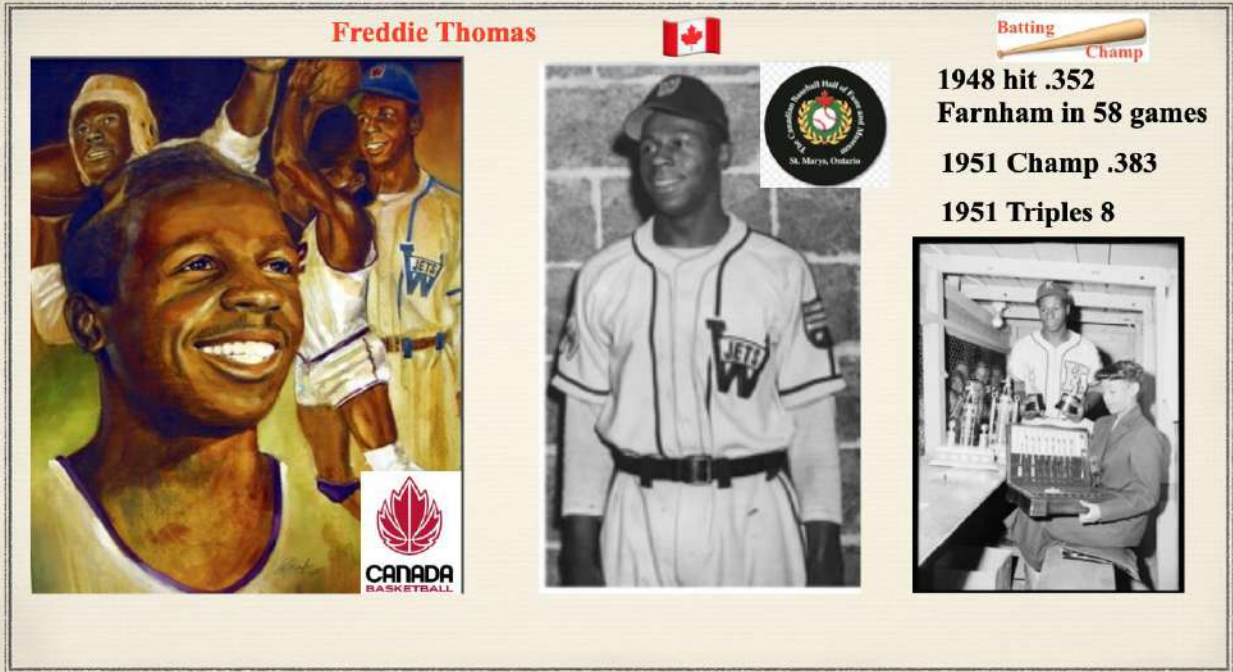
1956 hit .397



One of Wilmer's Homestead Grays teammates who came with him to Brantford in 1951 was Luther "Shanty" Clifford. Like Fields, Clifford was a renowned long ball slugger. Shanty liked it so much in Canada that he remained to live in Brantford until his death in 1990. Shanty was the

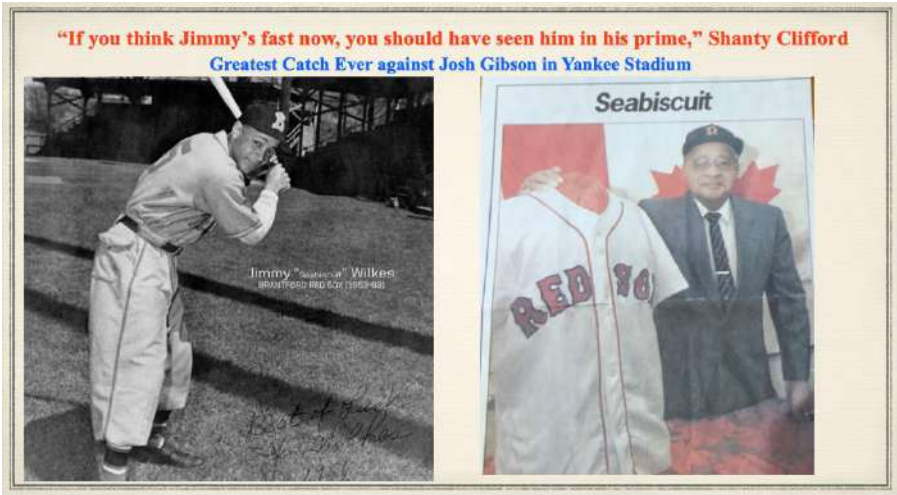
1956 IBL batting champion when he hit .397.

