

Gibson Foundation honors Negro League Reggie Jackson, several former Pirates will headline the dais

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By Sam Werner, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Josh Gibson Foundation announced plans for the Josh Gibson Centennial Negro League Gala at a news conference Tuesday at the Heinz History Center.

The Aug. 13 gala at the Wyndham Grand Hotel will serve as the cornerstone of a series of events to honor the 100th anniversary of Gibson's birth, said Sean Gibson, great-grandson of former Negro League standout Josh Gibson and executive director of the foundation.

Josh Gibson was born in Buena Vista, Ga., Dec. 21, 1911, but moved to Pittsburgh when he was 12.

He began playing professionally for the Pittsburgh Crawfords at 16.

Over the next 17 years, he was the catcher for both the Crawfords and Homestead Grays and best known for his exceptional home run-hitting power. He died of complications from a brain tumor in 1947.

Former Steelers running back Franco Harris will serve as honorary co-chair of the gala along with his wife Dana. He said he was glad to help remember one of the city's early athletic heroes.

"We look at a lot of different feats and things that were accomplished, but, just like in any sport, we know there were a lot of challenges also during that time," Harris said of Gibson's days in the Negro Leagues.

"But the most important thing is that they met those challenges, came through those challenges and have left a great history for us, especially here in Pittsburgh."

Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson will receive the 2011 Josh Gibson Legacy Award at the event. Jackson hit 563 home runs over his 21-year major league career.

"We're very happy to have Reggie join us, and this'll be a very special night in Pittsburgh," Harris said.

The gala also will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the Pirates fielding the first all-minority lineup in major league history.

Three members of that team -- center fielder Al Oliver, pitcher Jim "Mudcat" Grant and second baseman Dave Cash -- also will receive awards at the event.

"It wasn't a big deal to most of us," Oliver said.

"But, when you look back over it, you appreciate it more today than when it happened, to be a part of history."

When he was player, Oliver said, he was aware of Gibson's legacy and credited Negro League players for giving him a chance to play in the majors.

"I owe a lot to them for their endurance and their tolerance of things," Oliver said. "Knowing that they were good enough to play in the major leagues, but just weren't given the opportunity."

The History Center also announced plans for a future Negro League exhibit. Anne Madarasz, co-director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, said the museum will play host to the traveling exhibition "We Are The Ship," a collection of Negro League art and memorabilia, starting July 2012.

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