

“Play-Off Championship” Series

The schedules for most Negro League seasons were played in two halves with a winner being declared for each half of the season. If different teams each won one half of the season or if the season ended in a dispute over who should be crowned the “league” champion, a Play-Off Series was held.

It is important not to confuse a Play-Off Series with a Colored Championship Series or the Negro League World Series. The Play-Off Series was played between teams from the same formalized league. Many if not most Colored Championship Series were played between two self appointed teams, while the Negro League World Series was played against the champions from two different formalized leagues. From 1924 to 1927 the Negro League World Series was a post season championship series that was played between the Negro National League champions and the Eastern Colored League (ECL) champions. Then in latter years, there was also a Negro League World Series played from 1942 to 1948 when the champions of the Negro American League (NAL) met the champions of the Negro National League (NNL).

“Play-Off Championship” Series (Summaries)

1941 Homestead Grays vs New York Cubans (Negro National League)

The Homestead Grays won the first half of the Negro National League season and the New York Cubans won the second half. Neither team however had the best regular season record. The Baltimore Elite Giants actually had the best overall won-loss record for the season at 36-21 (.632). Homestead finished with the second best record at 34-25 (.576) and the New York Cubans were a distant fourth with a losing record of 19-21 (.475). The final order of finish for teams in the Negro National League season for 1941 was:

Team	Games	Won-Loss	Pct.
Baltimore Elite Giants	57	36-21	.632
Homestead Grays	59	34-25	.576
Newark Eagles	34	19-15	.559
New York Cubans	40	19-21	.475
New York Black Yankees	32	13-19	.406
Philadelphia Stars	42	13-29	.310

The Homestead Grays were managed by Vic Harris. Buck Leonard who was a fixture at first base and Jud Wilson led the Grays and hitting, while Ray Brown (12-6) and Terris Mc Duffie (10-8) and Roy Partlow were the top pitchers.

Latin great Jose Maria Fernandez managed the New York Cubans. The strength of the New York Cuban teams was its hitting. New York’s top hitters during the 1941 season were Ramon Heredia (.409), Clemente “Sungó” Cabrera (.389), Francisco “Pancho Coimbre” (.353) and Juan “Tetelo” Vargas (.313). Dave Barnhill (13-8) was the ace of the pitching staff.

The Grays and Cubans met for a four game Play-Off Series in September. Homestead destroyed New York in the first two games. The New York Cubans couldn't get Grays hitters out and New York batters could hit the Grays pitching. Homestead won the first two games by the scores of 20-0 and 5-0. Ray Brown and Terris Mc Duffie each pitched a shutout for Homestead. The Grays leading hitters for games one and two of the series were:

Player	At Bats	Hits	Batting Average
Vic Harris	9	6	.667
Howard Easterling	10	6	.600
Ray Brown	5	3	.600
Lick Carlisle	9	4	.444
Buck Leonard	7	3	.429
Ameal Brooks	9	3	.333
Chester Williams	10	3	.300

Collectively these seven Homestead players batted .475 (28 for 59) for the first two games of the Play-Off Series.

Box scores for games three and four have yet to be uncovered. Newspaper reports indicate the Grays and Cubans each won one game. Homestead won the Play-Off Series three games to one and was crowned the Negro National League Champions.

Negro National League Champion (1941) – Homestead Grays

1943 Birmingham Black Barons vs Chicago American Giants (Negro American League)

The Birmingham Black Barons won the first half of the Negro American League season in 1943 and the Chicago American Giants won the second half. The Black Barons also had the best overall won-loss record in the Negro American League for the entire season. Birmingham finished the regular season with a record of 20-14 (.588). Chicago got off to a very poor start at the beginning of the season but rebounded to claim the title for the second half of the regular season. Despite winning the second half of the season, the American Giants still finished with a losing record of 20-23 (.465) and were next to last place in the overall standings of the league. The two teams met in mid September to decide which team would be crowned as Negro American League champions and play the Homestead Grays in the Negro League World Series.

The Birmingham Black Barons were managed by Wingfield Welch. The Black Barons had a strong hitting team that included five starters who hit over .300 for the season. The leading hitters for Birmingham were Lyman Bostock (.412), Felix McLaurin (.406), Lester Lockett (.388), Tommy Sampson (.358) and Lorenzo "Piper" Davis (.348). The pitching staff for Birmingham included John Markham (7-2), Lefty McKinnis (6-4) John Huber (3-0) and Alvin Gipson (3-4). On August 21st (1943), Alvin Gipson set a Negro League record by striking out 20 batters in a game that was played in Philadelphia.

