

VOICES FROM THE NEGRO LEAGUES

*Conversations with
52 Baseball Standouts
of the Period 1924-1960*

BY BRENT KELLEY

Brent Kelley



McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers
Jefferson, North Carolina, and London

Thomas Turner

"High Pockets"

NEGRO LEAGUE DEBUT: 1947

Thomas Turner did not have a long professional baseball career, but he has spent his life in athletics.

He left college in 1936 and earned his living playing sports full-time: baseball with the Cincinnati Braves and Dayton Monarchs, football with the Cincinnati Stars, and basketball with the "Big Five," a touring team.

He continued to play all of these sports after he was drafted, and he also was his army post's champion bowler, one of the ranking golfers, and a superior roller skater. The officer in charge of recreation on the base, Lt. James Chambers, called Turner "the greatest natural athlete I've ever seen in my life." And at that time, Chambers had spent 27 years working with army athletes.

The Turner family was evidently very gifted athletically. Hattie Turner, a younger sister, once held the women's world records in both discus and baseball throws.

Turner played professional baseball again after leaving the service, in Mexico and briefly with the Chicago American Giants. For the past 38 years, he has coached women's softball teams in Ohio and Seattle, where he was a recreation supervisor for the Parks and Recreation Department. His teams have done very well; he has literally a room full of trophies and awards they have earned.

I started playing baseball when I was 11 years old. I started playing second base. My father managed the team. He bought me a glove, one of the best gloves that they were making. That was a Bill Doak. He admonished me from the day he gave me that glove, said if I lost it, that was it. So I slept with that glove. You know, those were the ones that would button; I could take it loose and put it on my pants and button it again. I kept that glove for years and years and years.

Then, in high school, I pitched — did real well as a pitcher. After I graduated from high school, I went to Tuskegee Institute for two years. I didn't play any sports

down there. I had a football scholarship, but Majors, the guy who was the coach at Tuskegee, he didn't like anybody under 200 pounds. I was weighing about 141 pounds, something like that. He didn't give me a chance because I wasn't what he was looking for.

So, in 1936, they organized this Indiana-Ohio League. All of these teams were major league farm clubs. A black man here in Cincinnati had a good thought. He put a lot of us guys together and we entered that league and I played in that league for four years — '36, '37, '38, and '39. In 1936 I was 21 years old when I started. I played short-stop the whole time in that league.



Thomas Turner (L.), Lt. James Chambers (R.). Fort Huachuca, Arizona baseball team. Photo taken in Nogales, Mexico, 1943 (courtesy of Thomas Turner).

Then I was drafted in the service. We were sent to Fort Huachuca, Arizona. The first thing that I did there — we got there in February — they started doing intra-mural stuff, stuff like volleyball. I was in a heavy weapons company — 368th machine gun company. Right quick I made first sergeant. I had been a boy scout and we

had a Spanish-American War veteran that was our scoutmaster and he taught us how to do close-order drill just like the soldiers, so I had all of that before I went into the service.

Then the whole infantry came in with the 368th. They started football teams, they started basketball teams, they started

baseball teams. Each company had a team. I was "H" company. Then they picked the guys from each company to represent the whole infantry, so I made that team. That's when I started playing first base.

The nice part about the army — you got everything that you needed. They would have the equipment salesman to come in and you could pick out your glove, you could pick out your bat. Whatever you needed, we got it.

I was an expert marksman with the rifle, so I taught marksmanship on the range. I'd be out there for six weeks at a time with new recruits coming in. That's why I'm wearing this thing today [he pointed to a hearing aid]. I wouldn't put cotton in my ears — it bothered me. Eventually, it affected that nerve in my ear.

I was captain of the football team, I was captain of the baseball team the whole time I was there. I played basketball, I roller skated — ran the roller rink. Five years in the service I played sports, I had to practice every day, and in the evenings I was special services. I had to open the skating rink, I had to skate 'til 11:00 every night with civilians — people who couldn't skate, women who had never been on skates before, and I had to teach them how to skate. Man, you talk about a job! That was a job! My back felt like it had been walked on.

So I wouldn't play football the last year. I just quit. We beat everybody around there in Arizona and we all got gold footballs. Baseball the same way. We would go to Santa Barbara for the 9th Service Command tournament — Santa Barbara, California — every year and that's where I got that nickname "High Pockets." A whole lot of women would be there and they would be on the first base line and they would holler to me, "Hey, High Pockets!" so that's where that name came from.

