

Dick Daniels

His Best Suit

An aging black man shuffled out of the visitors' dugout during pregame introductions. His teammates were Italians from Parma playing America's pastime against a squad of GIs from Camp Ederle, the U.S. Army base in Vicenza. He could hear the murmurs of surprise from the opposing bench, and the occasional racial slur — this being 1960.

His body was indeed old; his legs had begun to betray him. The Parma team normally played on Sundays, working at their sponsor's factory during the week. Ernie Jackson had reached the point where he pulled a hamstring or groin muscle almost every game, and had just enough time to partially recover before the next weekend.

Ernie's game was based on speed and quick reactions; there wasn't any way to turn that off or adjust it in his head. He sprinted out of the box when he hit the ball, same when he was trying to steal a base or go from first to third on a single. To compensate for his current limitations, he would feign injury and fatigue during games to deceive opponents into underestimating his capabilities.

He did that with the young GIs. Being an American, he could joke with them when they teased him about being so old, "on his last legs." If they only knew all the legs that made up this journey. He played along with them, and put a little hobble into his trot on and off the field.

Late in the game, he led off an inning — probably his last time up. He knew the pitcher was struggling with control and couldn't throw his curveball for a strike. Ernie was never a great hitter and probably couldn't have hit the curve anyway. He patiently worked his way to a walk, and "limped" to first base.

A sacrifice bunt got him to second base, and a slow infield roller allowed him to reach third. He'd been timing the pitcher's delivery and knew he was taking a little extra time throwing the curveball. Ernie had been taking a walking lead the first couple pitches, not far enough to worry anyone. After all, he was just an "old man." When he sensed the curve was coming, he prayed his frayed hamstring would hold as he sprinted toward home.

When he slid safely under the tag to the gasps of the crowd, he didn't talk any trash — but he took a long look at the opposing bench and the players on the field who had been needling him all day. Just enough to let them know he could still do something most of them would never even try. A few of them were big enough to come over after the game and congratulate him on his mad dash. When they learned he was a World War II vet, they accorded him the proper respect and accepted him as one of their own.

Although the triple play is one of the few things in baseball more rare than stealing home, there isn't anything more exciting for three seconds in a game than seeing a runner risk it all charging down the baseline. Whereas the triple play is a reaction involving awareness and surehandedness, the steal requires so much more. To reach home successfully, you must combine cunning, daring, timing, speed and skill to avoid the catcher's tag.

Well, Ernie had gambled and won, but he knew his playing days were numbered. It was time to think about the future. As people so often do when faced with that prospect, he thought back to the past. How did I get here? What could I have done differently? It is said failures talk about the obstacles that got in their way, and successes talk about the obstacles they overcame. Ernie had certainly seen plenty of obstacles.

A black child born in the Deep South during the Great Depression was the trifecta of difficulties. His grandmother was the midwife in Shaw Town, North Carolina, and when she delivered him from his mother's womb, she noticed his pointed ears and told her daughter, in a voice from the Bugs Bunny cartoons, "you have a cute wittle wabbit." The nickname Rabbit stuck, although Ernie would say it was because he was so fast, "cropping" (harvesting) tobacco in his youth and running the basepaths in the Negro Leagues as a young man.

Life in the South was never easy for black families; by the time Ernie was seven, the color-blind Great Depression had engulfed all families in America. The Jackson folks had always worked as day laborers for the landowners and sharecroppers on nearby farms, who mostly grew cotton or tobacco as their cash crop. Some were better than others at paying black workers the same rate as whites, but it was the only work around and you took what they offered without complaint.

Ernie, like most males, wasn't much good at picking cotton. Women were always better, either because of their

smaller fingers or their higher pain threshold when being stabbed by the thorny protrusions of the cotton bolls. But when it came time to harvest the tobacco crop, Ernie was The Rabbit.

Tobacco stalks ripen from the ground up, and workers cropped each field one day a week for nearly two months. You might work at Mr. Beard's farm on Monday, his son's field on Wednesday, and his brother-in-law's place on Thursday. And you tried to catch work elsewhere on the other days.