The image below features likely the most highly skilled multi-sport athlete that most Canadians don't know very much about. He is Windsor, Ontario's Freddie Thomas. Freddie was an outstanding basketball player for Assumption College in Windsor, now the University of Windsor. He still holds the career record for most points scored in UW basketball history. Freddie's team beat the Harlem



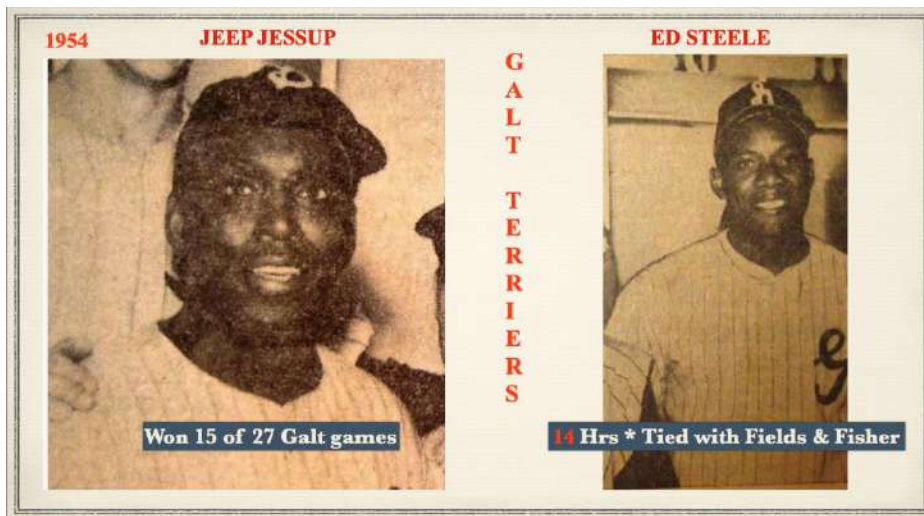
Globetrotters twice in an era where the Trotters were not fooling around. He was so dominant in those games that Abe Saperstein, the Trotters owner, hired Fred to play for his team. Saperstein also arranged for Freddie to baseball barnstorm with the Detroit Senators and play with the Negro League Cincinnati Crescents. In 1948, Saperstein recommended Freddie to Cleveland Indians owner Bill Veeck, and Freddie integrated the Eastern League when he played for the Wilkes Barre Barons, a Cleveland farm team. Fred came to the IBL after a season with Farnham in the Quebec League; he was a superstar in the IBL where his skill is mentioned in the same breath as Wilmer Fields.

Jimmy "Seabiscuit" Wilkes came to the IBL with the Brantford Red Sox in the 1953 season. He was a fleet-footed center fielder who played on the Negro League 1948 champion Newark Eagles, four seasons in the professional minors with the Brooklyn Dodgers



organization, and a season with the Indianapolis Clowns. He made what is considered to be the greatest catch in Negro League history when he ran down a ball hit to the deepest part of Yankee Stadium by the great Josh Gibson. The back to the plate catch made by Willie Mays in the 1954 World Series at the Polo Grounds off the bat of Vic Wertz would be comparable to Jimmy's catch.

Here are Jeep Jessup and Ed Steele, two great Negro League stars who played for the Galt Terriers in the IBL. Joseph Gentry "Jeep" Jessup arrived in the Intercounty



Baseball League for the 1954 season to play for the Galt Terriers with a Negro American League pedigree that included nine years (1940-1948) with the Birmingham Black Barons and the Chicago American

Giants, winter ball in Cuba pitching for Almendares in 1946-1947, and three stints (1950-1952) in the ManDak League. He had been selected in five consecutive years for the prestigious Negro League All Star game.