Then we traveled to Mexico. They saw me play there, so Zaragoso asked me when I was discharged from the service would I like to come down and play in the Mexican League. I just said, "Sure"; I had no intention of going to Mexico.

I got discharged December the 23rd, 1945, and I came home here in Ohio and in nine days I had four long distance telephone calls from Mexico. I wasn't married, so I set down with my mom and talked to her. She said if I liked to, go on and play. They sent me my plane fare and everything, so I went back to Mexico.

First year I was there, we played in the Pacific Coast League; that was the winter league. Bob Lemon managed our team — Hermosillo. Herman Breech from Minnesota, he played. And I forget this guy's name — he was Chicago Cubs' shortstop, he played on the team. And when spring training time came, they had to leave.

The winter league consisted of four cities: Hermosillo, Guaymas, Culiacán, and Mazatlán. Bill Wright played with Mazatlán. I played against him; I was very anxious to see him. Bill was an excellent hitter. Bill was a long ball hitter and to me, when he did hit the ball, it looked like it would just suddenly disappear like a rocket. It would be gone! Over the fence, in the stands, wherever. He was a good outfielder; he had a good arm; he was a big man. He was an exceptionally nice person and he still is.

Do you think he belongs in the Hall of Fame?

Sure, I do. I think he belongs there. I doubt he'll get there. I don't think that would worry Bill. You see, the thing about it, they didn't keep good records. Just like when I wanted my records from Chicago, they didn't have a picture of me anyplace. My nephew lives in Chicago and he had to go to the newspaper office and get the write-ups. They didn't even have anything at the *Chicago Defender* — no pictures or anything. And [Walter] McCoy doesn't have any.

I learned how to speak Spanish down there. I'll be honest; the girls taught me. In most of the stores in Hermosillo, the clerks were women and you would never believe the enthusiasm that baseball created in the country of Mexico during those days. You'd have to see it to believe it. I would go to the post office from my hotel, which was about



Thomas Turner, 1995, in replica uniform (courtesy of Thomas Turner).

six blocks. It would take me a half a day to go from my hotel to the post office 'cause I would get stopped by everyone and everyone in every one of those stores and they wanted to talk to me. And they made me speak Spanish; they wouldn't let me speak English. They made me learn it. They would pick me up in their automobiles and

ride me to the park; it wasn't that far — you could walk — but they'd come by the hotel and pick me up in a car and ride me.

They paid me \$700 a month, they paid for my laundry, they paid for my food, and they paid for everything. Only thing that I could spend money for was just for my personal effects. I couldn't spend money in a

restaurant; I could go to the restaurant to eat and they wouldn't take my money. They were just that nice to me.

Bill Wright said the conditions for a ballplayer were much better there.

If you knew how to act. Some of the white guys had a rough time — a *real* rough time. I'll tell you why — because they came to Mexico with that American feeling, you know, and that didn't work too good.

I used to take kids — 40 or 50 of them — and play with them, take them to the ball-park. If one carried my glove and my shoes, he could get in free. Well, I'd give one my shoes and I'd give one my glove and they'd let them in free and they could sit on the bench with us. During warmups before the game started, I'd throw with them. Oh, boy, they loved that!

There were a lot of white businesses down there and they hired me to teach their kids baseball. During those days, they gave me, for an hour out in the field, five dollars for each kid. Five American dollars. That was good money. I had about 15, 16 kids. They would come to the hotel and pick me up in their limousine. The chauffeur would pick me up. This is the kind of life that I lived. Bill was telling you right.

One guy was putting up a creamery there. They didn't have pasteurized milk; you'd have to boil your milk to drink it, it was right from the cow. He had a son — he had two kids — he was from San Diego, and he struck up a friendship with me and when I got ready to leave he asked me to stay. They wanted to give me a home and they would furnish it for me if I would stay down there. I had married down there and my wife was pregnant with my first child. Well, I wanted my kid to be born in the States, so I left there in early '47.

When I came here, unbeknownst to me, Jack Adkins, who was our football coach in the service, had contacted Dr. [John] Martin, who was the owner of the Chicago American Giants, and recommended me to him to play with the team. And McCoy,

also. So that's how we got on with the Chicago American Giants. I never would've got on if it hadn't been for Jack Adkins. I wouldn't even think about it. In fact, I didn't know anything about them, really.

