



'Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American'

A new exhibit spotlights American Jews and the fight for equality in baseball.

By Peter Dreier

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Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball," wrote Columbia University scholar Jacques Barzun in 1954.

In the history of baseball, great attention has been justifiably paid to the sport's important role in battling racism. The moment when Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier will always be one of baseball's most memorable. Less noticed in our national pastime's history has been its contribution to combating anti-Semitism and other forms of bigotry. Equally important, baseball has helped immigrants and minority groups to assimilate into mainstream America and forge their own separate identities.

A glorious exhibit, *Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American*, refracts that history through the lens of baseball. The exhibit displays over 130 artifacts, original films, and interactive experiences that highlight how Jews and other minority groups, including Italians, African Americans, Latinos, Asians, and others, used baseball to help them find common ground as Americans. It documents the country's history of immigration, ethnic and racial conflict, tensions between group identity and assimilation, and crusades to challenge bigotry and dismantle discrimination. Organized by the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, it will be on display at the Skirball Museum in Los Angeles through October 30, the American Jewish Historical Society in New York through July 2017, and **other cities**.

It is difficult today to imagine the excitement that greeted Jackie Robinson when he broke baseball's color barrier in 1947. His success on the baseball diamond—he won the Rookie of the Year Award that season—was a symbol of the promise of a racially integrated society. The dignity with which Robinson handled his encounters with racist players and fans and dealt with Jim Crow on the road in hotels, restaurants, trains, and other public places drew public attention to the issue. His experiences stirred the consciences of many white Americans and gave black Americans a tremendous boost of pride and self-confidence.

By hiring Robinson, the Dodgers earned the loyalty of millions of black Americans from across the country. But the team also gained the allegiance of many white Americans, most fiercely American Jews, especially those in the immigrant and second-generation neighborhoods of America's big cities, who believed that integrating our national pastime was a critical steppingstone to tearing down many other obstacles to equal treatment.

Despite the fact that Americans fought in World War II in part to end Hitler's persecution of Jews, anti-Semitism was still widespread in postwar America. Throughout the country, colleges, employers, real estate agents and homebuilders, hotels, resorts, and country clubs still discriminated against Jews. In this climate, Jews and African Americans were natural allies, and Jewish groups were at the forefront of campaigns to integrate housing and break down other barriers for both groups.

One of the most interesting artifacts in the *Chasing Dreams* exhibit is a **1948 poster** portraying four white boys and one African American boy holding bats and gloves, preparing for a game of baseball. One of the white boys, clearly upset, tells another white player, "What's his race or religion got to do with it? He can pitch!"

The caption on the poster says: "Keep pitching for EQUAL RIGHTS for all Americans. Remember—Home runs are made by children of every race, color, creed, and national origin. FIGHT FOR racial and religious understanding."

The poster was part of a campaign in Cincinnati to promote religious and racial understanding. In 1948, as the Brooklyn Dodgers were prepared to meet the Cincinnati Reds, Mayor Albert D. Cash used the occasion to collaborate with Phil Goldsmith, owner of Goldsmith Sporting Goods and local president of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish fraternal and service organization, in an effort to combat prejudice and discrimination.



Courtesy of the Cincinnati Human Relations Committee

Jackie Robinson and Danny Litwhiler, 1948.

I was intrigued enough by the Cincinnati poster to dig a little deeper to learn more about the campaign. Why would the mayor of that conservative, segregated city that borders Kentucky, and has a long history of racial intolerance, get involved in this effort?

During his rookie season in 1947, Robinson faced enormous hostility when the Dodgers were on the road. Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Cincinnati were particularly unfriendly cities. The Dodgers stayed at the Netherland Plaza when they came to Cincinnati. Robinson was allowed to stay at the hotel, but wasn't allowed to eat in the dining rooms; he had to eat all his meals in his room.

During the first game of the Reds-Dodgers series, Cincinnati fans were giving Robinson a rough time with racist catcalls. His teammate Pee Wee Reese temporarily left his position at shortstop, walked over to Robinson playing at first base, and put his arm around the rookie. This act silenced the crowd, which was shocked and awed by the act of racial empathy by Reese, a popular

All-Star from nearby Kentucky. A statue of Reese with his arm around Robinson stands outside the stadium where Brooklyn Cyclones (a minor league team affiliated with the New York Mets) play.


Every biography of Robinson recounts that story, but not one of them mentions the Cincinnati campaign for racial tolerance a year later. The campaign enlisted Robinson, who had broken baseball's color line the year before, and Reds' outfielder Danny Litwhiler, to pose for a photo holding the poster. (It is unfortunate that the *Chasing Dreams* exhibit doesn't include this photo.)