Harvesting the tobacco started with the "sand lugs" on the bottom, the largest and heaviest leaves because the sandy soil would splash on them when it rained. You moved up the stalk as the leaves ripened, usually indicated by a lightening of their green shade. It required some judgment, which could slow you down. Trying to beat Rabbit, some workers cheated and stripped off the leaves at the same height regardless of ripeness. But he was always waiting for them at the end of the row.

As he matured, Ernie began playing pickup baseball games on Sundays, when farmers took off work unless they had been rained out during the week. It didn't take long for Rabbit's speed on the bases to be noticed. He could bunt for a base hit, go from first to third on the most routine play, even score from first on anything that wasn't handled flawlessly in the outfield. Ernie played second base or shortstop most of the time with almost unlimited range, nimble feet on the double play and a strong, accurate arm.

The Birmingham Black Barons, one of the premier Negro League teams, came through on a barnstorming tour one winter; Ernie had a successful tryout and rode their bus back to Alabama. The Black Barons' players were idolized when they took the field in what most of them considered to be the best set of clothes they had ever worn. After games, if they didn't have to leave immediately on the team bus, there were invitations to parties by women who hung around the locker room exit.

Most of these women weren't looking for a husband—heck, some of them already had husbands at home. During such hard times, it was a chance to escape their troubled lives, enjoy plenty of free booze and perhaps spend a night with a professional athlete in his prime. Although no one charged for sex, there was often a request the next morning for cab fare or some spare change to replace stockings or a blouse torn in the height of passion. Rabbit had attended plenty of these parties, but never lost his heart.

Ernie was just getting established with the Black Barons when World War II sent a calling card in the form of his draft notice. The U.S. Army was segregated at this time; Jackson became part of the “Buffalo Soldiers Division,” the 92nd Infantry Division, which trained for two years in Fort Huachuca, Arizona before heading for the European theater in 1944. September found them as part of the U.S. Fifth Army, fighting in the Italian Campaign. The unit motto was DEEDS, NOT WORDS.

As they slowly took ground from a reluctantly retreating German Army, the black unit was also fighting to earn respect. Their failures were magnified and successes minimized by the white “brass.” Every detail of their service was scrutinized. They were assigned more latrine duty and KP than white units. They didn’t get to “go into town” as often.

The Buffalo Soldiers had been warned to avoid any relationships with Italian women. Leaving your home, crossing the ocean and risking your life for your country had not changed deep-seated prejudice. It was okay to patronize the brothels that followed all Army units as they headed up the Italian peninsula, but steer clear of the locals. This had never presented a problem for Ernie, and he had felt no need to buy the prostitutes’ services.

In one battle, a mortar round caught the back of Ernie’s hand with a nasty piece of shrapnel, and the medic told his Lieutenant they needed to send Jackson back to the battalion aid station to dig it out before it did any nerve damage. They didn’t even realize it was his throwing hand. There was no transportation to spare, so Ernie was walking down the road when a sudden downpour soaked him to the bone. He began looking for some form of shelter and spotted a barn roof in the distance. As he cautiously approached, an Italian woman appeared in the farmhouse doorway with a shotgun pointed in his direction. She recognized his uniform as an ally and yelled, “*Americano? Vieni,*” motioning for him to come inside.

There was a warm fire going, and the woman brought out a man’s robe, indicating he should hang his drenched clothes by the hearth to dry. While she disappeared into the kitchen, Ernie removed the sopping uniform and noticed a photo on the mantle of a soldier in uniform. He was still looking at it when she emerged with a loaf of bread and some cheese. “*Marito. Morto,*” she said. He understood and secretly hoped his unit had nothing to do with her husband’s death. She somehow sensed what he was thinking, saying “*Africa*” with a backward motion of her hand to indicate it had happened

long ago and far away.

Ernie reached into his pack and pulled out a can of pork and beans from his C-rations, which she heated up on the stove. For dessert, he produced a can of peaches obtained in a recent trade. After their banquet, he fished around for the small pack of “Luckies” to offer her an after-dinner smoke—and his baseball rolled out. He’d been carrying it for luck since he joined the Army. Ernie tried to explain what it was and how to play the sport, which was impossible with the cultural and language barriers. They ultimately laughed at their inability to communicate and cleared the table. At least they had been able to learn each other’s name.