Ed Steele joined the Birmingham Black Barons in 1942 at age 26. Their roster was so strong that he seldom played his first two seasons, then becoming a regular in 1944. Steele's home run power and strong arm earned him the Barons' regular right field job for the next five years. In his seven years with the Barons, Ed averaged .328. His two best seasons came in 1945 and 1947 when he hit .376 and .372. He spent parts of 1953 and 1954 in Ontario with the Terriers. He rediscovered his power in 1953, and led the IBL with 14 homers; his batting statistics were not available for the 1954 season.

Pictured below is Canadian Harry Fisher, the "handsome blonde hurler" who had brief stays with the Pittsburgh Pirates and played a total of 12 seasons in the pros.

MLB

Harry Fisher



Pittsburgh Pirates



1949 with AA New Orleans hit **.397** in 33 games

1950 with AA New Orleans hit **.423** in 79 games

Twice runner up for IBL Batting title

1954 **.373** to Wilmer's **.379**

13-4

14 Home Runs

1955 **.375** to Wilmer's **.425**

1958 **.328** at age 32 hit 19 homers,
tied for 1st on Tulsa Oilers

1959 **.261** at age hit 15 homers,
2nd on team in Asheville

A terrific hitter and overpowering pitcher, Fisher was another “best of the best” all-time IBL stars. He was twice runner-up for the IBL batting title. He was signed by the Phillies in 1958 and at age 32 hit 19 home runs to lead their AA Tulsa affiliate. He also played AAA on a couple of occasions.

Pete Gray was a former major leaguer who played 77 games with the St. Louis Browns of the American League in 1944. What's remarkable about Gray is the fact

