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Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Heidi LM. (2024). Fred Thomas in Baseball. *Journal of Canadian Baseball*, 3 (1).
<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/leddylibrarypub/64>

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Fred Thomas in Baseball

Heidi LM Jacobs

Abstract: Best known for his skills on the basketball court, Fred Thomas also made significant contributions to baseball history as the first Black player to play in the Eastern League in 1948. Active in the Windsor and Detroit areas, Fred Thomas's baseball story deepens our understanding of cross-border baseball history and how the desegregation of baseball in the US played out in Canada.

Résumé: Mieux connu pour ses talents sur le terrain de basketball, Fred Thomas a également contribué de manière significative à l'histoire du baseball en étant le premier joueur noir à jouer dans la ligue Eastern en 1948. Actif dans les régions de Windsor et de Detroit, la carrière de baseball de Fred Thomas nous permet de mieux comprendre l'histoire du baseball transfrontalier et les effets de la déségrégation du baseball aux États-Unis sur le baseball canadien.

The most evocative summary of Fred Thomas' athletic career comes from his nephew Keenan Thomas who said, "my Uncle Fred played three professional sports at a time when they didn't want Blacks playing any pro sports."¹ Fred Thomas has been known as a basketball player, a football player, and baseball player. After being inducted into the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame's Order of Sport in 2024, he will be better known across Canada as what he was: "a multisport phenomenon who refused to let prejudice define his potential."²

Most of the attention Thomas receives focuses, justifiably, on his accomplishments as a basketball player. In 1950, a Canadian Press poll called Fred Thomas the second most significant Canadian basketball player in the first half of the twentieth century, in part for his stellar contributions to the Assumption College basketball team where he accrued 2,059 points. As one Windsor sportswriter noted, "There was probably never a Canadian basketball player who so dominated the key area and was so deadly with the hook shot as Fred Thomas. He played the game with the grace of a swan and the agility of a gazelle."³ Basketball was Thomas' main passion and his contributions to Canadian basketball were significant. His success on the basketball court often overshadows the contributions he made to Canadian baseball. But Fred Thomas' baseball story reveals a great deal about the history of Black baseball and the ways in which race, sport, and history intersect.

Thomas was born in Windsor, Ontario on December 26, 1923 to Fred Thomas, Sr of Windsor and Edith Mae Jones of Chatham. Thomas was a fifth-generation Canadian whose family could trace their roots to North Carolina and Barbados. Both sides of his family were descendants of those who sought freedom from slavery in Southwestern Ontario in the mid nineteenth century.

1 Keenan Thomas quoted in Mary Caton, "TVO piece recalls remarkable career of Windsor's Fred Thomas," *Windsor Star*, July 18, 2019: A1.

2 "Fred Thomas: Order of Sport," Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, 2024, <https://orderofsport.ca/2024/06/fred-thomas/>.

3 Ken Fathers quoted in Tony Techko, "Fred Thomas." *Windsor This Month*, nd, 12-13. Tony Techko Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Windsor (Accession 03-008 Box 51).

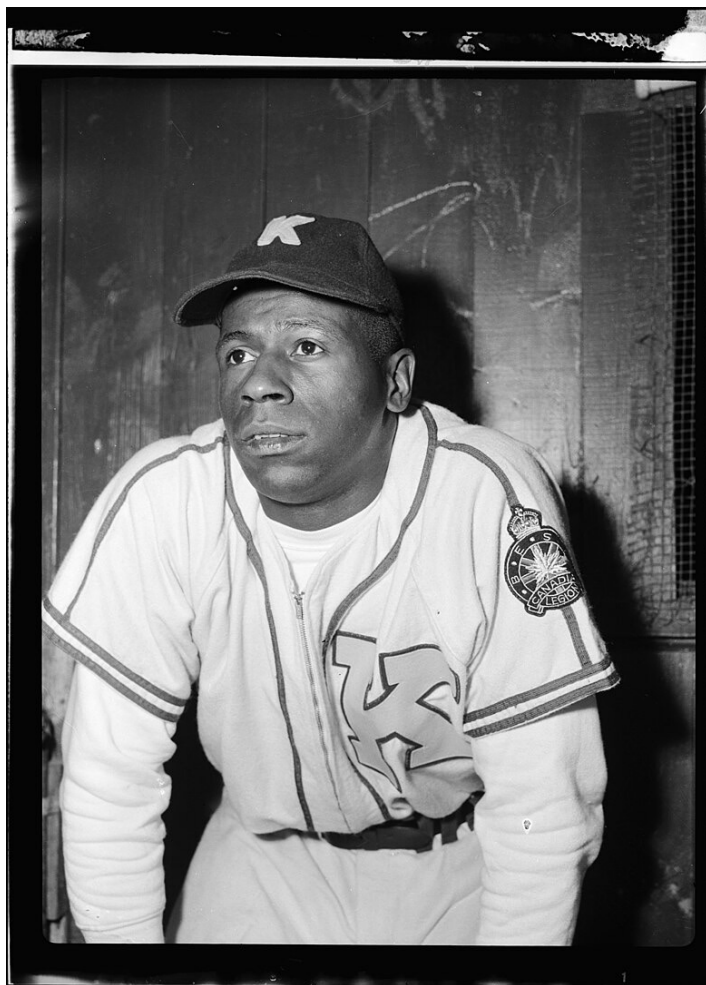


Image from Kitchener-Waterloo Record, University of Waterloo Library. Special Collections & Archives. Kitchener-Waterloo Record Photographic Negative Collection. 52-3316_003.

