

The 1955 Cannon Street All-Stars



A Chat with Augustus Holt

Photo By John Di Giovanni

1955 Cannon Street All-Star players Vermort A. Brown and Leroy Major sit with the team's historian, Augustus Holt, at Hampton Park's baseball field. It was here that the 1955 City of Charleston Little League Championship was scheduled to be played. As history would have it, the games never took place. The all-white teams refused to play in a tournament with an African-American team. This event, and the ones that transpired from it, will always be remembered for the significance it had in the American Civil Rights Movement.

In the spring of 1955, I left Charleston to join my father in Honolulu, Hawaii at Hickam Air Force Base. It was my first exposure to Little League Baseball. The next year I joined the Hickam Air Force Base Little League Baseball program. I played for the Dodgers, named after the first Major League Baseball team to sign an African American player, Jackie Robinson. I played second base, the same position as Mr. Robinson. Little did I know that the city of my early Little League dreams would be the birthplace of our country's first African American president. Here I was competing in a completely integrated Little League Baseball program, attending an integrated school and living in an integrated neighborhood. I did not know that the white leaders in the city and state of my birth were fighting to keep the schools and baseball fields separate.

I discovered the story of the Cannon Street All-Stars in 1993 when I was coaching my late son, Lawrence A. Holt in the Charleston Recreational Baseball program. I was given a rule book that read "Dixie Youth Baseball" over a Confederate flag. I began to research the Dixie League and discovered that it was founded to keep black and white players segregated, on the tears of the Cannon Street players.

I was determined not to let my son, and myself, be a part of a league that had such beginnings. We shared the dream of re-establishing Little League Baseball and honoring the 1955 Cannon Street All-Stars, through Lawrence's battle with brain cancer and even after his eventual passing.

-Augustus Holt, Historian for the Cannon Street All-Stars

Before we get into the history of the team, take us back prior to its formation. It was a difficult time in our history. What was it like growing up in Charleston?

The various black communities in Charleston were somewhat integrated. Some of the white families lived in the same neighborhoods as black families. But most neighborhoods were segregated. Most of the boys' and girls' play activities centered around outdoor games like jump-rope, tag, stick ball, football, basketball and, most importantly because of Jackie Robinson, baseball.

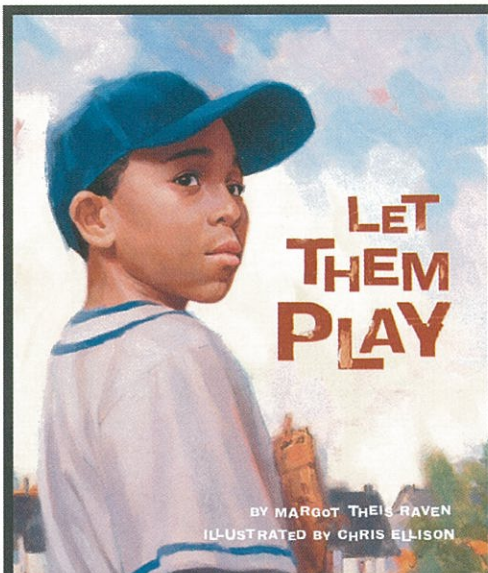
Can you tell us how the Cannon Street All-Stars formed?

In 1953, the Cannon Street YMCA youth activities director asked the Y's president, Robert F. Morrison, to assist him in organizing a Little League Baseball program. From 1953-1955, the Cannon Street YMCA had the only African American Little League team out of 62 in South Carolina.

A team of All-Stars entered the City Little League Championship Tournament. What happened next?

The Cannon Street All-Stars won the city league tournament by forfeit because the other white teams refused to play. The Cannon Street All-Stars met the same fate at the state tournament, where all 61 white Little League teams refused to play the Cannon Street All-Stars. The Cannon Street All-Stars qualified for the regional tournament, but Little League Baseball would not let the team move up any further because of a rule book technicality that they had never won a game in the previous tournament. They were invited to the Little League World Series in Williamsport, Penn. as honorary guests.

The next year a white-only baseball league, Dixie Youth Baseball, was formed.



Margot Theis Raven's book "Let Them Play" is an award winning true story of a group of young men whose desire was to only play baseball. In doing so, Raven provides a human history lesson for those young enough to learn and old enough to remember. Illustration by Chris Ellison Published by Sleeping Bear Press

Again, times were different, Was the team concerned for their safety traveling from Charleston to Williamsport, Penn.?

I am sure there were some concerns for the boys' safety, however, the adults that made the trip with the boys made them feel safe. One of the coaches, Walter Burke, was a Charleston police officer.

What was the reception from the Williamsport crowd when the All-Stars were introduced as honorary guests?

The people in the stands gave the boys a standing ovation. The fans started chanting, "Let Them Play. Let Them Play." The chant became louder and louder. The team was allowed to take the field to warm up but not play. The chant continued after the team returned to their seats to watch the championship game.

As a group of 12-year-olds just wanting to play baseball, was there any understanding at the time of the significance of what was happening?

The boys did not understand the significance of their story at the time. They did

not realize that they were young pioneers in the early Civil Rights Movement.

Tell us about some of the top accolades and recognitions that the team has received over the years.

The team has been recognized twice at the Little League World Series. The Charleston Riverdogs pay tribute to the team every year. The story has been on ABC Night Line, ESPN, Costas Now and HBO. It is the subject of an award-winning book, "Let Them Play," along with a book by William Buck Godfrey, "The Team Nobody Would Play." There have been proclamations from the state as well as the city. The team was also recognized before a major league game between the Washington Nationals and the Philadelphia Phillies.

The injustice of refusing the team and taking away the experience the young team would have enjoyed cannot be changed. What would you say were the major positives taken away from the experience?

They learned how to handle disappointment and to not let anyone take away their dreams.

The team recently lost one of its coaches and mentors. Can you give some insight on what Lee Bennett Sr. meant to the members of the team as well as with the Charleston community?

Lee Bennett was a community man, a pillar in the black community and the ultimate volunteer. He was a charter coach of the Cannon Street YMCA Little League. He would leave the shipyard and go to the ball field to coach baseball, as well as teach woodworking and upholstery at the boys club.

He was also a charter member of the Charleston Bears Athletic Club and football team. The club sponsored youth baseball teams and took kids to summer camps. They also gave college scholarships.