



# Sports, Race, and Canadian History

## The Chatham Coloured All-Stars Public History Project

Sports headlines over the past few years remind us of the ways that race and sports intersect in both the past and the present. Willie O'Ree's induction into the Hockey Hall of Fame, NFL player protests, and ethnic slurs hurled at First Nations hockey players, among others, all suggest that sports can offer insights into racial injustice in society, as well as the fight against it. Over the past three years, I have been part of a university-community group that has developed a website and public history project to help students explore these issues. In June, 2017, we launched "Breaking the Colour Barrier: Wilfred "Boomer" Harding and the Chatham Coloured All-Stars" (<http://cdigs.uwindsor.ca/BreakingColourBarrier/>). In 1934, the All-Stars were the first amateur Black baseball team to win a provincial championship in the predominantly white Ontario Baseball Association. Like many athletes from historically-marginalized communities, the players regularly faced racial and economic barriers playing ball in 1930s southern Ontario. While their descendants and community members have remembered and commemorated the team's achievements and hardships, the All-Stars' story has received little attention outside Chatham.

The project itself began when I was at a local history event and met Pat Harding, daughter-in-law of the late Wilfred "Boomer" Harding, one of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars players. She told me about scrapbooks she had created on Harding's sports life, using photos and newspaper articles saved decades earlier by Boomer's mother, Sarah. She asked if we could help make a website. I said yes, immediately, and then turned to two colleagues at the university's Leddy Library, Heidi Jacobs and Dave Johnston, for help. Both had previously worked with the History Department on using digital methods and resources in teaching. Together with Pat and Boomer's son, Blake Harding, we connected with other community groups – the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame, with whom we partnered to secure an Ontario Trillium Foundation grant, and the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society. We were able to hire students and move forward with the project that included both a website and community-based physical exhibits.

Our community partners felt very strongly about reaching students, so we thought carefully about making the historical materials accessible. We put digitized newspaper articles, photos and documents in galleries, with the full *Chatham Daily News* reports from the 1934 season on a timeline. One of the more compelling aspects of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars are the stories of the players themselves, so we created separate players' pages with

short biographies, photographs and links to relevant documents and interviews. An award-winning secondary school teacher in the Windsor area, Shantelle Browning-Morgan, created lesson plans based on the historical documents for grades one through twelve. Her thoughtful exercises and questions for students are all down-loadable, and are aligned with the Ontario curriculum.

As well as the documents, we included new oral histories we did with family members of the players – sons, daughters, nieces, nephews and one younger brother. A few were old enough to remember the team play in the 1930s, but most people we interviewed were recalling their dads and uncles in later years. Participants talked about sports, growing up in Chatham's east end neighbourhood, and navigating in a racialized world. Currently we have 17 interviews posted on the site, both audio recordings and transcripts, all indexed and searchable.

Finally, we created some portable physical exhibits as a way to publicize the website, and to connect with people who don't live online. Using photos and documents from the scrapbooks, we made some storyboards for the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame. We also made portable banners, including one with a four-panel comic on the Chatham Coloured All-Stars graphic novelist Scott Chantler drew for the project. These have been displayed at various locations in the region, including the Black Mecca Museum in Chatham. The banners are also available to loan to local schools and organizations. Sets of 1930s-style baseball cards we designed featuring the photos, bios and stats of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars players have also been a popular way to convey the story – with proceeds from sales going to the Chatham-Kent Black Historical Society.

Winning a provincial championship during the height of the Great Depression was undoubtedly unique, but in many ways, the stories of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars are similar to other non-white athletes who faced social, economic and racial barriers in Canada. Looking at their experiences can help students gain insights into the larger dynamics of sports, race, class, and gender in Canadian history. It may also help them make sense of the continued conflicts we see on sports fields, in dressing rooms and in hockey rinks.

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