Litwhiler recounted the story in his 2006 autobiography, *Living the Baseball Dream*. According to Litwhiler, Reds President and General Manager Warren Giles called him to his office. He was introduced to Mayor Cash and Phil Goldsmith, who served on the mayor's Friendly Relations Committee (which later became the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission). Litwhiler recalled that Giles was concerned that there was "talk that we could have trouble with Jackie coming to town. ... They asked me if I would take a picture with Jackie to run in the paper the next day." Litwhiler agreed, but asked, "Why me?"

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“Mr. Giles said, ‘You are a college graduate, and I believe you will agree that Jackie Robinson should play Major League Baseball,’” Litwhiler recalled. Litwhiler agreed to pose for a photo with Robinson, and Giles said, “That will let people know the Cincinnati Reds welcome him.” The photo ran in local newspapers and was displayed in many stores and public buildings. Litwhiler recalled that he took “a lot of flak from a few of the players over the picture” and that his roommate, a Southerner, called him a “nigger lover.”

Jewish groups viewed the era’s popular national pastime as one way to raise these issues. In this context, it is not surprising that Mayor Cash, the Cincinnati Reds, and B’nai B’rith joined forces to battle bigotry and promote intergroup understanding.

Chasing Dreams focuses primarily on Jewish players, but the exhibit also delves into other immigrant, racial, and ethnic groups’ ties to baseball. After the Civil War and into the early 20th century, white immigrant groups identified with, took pride in, and felt connected to baseball more than any other sport. Each group had its ethnic heroes like John McGraw, an Irish American; Honus Wagner, a German American; Al Simmons (born Aloisius Szymanski), a Polish American; and Tony Lazzeri and Joe DiMaggio, Italian Americans.

When Jewish immigrants began arriving from Eastern Europe in large numbers in the late 1800s, baseball was as foreign to them as ham. Lipman Pike, a power-hitting utility fielder who played in the 1860s to 1870s and hit six home runs in one game for the Philadelphia Athletics, was not only the first documented Jewish baseball star but also the first professional baseball player.

Many immigrant parents initially resisted allowing their sons to play what they considered a silly game that diverted their attention away from school and religion. Several Jewish institutions, including the Young Men’s Hebrew Associations (settlement houses modeled after the YMCA) and Jewish newspapers, took on the responsibility of persuading parents that if they wanted their children to be accepted in America, it behooved them to learn about baseball and permit their sons to play the game and cheer for their local pro teams. Baseball became a way for Jews to prove that they were loyal Americans who wanted to fit in, even as they sought to maintain their group identity.

In 1903, the *Forward*, a widely-circulated Yiddish-language daily newspaper in New York, published a letter from a Russian immigrant, who'd written to say he didn't understand why baseball was so beloved by Americans.

"What is the point of a crazy game like baseball?" the reader wanted to know. "I want my boy to grow up to be a mensch, not a wild American runner."

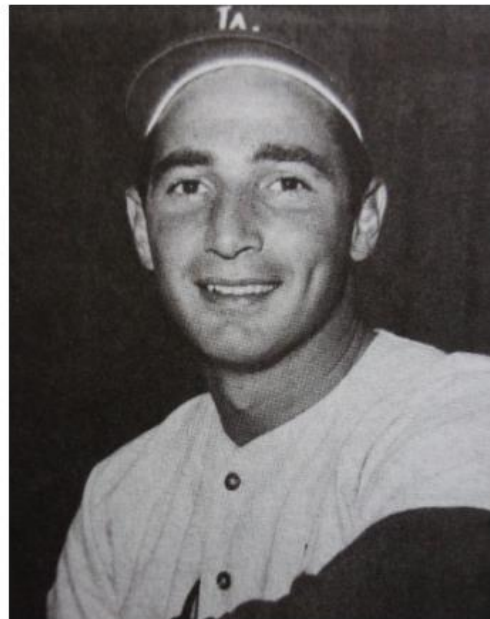
"Let your boys play baseball and play it well," *Forward* editor Abraham Cahan responded in the letters-to-the-editor column. "Let us not raise the children that they grow up foreigners in their own birthplace."

The exhibit does not ignore the ugly anti-Semitism that infected baseball and the rest of American society. As millions of immigrants came to America in the early 1900s, the country became a cauldron of nativist and anti-Semitic vitriol. Anti-Semitism was directed at players as well as the handful of Jews who owned major and minor league teams. It was exacerbated by the role that Jewish gamblers played in the infamous 1919 "**Black Sox**" scandal. The next year, industrialist and auto magnate Henry Ford, a vicious anti-Semite, wrote, "If fans wish to know the trouble with American baseball, they have it in three words—too much Jew."