The Chicago American Giants were managed by Negro League veteran Ted “Double Duty” Radcliffe. Alec Radcliffe (.366), Ducky Davenport (.324), John Bissant (.294) and Henry Smith (.286) were the team’s top hitters. Gentry Jessup (8-8) and Sug Cornelius (7-4) anchored Chicago’s pitching staff.

Game one of the Play-Off Series was played in Toledo (Ohio) on September 13th. Trailing 2-1 in the bottom of the ninth inning, Alec Radcliffe knocked in the tying run. Double Duty Radcliffe (manager and brother of Alec) came up next and delivered the game winning hit, giving Chicago a 3-2 victory. Gentry Jessup picked up the win and Alvin Gipson took the loss. Birmingham won game two by a score of 16-5 and Chicago won game three 5-4. Game four was played on September 17th in Montgomery (AL). Birmingham won the game 4-1 and tied the series at two games apiece. With the Negro League American League title on the line, the Black Barons sent their ace John Huber to the mound to face the American Giants ace, Gentry Jessup. Huber responded with one of the best games ever played in Negro League post season play. Huber hurled a one hit shutout of the American Giants and won the game by a score of 1-0. The victory in game five for the Birmingham Black Barons allowed them to defeat the Chicago American Giants three games to two in the Play-Off Series to win the Negro American League title.

Game	Location	Date	Winning Team	Score	Winning Pitcher	Loosing Pitcher
1	Toledo (OH)	Sept 13 th	Chicago	3-2	Gentry Jessup	Alvin Gipson
2	Columbus (OH)	Sept 14 th	Birmingham	16-5	-	-
3	Dayton (OH)	Sept 15 th	Chicago	5-4	-	-
4	Montgomery	Sept 17 th	Birmingham	4-1	Al Saylor	Gentry Jessup
5	Birmingham	Sept 19 th	Birmingham	1-0	John Huber	Gentry Jessup

Top Hitters for the Series: (Statistics are incomplete. Several box scores are still missing)

Birmingham – Sloppy Lindsey (.429), Felix McLaurin (.375), Clyde Spearman, (.333) and Tommy Sampson (.286).

Chicago – Pep Young (.286), Henry Smith (.167) and John Bissant (.167)

Leading Pitchers for the Series:

Birmingham – John Huber (1-0) and Al Saylor (1-0)

Chicago – Gentry Jessup (1-2)

Negro League American League Champion (1943) – Birmingham Black Barons

1947 Newark Eagles vs New York Cubans (Negro National League)

The Newark Eagles won the first half of the Negro National League season and the New York Cubans won the second half. The final league standings for the 1947 Negro National League season were as follows:

Negro National League (1947)

	Games	Record	Pct.
New York Cubans	60	42-18	.700
Newark Eagles	83	46-37	.554
Baltimore Elite Giants	76	40-36	.526
Homestead Grays	66	32-34	.485
Philadelphia Stars	57	26-31	.456
New York Black Yankees	50	10-40	.200

The Newark Eagles won the first half of the season, but took a nose dive when Larry Doby was signed by the Cleveland Indians (MLBB). The New York Cubans were awarded the Negro National League pennant because they were believed to have the best overall record for the entire season. It is unclear if a Play-Off Series was ever held, but the New York Cubans were crowned the Negro National league championship and represented the league in the Negro League World Series.

The New York Cubans defeated the Cleveland Buckeyes (Negro American League champions) four games to one to win the Negro League World Series.

Negro National League Champion (1947) – New York Cubans

1948 Birmingham Black Barons vs Kansas City Monarchs (Negro American League)

During the 1948 Negro American League season, only the Birmingham Black Barons (57-21) and the Kansas City Monarchs (43-25) finished the regular season with records above .500. The Birmingham Black Barons won the first half of the season and the Kansas City Monarchs won the second half.

The complete standings for the 1948 Negro American League season were:

Negro American League (1948)

	Games	Record	Pct.
Birmingham Black Barons	78	57-21	.731
Kansas City Monarchs	68	43-25	.632
Cleveland Buckeyes	83	41-42	.494
Memphis Red Sox	77	33-44	.429
Indianapolis Clowns	73	27-46	.370
Chicago American Giants	75	27-48	.360

The Birmingham Black Barons were led by the hitting of Artie Wilson (.402), Lorenzo “Piper” Davis (.353), Alonzo Perry (.325) and Ed Steele (.300). Also on the team was a young ball player from Fairfield (AL) by the name of Willie Mays. Jimmy Newberry (14-5), Bill Powell (11-11) Alonzo Perry (10-2), Jehosie Heard (6-1) and Bill Greason (6-4) were the top pitchers for Birmingham.