Francesca brought him bedding to make up the couch and retired to her room. A few hours later, she returned with an extra blanket. As she warmed herself briefly in front of the fire, the simple white nightgown allowed the firelight to illuminate a mature woman with enticing curves. She lingered while he remembered all the admonishments of the Army, including the threat of court-martial. White people had been telling him his whole life where he could eat, where he could sleep, who he could talk to, or even look at. Well, he couldn’t stop looking at Francesca, and she didn’t seem to mind.

Distant German artillery explosions shook him out of his reverie. Francesca was frightened, and his first thought was to comfort her. As he stood up and surrounded her with his arms, she clung to him tightly. She whispered his name just before she placed soft lips on his. Throughout the night, they helped each other escape the war—two people who, for years, had missed the gentle touch of another. The lovemaking was not an athletic event like it had been with the girls “on the road” when he was playing baseball. Tenderly, she touched his soul like no one ever had. In the morning, she sent him on his way with dried clothes, a chunk of bread with half an onion, and a lingering kiss on his bristly cheek. Ernie left Francesca the baseball for luck. The German artillery was still rumbling, sounding even closer.

Two days later, Jackson’s hand had been repaired and cleared of infection. He caught a ride back to his unit in the Company Commander’s jeep. As they passed Francesca’s place, they saw the house and barn had both been hit by the German shells. Ernie wanted to stop and check on her, but that was asking for trouble if he had to explain to his CO. He worried in silence.

The Buffalo Soldiers would advance up the Italian peninsula, and head back home after the war ended in May 1945.

By the time Ernie mustered out, baseball season had already started and he was out of shape, anyway. Jobs were scarce, with women now handling more jobs and lots of returning soldiers looking for work. He went back to the tobacco harvest, then hooked up with a baseball team barnstorming through the South.

Throughout the 1946 season, he worked to re-establish himself and rejoined the Black Barons squad late in the year. The baseball world would be rocked the following spring as Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball. That became a mixed blessing for the Negro Leagues. While it finally gave the black superstars an opportunity to compete against the best white players and show they belonged on the same field, it ultimately killed the Negro Leagues over the next decade as the best players were systematically siphoned off.

Integrating baseball did not help the everyday player like Ernie Jackson. The major league teams did not want black players of average ability. They felt they could find adequate numbers of white players for that role. Nor did they want to develop black players in their minor league system, considering it too much of a hassle to integrate the farm teams, many of which were located in the segregated South. They let the Negro Leagues be their vehicle for developing black talent.

The South, and Birmingham especially, was so segregated at this time black and white fans could not sit together at games. The Black Barons shared aging Rickwood Field with the white team, the Birmingham Barons. When the Barons played, black patrons were required to sit in a designated section in the rightfield stands. When the Black Barons were at home, white customers were confined to that same section. Incidentally, the Black Barons usually drew a larger crowd.

Birmingham won the Negro American League pennant in 1948, partly due to the success of a seventeen-year-old high-schooler named Willie Mays, who would eventually become a Hall of Fame center fielder with the New York Giants. Willie would have to play three years with Birmingham before being signed by the Giants. Five other teams would give him tryouts during that time, but decide against adding him to their rosters. One of those teams was the Boston Red Sox, who would be the last team to integrate in 1959. How ironic for this to be the stance of a town whose Irish forefathers had been greeted with hostile discrimination, evidenced by the signs of NO IRISH NEED APPLY in store windows and on factory doors.

As the quality of play in the Negro Leagues continued its downward spiral, crowds and paydays were shrinking, too. Ernie was probably good enough to have contributed to a major league roster as a late-inning defensive replacement, occasional starter when a regular was injured, or as a pinch runner. While black professional baseball had, at one time, provided better pay than the menial jobs available, it now only paid about the same. But it still gave Ernie a sense of pride and acceptance to put on that bright, crisp uniform and escape the harsh world playing “between the lines.”

In 1955 the Buffalo Soldiers Division had a reunion in Atlanta to celebrate the ten-year anniversary of V-E Day, and Ernie attended with teammate Elijah Barnes. As the men relived wartime experiences, someone mentioned there was now a professional baseball league in Italy. On the journey back to Birmingham, Ernie thought about Francesca and the night they had shared, hoping she had somehow survived the heavy shelling.