Unlike African Americans, Jews were never banned from professional baseball and many played in the minors and majors. But it is impossible to know how many Jews played in the majors in the first third of the 20th century because so many of them changed their names. The exhibit has a fascinating display of five players named Cohen who donned major league uniforms during that period, only one of whom (New York Giants star Andy Cohen) used his birth name. Samuel Cohen, for example, played second base in the major leagues from 1916 to 1926 under the name Samuel Arthur Bohne.

As Jews gained more acceptance and self-confidence in America, fewer Jewish ballplayers changed their names. The most prominent was Hank Greenberg, who joined the Detroit Tigers in 1930. He was the first Jewish superstar: He won the Most Valuable Player award twice and played in five All Star games, eventually going on to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. Detroit was among the country's most anti-Semitic cities. It was the home of two influential anti-Semites: Henry Ford and radio priest Charles Coughlin. According to Birdie Tebbetts, his Tiger teammate, Greenberg "was abused more than anyone except Jackie Robinson."

During the 1935 World Series, umpire George Moriarty warned the Chicago Cubs players to stop screaming anti-Semitic insults at Greenberg. By the time the game was over, Moriarty had cleared much of the Cubs' dugout. Kenesaw Mountain Landis, baseball's racist commissioner, then disciplined and fined Moriarty for his actions.



N.Y. Public Library Picture Collection/Public Domain

Many baseball experts consider Sandy Koufax the greatest pitcher of all time.

Although Greenberg wasn't religious, he was proud of his Jewish identity and knew that he was both a role model for Jews and a symbol of his group to non-Jews. On September 18, 1934, when Greenberg was leading the American League in runs batted in and his Tigers were in a close battle for first place, he chose to attend Yom Kippur services rather than play. When he arrived at the synagogue, the congregation gave him a standing ovation. In 1938, when Greenberg hit 58 home runs, two short of Babe Ruth's 1927 record, he faced regular anti-Semitic insults from fans who hated the idea that a Jew might overtake the beloved Babe's milestone.

He often said that he felt every home run he hit was a home run against Hitler: Greenberg was the first major league player to register for the draft, in October 1940. He served 47 months, longer than any other player, during his prime athletic years. "My country comes first," Greenberg said. The exhibit displays his original military identification card.

Although his career was cut short by injury, many baseball experts consider Sandy Koufax the greatest pitcher of all time. He won, by unanimous vote, the Cy Young Award as the game's outstanding pitcher in 1963, 1965, and 1966. He hurled four no-hitters, including a perfect game. In 1972, Koufax, then 36, was the youngest player ever elected to the Hall of Fame.

When Koufax decided to skip the Dodgers' first game of the World Series against the Minnesota Twins, on October 8, 1965, which fell on Yom Kippur, his decision made headlines and sparked controversy around the country. But he also became a source of great pride among American Jews. In his 1966 autobiography, Koufax wrote: "There was never any decision to make ... because there was never any possibility that I would pitch ... the club knows that I don't work that day."

The exhibit not only celebrates Jewish major league players, but also managers, owners, executives, vendors, minor leaguers, scouts, fans, journalists, novelists (like Bernard Malamud, author of *The Natural*) and broadcasters (including Mel Allen, voice of the Yankees, whose real name was Melvin Allen Israel). Rosalind Wyman, who became Los Angeles's first Jewish city council member in 1953, was instrumental in bringing the Dodgers to Los Angeles—a feat that may have earned her the enmity of many Brooklynites (including its large Jewish population) but also earned her *The Los Angeles Times*' Woman of the Year award in 1958.

Two of the most important Jews in baseball history are Lester Rodney, the sports editor of the Communist Party paper *Daily Worker* who was an early and vocal advocate for baseball racial integration, and Marvin Miller, the first executive director of the baseball players union who dramatically changed labor relations in the major leagues and improved players' salaries,

benefits, and working conditions. Both men **should be** in the Baseball Hall of Fame; sadly, Miller **has been** kept out.

The exhibit also celebrates the contributions of Jewish women to the sport. Justine Siegal was the first woman to pitch major league batting practice when she threw to Cleveland Indians players during their 2011 spring training in Arizona. She was denied the chance to play for her high school baseball team but later served a four-year stint as an assistant baseball coach with Springfield College (making her the only female collegiate coach for a men's program) and, in 2009, the first woman to coach in pro baseball when worked as a first-base coach for the Brockton, Massachusetts, Rox in the independent Canadian-American League.