The Kansas City Monarchs were managed by Buck O’Neil. The Monarchs like the Black Barons had a strong hitting team. The top hitters for Kansas City were Willard “Homerun” Brown (.374), Hank Thompson (.348), Herb Souell (.302), Earl Taborn (.301), Gene Baker (.293) and Elston Howard (.283). Jim “Lefty” La Marque (15-5), John Ford Smith (10-5) and Gene Collins (9-3) were the nucleus of the pitching staff. The 1948 Kansas City Monarchs had six players on their roster that would appear in the Major Leagues. These players were Gene Baker (shortstop), Willard Brown (outfield), Elston Howard (catcher), Connie Johnson (pitcher), Curt Roberts (second base) and Hank Thompson (outfield).

Game one of the series was played on September 11th in Birmingham. The Black Barons collected 17 hits in the game. The top hitters for Birmingham were Piper Davis with four hits and Artie Wilson with three. Kansas City held a one run led (4-3) going into the bottom of the ninth inning. The Black Barons tied it up in the bottom of the ninth and won it in the bottom of the eleventh inning when Willie Mays delivered a single up the middle with the bases loaded to give Birmingham a 5-4 victory. Game two was a hitters contest. Birmingham got fourteen hits in the game and Kansas City got eleven. Piper Davis hit for the cycle with a homerun, triple, double and single. Willie Mays collected three hits and Willard Brown of the Monarchs went 3 for 4. The Black Barons won the game in the bottom of the tenth inning by a score of 5-4. Game three was played in Memphis (TN) and resulted in another one run victory. Jim Zapp tied the score in the bottom of the ninth with a homerun and shortly latter the winning run scored on an error. Bill Powell got the victory and Jim “Lefty” La Marque took the loss in the 4-3 win for Birmingham. Kansa City got their first victory of the series when the Play-Off Series moves to Kansas City. The Monarchs won game four by a score of 3-1.

Research by Larry Lester and Dick Clark identify that three more games were played in the series and that the Birmingham Black Barons won the series four games to three for Kansas City.

Game	Location	Date	Winning Team	Score	Winning Pitcher	Loosing Pitcher
1	Birmingham	Sept 11 th	Birmingham	5-4	Jimmy Newberry	Gene Richardson
2	Birmingham	Sept 12 th	Birmingham	6-5	Bill Greason	John Ford Smith
3	Memphis	-	Birmingham	4-3	Bill Powell	Jim La Marque
4	Kansas City	-	Kansas City	3-1	John Ford Smith	Jimmy Newberry

1948 Baltimore Elite Giants vs Homestead Grays (Negro National League)

The Baltimore Elite Giants won the first half of the Negro National League season and the Homestead Grays won the second half. The Homestead Grays finished the year with the best won-loss record in the Negro National League at 41-19 (.683). The Baltimore Elite Giants were second in the league with a record of 45-25 (.643). The complete Negro National League standings for 1948 were:

Negro National League (1948)

	Games	Record	Pct.
Homestead Grays	60	41-19	.683
Baltimore Elite Giants	70	45-25	.643
Newark Eagles	56	29-27	.518
Philadelphia Stars	56	27-29	.482
New York Cubans	43	16-27	.372
New York Black Yankees	47	8-39	.170

The Baltimore Elite Giants were led into the Play-Off Series by the hitting of Lester Lockett (.386), Bill Byrd (.344), Frank “Junior” Russell (.322), Henry Kimbro (.314) and John Washington (.308). Besides excellent hitting, the Elite Giants also had an outstanding starting pitching rotation that included Bill Byrd (11-6), Joe Black (10-5), Jonas Gaines (9-4) and Bob Romby (8-5).

The Homestead Grays were managed by legendary Negro League great Sam Bankhead. The Grays leading hitters during the 1948 season were Buck Leonard (.395), Luke Easter (.363), Bob Thurman (.345), Wilmer Fields (.311) and Luis Marquez. Homestead’s pitching staff included Wilmer Fields (7-1), R.T. Walker (7-3), Tom Parker (7-4) and Bob Thurman (6-4)

The Homestead Grays defeated the Baltimore Elite Giants three games to none in a Play-Off Series to claim the Negro National League title.

The Homestead Grays then defeated the Birmingham Black Barons (Negro American League champions) four games to one to win the last Negro League World Series.