1953

PETE GRAY



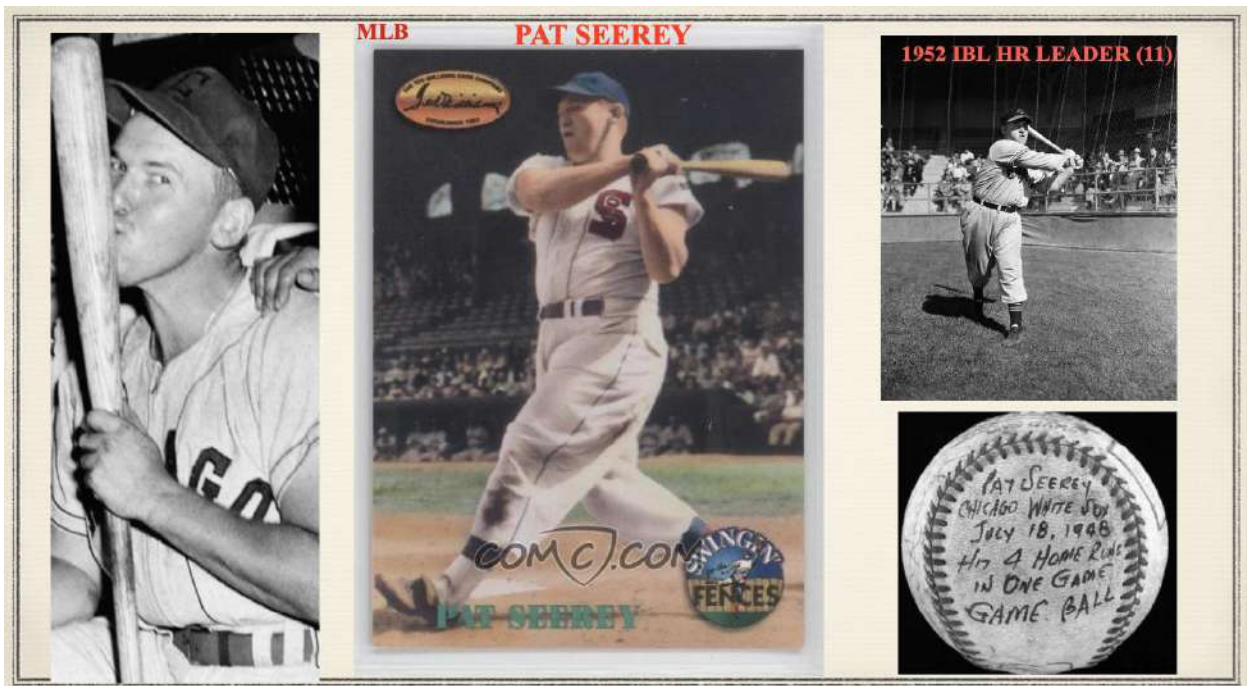
1953 IBL All Star Gamr

With one out in the 7th inning, Gray caught Irv Ler's fly ball with runners on second and third and threw out Harry Psutka at home.



that his right arm was amputated after a serious injury when he was a six-year-old. His limb was caught in the spokes of a truck when he attempted to jump off the truck. Overcoming the odds, he still pursued his dream to play baseball in the Major Leagues. Pete played for Trois-Rivières in the Provincial League and in the Can-Am league before starring with the Memphis Chicks in the Southern Association, hitting .289 in 1943. The next year he was the Southern Association MVP, when he hit .333, scored 119 runs in 129 games and led the league with 68 steals. He then went to the St. Louis Browns. He played one year in 1953 for Guelph in the IBL.

Pat Seerey was a former Cleveland Indian and Chicago White Sox player who once hit four home runs in a major league game. He drew a lot of fans in the IBL when he joined Guelph in 1952. He led the IBL that year with 11 homers.



St. Thomas won consecutive IBL championships in 1954 and 1955. They were led by a pair of former Quebec Provincial League players, Johnny Ambrose and Doc Glenn (shown below). Glenn, a catcher, had played in the Negro Leagues with the Philadelphia Stars.

1954-55 IBL Champions **Doc & Johnny** St. Thomas Elgins

320 x 320

Stanley Glenn
Philadelphia Stars
Catcher 1940's

Signing February 20th, 1999
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THE NEGRO BASEBALL LEAGUES

In conclusion, the Negro League players and exceptional pros who played in the IBL in the 1949-1959 seasons:

1. Made the league more competitive.

EQUALIZED LEAGUE COMPETITION

1. 6 year sample - (1943-1948) Before arrival of Jeff Shelton (First Negro Leaguer in 1949), London won 5 IBL championships for a 83.3% success rate.
Other teams were obviously dominated by London.
2. 11 year sample - (1938-1948) * **Before** influx of Negro League players and exceptional players to IBL.
London won 2 pennants = 18.18% success rate.
London won 5 championships = 45.45% success rate.
3. 1949-1959 (11 years) * **After** influx of Negro League players and exceptional pros to IBL.
London won 1 pennant = 9.0% success rate.
London won 2 championships = 18.18% success rate.

It is a fair conclusion that other IBL teams became more competitive in this period by the addition of Negro League players and exceptional pros to their rosters.

2. Improved the quality of play.

IMPROVED QUALITY OF PLAY			
Style of play and skill level of Negro League players & exceptional pro players positively impacted the calibre of baseball in the IBL.			
1949-1959	1949-1959	1949-1959	1949-1959
Batting Champs	Doubles	Home Run Champs	Pitching Champs
8/11 *pros	153 6/11* pros	107 *7/11 pros	ERA
			10/11 * pros
			Wins
			9/11 * pros

3. Created interest in the IBL and drew huge crowds.

CREATED INTEREST AND ATTRACTED HUGE CROWDS

“During the 1940s and 1950s, the crowds at IBL baseball games we’re massive, largely due to the influx of talented players from the Negro Leagues and pro teams.”

“The stadium had wooden bleachers along the foul lines, and there we’re even sections in the outfield within the fair territory, just beyond the fence to accommodate the overflow crowds.”

Brian Pearen 1965 IBL Batting Champ

“A significant number of fans came to the Brantford ball park to watch batting practice, hours before game time.”

IBL player Robbie Vipond

Crowds of 5,000, 7,000, and 8,000 in Galt and London often reported in newspapers in 1949.



Paul Allen
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