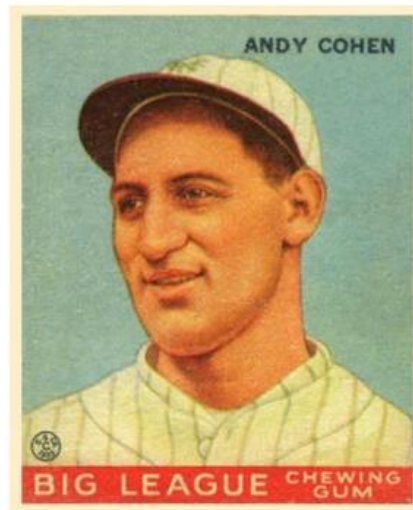
The Hollywood film *A League of Their Own* portrays the world of the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League, which attracted fans in the 1940s and 1950s. *Chasing Dreams* includes photos of one of its biggest stars, Thelma "Tiby" Eisen, was born in Los Angeles in 1922 to Orthodox Jewish parents.

The exhibit includes a reproduction of the first World Series agreement, signed in 1903 by Boston American owners Henry Killilea and Barney Dreyfuss, a Jewish German immigrant who owned the Pittsburgh Pirates.

Visitors can view the sheet music of the song, "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," composed in 1908 by Albert Von Tilzer, son of Polish Jewish immigrants, who had never been to a baseball game. Born Albert Gumm, he took his mother's maiden name Tilzer and added the von title to make himself sound less Jewish. Collecting and trading baseball cards is as central to the sport as singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." The exhibit honors Seymour "Sy" Berger, an employee of the Topps Chewing Gum Company, who in 1952 designed the modern baseball card that included colorful player photos and facsimiles of their autographs, statistics, and short bios.

The exhibit includes a section, "Overcoming Adversity," that captures the hardships and accomplishments of players from other immigrant and minority groups. It wasn't until 1959, 12 years after Robinson joined the Dodgers, that every major league team had an African American onto its roster. The black players who followed Robinson shattered the stereotype that there weren't many African Americans "qualified" to play at the major league level—a stereotype once widely shared among many white team owners, sportswriters, and fans.

Museumgoers also learn about the experiences of Puerto Ricans like Roberto Clemente and Vic Power. Latin American players whose contributions are noted include Fernando Valenzuela of Mexico, and Camilo Pascual and Minnie Minoso of Cuba. It also showcases the more recent participation of players from Japan and Korea.



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Of the five Jewish players using the name Cohen in the early 20th century, Andy Cohen was the only one using his birth name.

The exhibit documents Japanese Americans who organized amateur leagues in California and even played baseball in the internment camps to which they were sent during World War II. It also displays photos and artifacts of Mexican American farmworkers in rural California and barrio dwellers in Los Angeles who created teams that helped them forge a sense of community that laid the foundation for their later political and union activism.

Racism stalked Latino players. The exhibit includes a 1953 letter from Ossie Bluege, director of the Washington Senators' minor league teams, to Joe Engel, owner of its farm team, the Chattanooga Lookouts. Bluege wanted to know if Cuban player Raul Lago "is colored or not." That would determine if he could attend the team's spring training camp in racially segregated Florida. "If he's white all go and well, if not, he stays home," wrote Bluege. The response from Havana— "NO COLORED BLOOD AT ALL, POSITIVELY WHITE, AS SNOW BALL"—meant that Lago was OK to join the major league team's training camp.

Chasing Dreams displays one of Valenzuela's warm-up jackets. The Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher became an iconic figure among the large Latino immigrant population in the city. Although the Dodgers were the first team to field African American players, they were late to field Latino players from the U.S. or elsewhere. In the 1950s, the city had razed Chavez Ravine, a Mexican-American neighborhood, which eventually became the site for Dodger Stadium. To this day, there are Mexican Angelenos who refuse to attend Dodger games in protest over the neighborhood's destruction.

The Dodgers won the allegiance of many Latinos when they brought Valenzuela to Los Angeles at the end of the 1980 season. His charisma—and his unusual windup—made him a popular celebrity in the U.S. and Mexico, a craze known as "Fernandomania." In 1981, he led the team to a World Series victory and became the first player to win both the Cy Young and Rookie of the Year awards in the same season. (Since 2003, he has been the color commentator for Dodgers games on Spanish language radio and television.)

Valenzuela's success helped shatter stereotypes about Mexican Americans just as Greenberg's and Koufax's triumphs' did with Jewish Americans. But Valenzuela faced many indignities from sportswriters, fans, and teammates as he sought to adjust to life in the United States and in the big leagues.

Fans whose curiosity is piqued by the photos and artifacts can learn more by reading beautifully illustrated, 256-page **book**, *Chasing Dreams: Baseball & Becoming American*, edited by Josh Perelman, the exhibit's co-curator. It includes over 40 essays by novelists, journalists, scholars, players, and fans.

Chasing Dreams reminds us that baseball (like all amateur and professional sports) is more than a hobby, extracurricular activity, or entertainment. It is a mirror of society's economic and racial tensions as well as a battleground for social justice.