Over the next two years, Eli kept getting more information and pestering Ernie about playing overseas. He heard they weren’t discriminating against blacks. Teams were allowed a limited number of foreigners, and they wanted players who could also coach and help develop the Italian talent. Barnes was a pitcher and Jackson a position player, so they were an enticing package to a team from Parma. In December of 1957 they boarded a ship in New York headed for the port of Livorno, Italy.

Crossing the Atlantic in winter is rough sailing, to say the least. And the two ballplayers were not traveling first class. They ate a lot of saltine crackers to keep something down, and still spent a lot of time leaning over the rails. But they arrived safely and reported for work.

Elijah inherited a pitching staff with an assortment of deliveries that included windmills and double pumps, among other exaggerated movements. His first change was to have everyone use the “no-windup delivery” popularized by Don Larsen when he threw a perfect game in the 1956 World Series. He also helped with the outfielders since “shagging flies” in batting practice was the main form of conditioning for pitchers, other than throwing sessions off the mound every other day. Ernie would handle the infielders.

Although the Italian League had started in 1948, it was like coaching Little League. The best Italian athletes were soccer

players or cyclists. Everyone had grown up playing soccer, where the hands could not be used. Their natural tendency was to sling the baseball, like a catapult. Rabbit had to demonstrate how the four-seam grip stabilized the ball in flight and avoided tailing away to pull the first baseman off the bag, how to position the elbow and snap the wrist. He taught them fielding a grounder was like dancing with the approaching ball. You anticipated its movement and arrival, and positioned yourself to handle it smoothly. Then a quick two-step and the throw was on its way. You aimed at the shoulder of the first baseman's glove hand, so all he had to do was bend his elbow to make the putout.

Running the bases was another problem, because they didn't have a lifetime of experience. Similar to when you had been driving a car long enough that you knew when you had time to pass and return safely to your lane, the same concept applied about trying to reach an extra base. Rabbit made sure they understood stepping on a base with your outside leg would shorten the distance rounding the bag by a step and could be the difference between safe and out. But they would need years of trial and error before they would know their capabilities. As one intellectual teammate on the Black Barons had told Ernie one day, "The only way to know your limits is to fail."

One of the reasons black baseball had been more popular than the white version was that their games had more excitement. Daring baserunning was highlighted; speed, rather than raw power, ignited the offense. Rabbit had few equals on the basepaths, but Willie Mays was indeed faster and just as daring. Willie, like a lot of other Negro League players, also added showmanship to the game. He was known for his cap flying off when he reached full speed or slid into a base. Rabbit suspected Willie picked his hat one size too small so it would come off with the slightest exertion. Another innovation of Willie's was the "basket catch," where he caught fly balls down around his waist with the glove flat and the palm up, rather than snagging them at eye level. Ernie couldn't wait to introduce this entertaining style of play to the Italian fans.

The Parma team was in the middle of the standings that first season. Both Ernie and Elijah had solid years; Rabbit led the league in stolen bases and runs scored, and Barnes dominated on the mound. Sadly, Eli had left a girl back home and he grew increasingly homesick with each letter received. When she gave him an ultimatum to either come home or she was moving on, he headed for Livorno to catch the next boat back to the States.

Ernie was lonely, too, but he had left no one stateside. He thought of Francesca and resolved during the offseason to try finding her. The aid station where he had been treated was in a small town, and he thought he could recognize the name if he got close enough to see it on a road sign. Renting a powder-blue Vespa scooter, he drove south to the general vicinity.

He finally saw the familiar name and headed for the small village. Suddenly uncomfortable with his next step, he lingered over lunch in a small café before driving down the road leading to her farm. As he approached, he saw a dark-skinned teenage boy playing in the yard. Ernie had acquired enough of the Italian language he could say hello and ask the boy his name. When the lad answered “Ernesto Molinari,” the Rabbit noticed the same slightly-pointed ears—and couldn’t think of anything else to say. There was no need to ask how old he was because that was just math.

