

# Delaware Backstory: Honoring Hall of Famer Judy Johnson



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Not long ago, a park at Second and Clayton streets in Wilmington was owned by dope slingers.

They and the garbage-strewn field insulted the man for whom the park was named.

On Thursday, however, a state historical marker and more than \$25,000 in improvements – new fencing, dugouts, field improvements and a stately brick-based sign – were dedicated in a ceremony marking the revitalized park as a true tribute to the late hometown Hall of Famer William Julius "Judy" Johnson.

One of the best third basemen ever to play the game, Johnson was a star of the Negro Leagues.

Scouted at 14, he rode a ferry and milk truck daily to play in Atlantic City, New Jersey, recalled family friend Ron Whittington, who wore a replica Hilldale team uniform in honor of the team Johnson joined full-time at age 18.

Whittington also recalled that when anyone asked Johnson how he was doing, he happily replied, "The sun is shining and there's a baseball game going on."

He was "a slick-fielding, spray-hitting, clutch performer," his Hall of Fame biography says.

He led the Hilldales to three pennants in 1923-25 and played in the first Negro World Series in 1924. The Kansas City Monarchs won, but the Hilldales beat them the next year.

He was declared the Negro Leagues MVP in 1929 – batting over .400 – and he went on to be the Homestead Grays' player-manager, later joining the Pittsburgh Crawfords and retiring in 1937.

He scouted for teams including the Phillies, signing Richie Allen among other greats. His Hall of Fame bio notes that his 1954 work as a spring training coach was considered too brief for him to be credited as the majors' first African-American coach.

He was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1975 and Clayton Park, where he had played as a kid, was renamed for him shortly thereafter.

Johnson, who lived with his wife Anita in Marshallton, died in 1989. Their home was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995.

By then, his namesake park had fewer players and more dealers.

Its years-long transformation was led by the persistent presence of Hilltop residents determined to take it back, relentless enforcement by city police and leadership of elected officials sickened by its degradation.

Rep. Helene Keeley, who drives by the park daily, said, "Year after year after year, I kept looking ... and it disturbed me."

Keeley, who secured funds for the marker, was among many who spoke at the dedication of honoring Johnson "properly."

*Now, she said, "there's going to be kids playing baseball here for the first time in a very long time."*

*Mayor Dennis P. Williams, who called Johnson "a team player, a good man, a good American and a good Wilmingtonian," envisioned the revitalized field's long-term benefit, saying "baseball has turned so many lives around, of young inner-city kids."*

*City Council President Theo Gregory, Councilman Bob Williams and others spoke of the improved park as a commitment to the city and its children, as well as Johnson's history-making career and legacy.*

*"He's a legend in the baseball world," City Councilman Bob Williams said. "The way he played the game was with his heart."*

*Wilmington Blue Rocks' general manager Chris Kemple said he is inspired daily by Johnson's statue at Frawley Stadium, with Judy Johnson Field, inviting all to the team's annual August tribute to the Negro Leagues and Johnson.*

*Sandra Johnson, his niece, a Philadelphia writing professor, thanked more than 100 people attending the event. There were cheers and laughter when she said her students must write about the Negro Leagues to pass her class – and write about her uncle for an A+.*

*Larry Morris, a neighbor of guest-of-honor Olivia Johnson, Judy's sister-in-law, read a letter from U.S. Rep. John Carney praising the park as "a beacon" in the community and fitting recognition of Johnson's "impact and legacy."*

*City Councilwoman Sherry Dorsey Walker told of growing up in the area and sitting in church as a child with the guest-of-honor, whom she accompanied to the podium.*

*Olivia Johnson, 104 years old, greeted fellow "Hilltop Hillybillies" and talked of living nearby and going to Howard High School, as did her ballplayer brother-in-law.*

*"I'm so happy today," she said. "This is a beautiful day for all of us."*

*During post-ceremony photos, Delaware Backstory asked her favorite memory of her brother-in-law.*

*Delightfully, her answer had nothing to do with baseball.*

*With a sweet smile, she said, "Making homemade ice cream."*

### ***Epilogue***

*William H. Taylor Jr., who made the park sign's base, lingered after the crowd left.*

*Taylor, whose father told him of playing pick-up games with Johnson and Babe Ruth, said he was honored to be part of the project. As others had earlier, he said the sign designed by Joe Swarter was perfect, especially its baseball-capped posts.*

*He ran a rough mason's hand over the base's smooth concrete and chip marble top.*

*Almost whispering, he said he had to return right after it was finished to buff out graffiti painted in six places. "Pretty sad," he said.*

*But it felt like a warning about the fragile nature of the park's admirable transformation – and its potential to encourage other city kids while honoring the legacy of one who not only made good, but also made history – if it's not properly tended and protected with love.*

*Do you have a Delaware Backstory? Tell robin brown at (302) 324-2856, [rbrown@delawareonline.com](mailto:rbrown@delawareonline.com), on Facebook, via Twitter @rbrowndelaware or The News Journal, Box 15505, Wilmington, DE 19850.*