Negro National League Champion (1948) – Homestead Grays

1951 Indianapolis Clowns vs Kansas City Monarchs (Negro American League)

The Negro American League was divided into an Eastern and Western Division during the 1951 season. The Indianapolis Clowns easily won the Eastern Division. With a won-loss record of 53-26 (.671), Indianapolis was the only team in their division to have a won-loss record over .500 at the end of the season. The Kansas City Monarchs won the Western Division with a record of 42-28 (.600). The complete Negro American League standings for the 1951 season are as follows:

Negro American League (1951)

1951 (Eastern Division)	Games	Record	Pct.
Indianapolis Clowns	79	53-26	.671
Baltimore Elite Giants	64	28-36	.438
Philadelphia Stars	46	18-28	.391
Birmingham Black Barons	64	24-40	.375
1951 (Western Division)	Games	Record	Pct.
Kansas City Monarchs	70	42-28	.600
Chicago American Giants	58	34-24	.586
New Orleans Eagles	83	39-44	.470
Memphis Red Sox	56	22-34	.393

After the regular season the Indianapolis Clowns and the Kansas City Monarchs conducted a tour that was billed as the “Annual Negro World Series.” It is unclear how many games were actually played, but newspaper articles for three games have been found. The three games that we have documented are:

Date	Day	Location	Park
September 21	Friday	Greenville (MS)	Sportsman Park
September 28	Friday	Abilene (TX)	Blue Sox Stadium
September 30	Sunday	Fort Worth (TX)	La Grave Field

One thing that is clear is that the two teams were not playing in the big cities and had been relegated to second rate venues.

Our research has found the most information on the game played in Abilene (TX) at Blue Sox Stadium. The game was played on Friday September 28th and received stiff competition for attendance from the local high school football game. The Monarchs won the game in ten innings by a score of 7-6. Gene Collins hit a homerun in the game as the Monarchs collected eleven hits. Booker Mc Daniels for the Monarchs got the win.

The Indianapolis Clowns were declared the Negro American League Champions after the series.

Negro American League Champion (1951) – Indianapolis Clowns.

1952 Birmingham Black Barons vs Indianapolis Clowns (Negro American League)

The Indianapolis Clowns won the first half of the season and the Birmingham Black Barons won the second half. The finals standings for the 1952 Negro American League season were as follows:

Negro American League (1952)

	Games	Record	Pct.
Indianapolis Clowns	74	44-30	.595
Birmingham Black Barons	87	51-36	.586
Chicago American Giants	63	32-31	.508
Kansas City Monarchs	49	23-26	.469
Memphis Red Sox	69	29-40	.420
Philadelphia Stars	60	22-38	.367

The first game of the series was played in Sikeston (Missouri) on September 12th at VFW Memorial Park. Newspaper coverage of the tour was very minimal. It is unclear how many games were played during the tour.

The Indianapolis Clowns were named the Negro American League champions after the series.

Negro American League Champion (1952) – Indianapolis Clowns

1953 Kansas City Monarchs (Negro American League)

The Kansas City Monarchs won both halves of the split season and were named Negro American League champions. Kansas City was the only team in the league to finish over .500 for the season. The final standings for the 1953 Negro American League season were:

Negro American League (1953)

	Games	Record	Pct.
Kansas City Monarchs	77	56-21	.727
Birmingham Black Barons	62	28-34	.452
Indianapolis Clowns	75	31-43-1	.419
Memphis Red Sox	58	20-37-1	.351

No play-offs were held after the season.

Negro American League Champion (1953) – Kansas City Monarchs

1954 Indianapolis Clowns (Negro American League)

The Indianapolis Clowns won both halves of the split season and were crowned Negro American League champions.

Negro American League (1954)

	Games	Record	Pct.
Indianapolis Clowns	65	43-22	.662
Memphis Red Sox	84	49-34-1	.590
Birmingham Black Barons	80	41-38-1	.519
Detroit Stars	55	23-31-1	.426
Louisville Clippers	51	19-30-2	.388
Kansas City Monarchs	67	23-43-1	.348

No play-off series was held.

Negro American League Champion (1954) – Indianapolis Clowns

1955 Kansas City Monarchs (Negro American League)

By 1955 the Negro American League was down to just five teams (Birmingham Black Barons, Detroit Stars, Indianapolis Clowns, Kansas City Monarchs and Memphis Red Sox). The two division system had been done away with after the 1951 season and there had not been a play-off over the last two seasons (1953 and 1954). It also appears that the 1955 season was not split into two halves.

By the mid 1950's, the quality of play in Negro League baseball was drastically reduced and the end of Negro League baseball was in sight. If not for the dedication, perseverance and hard work of Ted Rasberry (owner of the Kansas City Monarchs and Detroit Stars), the demise of Negro League baseball would have come much earlier than it did.

The Kansas City Monarchs were managed by Buck O'Neil and were the dominant team in the Negro American League in 1955. Satchel Paige had rejoined the team and Buck's roster included three young ball players (George Altman, J.C. Hartman and Lou Johnson) that would go on to play in the Major Leagues. The Monarchs had the best record in the Negro American League in 1955 and at the end of the season they were awarded the Negro American League title.

Negro American League Champion (1955) – Kansas City Monarchs