Hearing the scooter, Francesca stepped from the house, followed by an elderly gentleman. She was beaming, but the man was not; he could put two and two together, too. Nevertheless, Ernie was invited inside, and when the man and Ernesto went to check on animals in the barn, Francesca explained her circumstances. Her new husband, Matteo, was a widower and the village mayor during the war. He had endeared himself by manipulating the tax rolls so she didn’t lose her farm. Then when she found herself pregnant, she accepted a marriage proposal that had been offered repeatedly. Ernesto had never questioned his lineage, although there were several folks in the village who had doubts.

Ernie had experienced losses before, but this felt like a layer of his heart had been peeled away as he sadly motored back to Parma. Francesca occasionally called with updates on Ernesto and even brought him to a game to see “*Il Coniglio*” play. The youngster presented a weathered baseball for The Rabbit to sign, and tears welled up with thoughts of that night in 1944. Hastily excusing himself, Ernie went in the locker room to wipe his eyes, and returned with a bat and glove for his son.

As he neared the end of his playing career, Ernie had to decide if he wanted to stay on as a coach for the Italian team. He got occasional letters from Elijah with news of what was happening with the civil rights movement back home. It seemed black people were in a virtual “combat zone.” Could one person make a difference? If every black person could change the mind

of someone not completely color blind, would that be enough? Should he return to do his part? Ernie had spent most of his life avoiding difficult situations, rather than confronting them. So many questions. What was left for him in Italy? How could he see Francesca and not be able to hold her again? How could he look at Ernesto and not want to embrace him and hear how he was growing up? Knowing he would never get to teach his son to play baseball—or even see him play soccer — might be more than he could bear.

Before he could reach a decision, Ernie received a call from Elijah's wife that his former teammate had been severely injured at a lunch counter sit-in. That was enough to push him over the edge. Clearing out his locker, and giving Francesca the address of his friend, he left everything in Italy behind. The Rabbit took his first plane ride, and when he walked into Eli's room, a telegram from Francesca was waiting. Matteo had died!

The chance for a storybook ending was suddenly alive. Once he got Eli healthy, he could return to Francesca and Ernesto and be an Italian farmer; the star-crossed lovers could live out their lives in peaceful bliss. But even from the grave, Francesca's second husband continued to disrupt Ernie's life. When Matteo's estate was settled, the tax discrepancy was discovered, and a mountain of back taxes were due. To compound matters, he had heavily mortgaged the farm to invest in an "innovative" company now bankrupt.

Francesca and Ernesto would come to the United States, and they could find happiness together at last. It was not to be. Caught between two worlds in the segregated South, Francesca did not feel accepted in either. She didn't like living in the poor section of town, nor did she appreciate the looks and whispered comments when on the street with her husband. Although Ernie's friends and their wives welcomed her, she was never comfortable in their presence. Their diet, for example, was completely foreign to her--they even ate corn on the cob, which Italians fed only to pigs! When Ernesto was accepted to Fayetteville State University, she returned to her homeland.

As much as Ernie and Ernesto missed her, it could have been a good life with just the two of them. Willie Mays had put in a good word, and Ernie was hired as a scout and roving minor league instructor for the Giants. He could spend more time with Ernesto, especially during the school year. But it didn't work out the way he planned. Ernesto fell for a fun-loving coed and flunked out when he ignored his studies. Without a student

deferment during the Vietnam War, Ernesto was immediately drafted and on his way to Southeast Asia. He learned his father's identity as they completed his enlistment papers. A sniper's bullet in the first month would take him from Ernie.

There would be no happy ending for Ernie Jackson. It pleased him when Satchel Paige, the greatest pitcher of the Negro Leagues, was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1971—even more so when Buck Leonard, whom he had played against in the 1948 Negro League World Series, was enshrined in 1972. All Ernie had left were his memories. He had known great love from a woman, and had fathered a courageous son. Most of all, he would tell the story many times of the day he stole home against a team of “soldier boys,” when he was nearly forty.

A stroke peacefully took Ernie in his sleep. He had kept a white home uniform of the Black Barons, and his last wish was to be buried in it. His old teammate and friend, Eli Barnes, had become an ordained minister and delivered the eulogy. At the end, he pointed toward the open casket and told the congregation, “Ernie always said it was the best suit of clothes he ever wore!”