My daughter was born February the 18th and two weeks later we went to Jackson, Mississippi, to spring training. I met up with McCoy down there and another boy named [John] Ritchey. He was a friend of McCoy's and we were all three rookies that year. And [Benvienito] Rodriguez was a rookie that year and I didn't know this, but he was only 15 years old.

We made the team. I played with them until June, then I quit and came home. They were paying me \$400 a month and our manager, Candy Jim Taylor, wanted to cut that in half. He wanted to pay me \$200 a month. I told him, "No way." He says, "The only way we can keep you is you'll have to take that cut." So I came home.

I thought that cutting my salary in half was too drastic. If he'd've said maybe \$300, I would've stayed there. In Chicago, I had to bear my own expenses and Chicago is no cheap town — never has been and never will be — so I couldn't very well take care of me and my wife and a kid off of \$200 a month. I couldn't have paid for a place to stay.

We would be gone. We went barnstorming. We'd only play in Chicago on a Sunday when the White Sox wasn't there and at 12:00 Sunday night we was in the bus and gone. Evansville, Indiana; St. Louis, Missouri; Little Rock, Arkansas; Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Selma, Alabama; Memphis, Tennessee; Kansas City, Missouri; Wichita, Kansas; Omaha, Nebraska; and back to Chicago. Two weeks of that — that's what we did. We were barnstorming everywhere; that's how they made their money.

I got a job at Shillito's [in Cincinnati] parking cars for \$30 a week. Then we started a semi-pro team called the Valley Tigers. We were good as professionals and I managed them until '51. Then in '51, G.E. hired me to play softball with their softball team. They had a good team. I played

outfield and we won the industrial league two years in a row. Fast pitch.

I went to three tryout camps after I left Chicago. One of 'em was the Yankees, one was St. Louis Cardinals, and the other was Cincinnati Reds. The Reds offered me \$250 a month if I would go down to their farm club in the Sally League, down there in Carolina. The Yankees, the only thing the guy asked me, do I think I could hit Triple-A pitching? That's the only word he said to me, and I told him, "I can hit major league pitching." Never heard from him.

Three days we were up there in Hamilton [Ohio]. If they didn't like you, they wouldn't invite you back the next day; they invited me back all three days. The last day we played intrasquad the whole day. I had 5-for-5, never made an error out there on the field. At this time, guys would bring ballplayers there and they would hustle them trying to get them hooked on. Everybody knew that I had a contract. I can't remember exactly what year that was, but it was in the early '50s. I never did hear from them, so I wrote them a letter — their headquarters were in Kansas City — and they sent me back a letter letting me know. The only problem was that I didn't weigh enough.

Do you know any of your individual season records?

In the Indiana-Ohio League, I was hitting .333. My batting averages never did go down under .300. In the service, I was hitting .4-something; I always kept a good batting average. No strikeouts.

We learned how to hit a ball with a broomstick and throwing a tennis ball. The

distance, I would say, was about [15 feet] and me and my brothers would throw at one another like that and we learned to hit that ball as hard as they could throw it, with a broomstick. And we were able to watch it. I almost want to throw up sometimes watching these professional guys go up to bat and being suckered with these pitches. It's really something to be professional and be suckered like that with a pitch. They aren't watching anything! They can't bunt a ball; they can't do anything! Anytime a professional man strikes out four times in a row, there's something wrong. And continues to do so!

We talk about it all the time, this type of baseball. We played baseball because we loved to play baseball. I loved baseball. My mom and dad played baseball. My mom was a good hitter. And they were at every game we played.

Did you enjoy the reunion in Kansas City?

I never felt so good in all my life, just to see those guys and to know that they're still around. I proposed to our meeting, and I'm still going to follow this through — we're going to get checks, you know, from major league baseball — I've never gotten one yet but some of the players have been getting them for two years already. I suggested to these guys that we take our checks and give them to the guys who are less fortunate than what we are. Some of these guys, I understand, can't even pay their rent, don't have a place to stay.

Would you be a baseball player again?

Oh, yes. That's all I'd do. I was brought up that a man takes care of his family. I'd need to do that, but I would play again.

THOMAS "HIGHPOCKETS" TURNER

Born 6-22-15, Olive Branch, TN

Ht. 5' 9" Wt. 155 Batted and Threw R

Year	Team, league	Pos	G	AB	R	H	2B	3B	HR	RBI	SB	BA
1947	Chi. American Giants, NAL	1B							1			.332

Turner also played in the Mexican League in 1946.