

Paying homage to Hall of Famer Judy Johnson

Written by *ROBIN BROWN* The News Journal
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A local was driving a Delaware newcomer to see sights in Wilmington, when the transplant bragged of having been to Point-to-Point *and* the Italian Festival. By a tiny park off Second Street, the newcomer planted both feet in his yap -- in one breath.

First he said, "I'm practically a Delawarean." Then, pointing to the park sign, he asked, "Judy Johnson, who's she?"

The local pulled over. Time for a Delaware lesson. To be Delawarean, one must know -- no, revere -- the modest park's baseball diamond namesake.

To start, he's no she. The state's most famous Judy was man and gentleman.

William Julius "Judy" Johnson, who lived from 1899 to 1989, was the first Delawarean in the Baseball Hall of Fame. The Cooperstown, N.Y., shrine calls him "a sure-handed third baseman from the sandlots of Delaware." Ballplayers of his day called him [smart](#)

, shy, graceful and honest. He started in pro ball as a [teen](#). His only baseball limitation was color.   Connie Mack, Philadelphia Athletics owner-manager, once said, "If Judy were only white, he could name his own price."

He was that good. And [better](#)

 . Because bigotry didn't beat him.


"But he kept playing, and treated all people, black and white, with dignity and love," wrote the Historical Society of Delaware's Ellen Rendle, author of "Judy Johnson: Delaware's Invisible Hero."

"Never bitter," she wrote, "he dreamed of a color-blind world."

Johnson has been called the Negro League's top third baseman, a line-drive master consistently batting over .300, and captain of a "Negro World Series" champion team. He later broke barriers as the majors' first black coach, with the Phillies.

"He was a cerebral player ... and a true gentleman," said friend Joe Mitchell, founder-president of the nonprofit Judy Johnson Foundation.

The foundation -- which paid for the Johnson exhibit at the Delaware Sports Museum and Hall of Fame -- aims to keep alive Judy's memory and [share](#)


 the Negro League's legacy. It hosts a yearly Judy Johnson Night at the Blue Rocks, backed by the city and state, slated this year for Aug. 18.

While the stadium is named for the late Wilmington Mayor Daniel S. Frawley, the field bears Judy's name and his statue greets guests. He was one of the first inductees in the state hall of fame at the stadium -- the only unanimous vote.

Johnson also was a prolific scout. He once urged the Philadelphia Athletics to sign a young talent -- Hank

Aaron -- but they declined.

He also scouted Ron Whittington of Wilmington on the old DeLaWarr [High School](#)

team. Whittington said he loves telling how Johnson got nicknamed "the most honest man in baseball."


Seems Johnson walked miles from a motel for a shave and haircut. The barber said that'll be 26 cents. Judy had 25. So he walked back to the motel, returning to the barber with another penny. The barber told everybody the story. It spread all over the country. It was priceless.

Like Judy Johnson.

And that little city ballpark with his name? No sign provides an explanation, but soon one may. That's where he first played.

Write to robin brown at The News Journal, Box 15505, Wilmington, DE 19850; fax 324-5509; call 324-2856; or [e-mail](#)

backstory@delawareonline.com.
