

Negro Leaguer O'Neil leaves big legacy

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) - Buck O'Neil, a batting champion in the Negro Leagues before becoming the first Black to serve as a major league coach, has died. He was 94.

The beloved national figure was the unofficial goodwill spokesman for the Negro Leagues died Friday night in a Kansas City hospital, eight months after he fell one vote short of the Hall of Fame.

O'Neil was admitted on Sept. 17 with what was described as extreme fatigue. Bob Kendrick, marketing director for the Negro Leagues Hall of Fame, said O'Neil passed away late Friday night with close family members nearby. No cause of death was given.

A star in the Negro Leagues who barnstormed with Satchel Paige, O'Neil later signed Hall of Famers Lou Brock and Ernie Banks as a scout. In July, just before he was briefly hospitalized for fatigue, he batted in a minor league all-star contest and became the oldest man ever to appear in a professional game.

"What a fabulous human being," Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson said. "He was a blessing for all of us. I believe that people like Buck and Rachel Robinson and Martin Luther King and Mother Teresa are angels that walk on earth to give us all a greater understanding of what it means to be human. I'm not sad for him. He had a long, full life and I hope I'm as lucky, but I'm sad for us."

O'Neil was re-admitted to the hospital on Sept. 17 after he had lost his voice as well as his strength.

Baseball commissioner Bud Selig asked for a moment of silence to be observed before Saturday's playoff games.

"Buck was a pioneer, a legend and will be missed for as long as the game is played," Selig said. "I had the good fortune of spending some time with him in Cooperstown a couple of months ago, and I will miss his wisdom and counsel."

A huge celebration of his 95th birthday has been planned for Nov. 11, with a guest list of about 750 that included many baseball greats as well as other celebrities and political leaders.

Kendrick told The Associated Press the party would still be held, only now as a tribute.

Always projecting warmth, wit and a sunny optimism that sometimes seemed surprising for a man who lived so much of his life in a climate of racial injustice, O'Neil remained remarkably vigorous into his 90s. He became as big a star as the Negro League greats whose stories he traveled the country to tell.

He would be in New York taping the "Late Show With David Letterman" one day, then back home on the golf course the next day shooting his age, a feat he first accomplished at 75.

"But it's not a good score any more," he quipped on his 90th birthday.

Long popular in Kansas City, O'Neil rocketed into national stardom in 1994 when filmmaker Ken Burns featured him in his groundbreaking documentary "Baseball."

The rest of the country

then came to appreciate the charming Negro Leagues historian as only baseball insiders had done before. He may have been, as he joked, "an overnight sensation at 82," but his popularity continued to grow for the rest of his life.

"He brought the attention of a lot of people in this country to the Negro Leagues," former Washington Nationals manager Frank Robinson said. "He told us all how good they were and that they deserved to be recognized for what they did and their contributions and the injustice that a lot of them had to en-

ure because of the color of their skin."

Few men in any sport have witnessed the grand panoramic sweep of history that O'Neil saw, felt, and was a part of. A good-hitting, slick-fielding first baseman, he barnstormed with Paige in his youth, twice won a Negro Leagues batting title, then became a pennant-winning manager of the Kansas City Monarchs.

In 1962, a tumultuous time of change in America when civil rights workers were risking their lives on the back roads of the Deep South, O'Neil broke a mean-

ingful racial barrier when the Chicago Cubs made him the first Black coach in the major leagues.

Jackie Robinson was the first Black with an opportunity to make plays in the big leagues. But as bench coach, O'Neil was the first to make decisions.

He saw Babe Ruth hit home runs and watched Roger Clemens throw strikes. He talked hitting with Lou Gehrig and Ichiro Suzuki.

"I can't remember a time when I did not want to make my living in baseball, or a time when that wasn't what

I did get to do," he said in an interview with The Associated Press in 2003. "God was very good to old Buck."

Born in 1911 in Florida, John "Buck" O'Neil began a lifetime in baseball hanging around the spring training complex of the great New York Yankee teams of the '20s. Some of the players befriended the youngster and allowed him inside.

In February 2006, it was widely thought that a special 12-person committee commissioned to render final judgments on Negro Leagues and pre-Negro league figures (See Buck O'Neil, Page 15)

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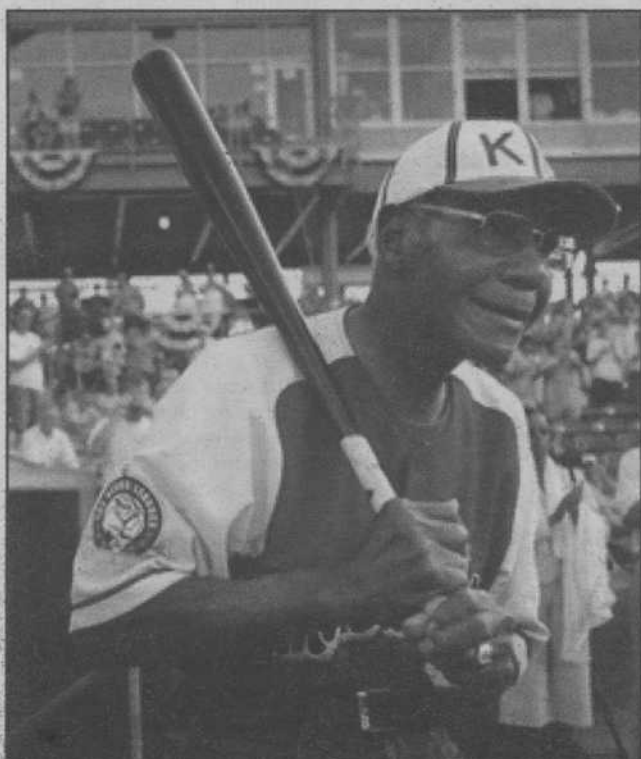
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Buck O'Neil shown in a file photo from the All-Star game.

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