Thomas' family lived in and around Windsor's McDougall Street Corridor—a once vibrant historically Black neighbourhood.⁴ They first lived on Goyeau and Giles and then later at McDougall Street and Erie.⁵ At the centre of this neighbourhood was Wigle Park. It was here where a young Fred Thomas was first introduced to baseball from postman and minister Clarence “Matches” Jones (1905-1978). That Thomas grew up near Wigle Park is significant for the history of Black baseball in the region since Wigle Park was the social centre of the neighbourhood and where baseball teams—Black and white—from the Windsor-Essex, Chatham-Kent, and Detroit areas would gather to play pick-up games as well as league games.

Wigle Park was also a short distance from where the celebrated ball player Earl “Flat” Chase (1913-1954) grew up. It was here where Chase first learned to play baseball and honed his formidable skills against the top players in the region. It was likely at Wigle Park where Flat Chase met Len and Boomer Harding, the baseball-playing brothers from Chatham. In 1933, Chase was invited to join the Chatham Coloured All-Stars who became the first Black team to win an Ontario Baseball Amateur As-

sociation championship in 1934. Although no documentation exists to suggest Thomas knew Flat Chase—ten years his senior—or watched him play, it is exceedingly likely the young Thomas had opportunities to watch Chase and all the superb players from Windsor and Detroit who competed on the field in Thomas' neighbourhood.

Thomas' family had other links to the Chatham Coloured All-Stars and Canadian baseball history besides their proximity to Wigle Park. Fred Thomas' grandmother was the sister of Ferguson Jenkins Sr's grandmother. Jenkins Sr was a player with the All-Stars in Chatham and his son, of course, is Canada's first inductee into the Baseball Hall of Fame, Fergie Jenkins Jr. In 1946, when Jackie Robinson, John Wright, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Roy Partlow, and fellow Canadian Manny McIntyre became the first Black players in the minor leagues, Ferguson Jenkins Sr was 37 years old and his

4 For more information on Windsor's McDougall Street Corridor, see Willow Key's superb work on the *We Were Here: Documenting Windsor's McDougall Street Corridor* site (2023): <https://collections.uwindsor.ca/we-were-here/welcome>.

5 For a deeper discussion of the Thomas family's history in Southwestern Ontario, see “Family Histories: Thomas Family,” Amherstburg Freedom Museum, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://amherstburgfreedom.org/thomas-family>.



William Bush, Sr, Ken Milburn, and Flat Chase, nd, possibly Wigle Park Courtesy of Northstar Cultural Community Centre.

son was 3 years old.⁶ Father and son were on opposite ends of integrated baseball: Jenkins Sr played before Robinson and Larry Doby broke the colour barrier in the majors and Jenkins Jr after.

In a 2022 interview, Jenkins Jr recalled his father taking him to Briggs Stadium in Detroit and seeing Larry Doby hit two home runs: “The crowd cheered for him. I said to my dad, ‘Dad, maybe I want to play baseball.’”⁷ Being able to see men of colour on professional baseball teams at an early age is a major distinction between what the Jenkins father and son must have believed to be possible.

Their cousin, Fred Thomas, was born between his Jenkins family members. When Jackie Robinson took the field in Montreal in 1946 and the colour barrier began to fall, Fred Thomas was 23 years old and at the prime of his career. As such, Thomas was well positioned to be one of those who played a role in the desegregation of organized baseball.



Fred Thomas, last on the right, on the Cock Brothers baseball team, 1945. Courtesy of Northstar Cultural Community Centre.

6 Merl Kleinknecht, “Integration of Baseball After World War II,” *Baseball Research Journal* (SABR), 1983.

7 Heidi LM Jacobs, *1934: The Chatham Coloured All-Stars’ Barrier-Breaking Year* (Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2023), 103.



Dayus Roofers baseball team, 1946. Fred Thomas is in the back row on the right. Courtesy of Northstar Cultural Community Centre.

Given his family and community contexts, it's not surprising to see that sports were a major part of Fred Thomas' upbringing. As a child, he attended Victoria and Mercer Street Public Schools and then Patterson Collegiate high school where he participated in basketball, softball, and track and field. After Thomas graduated from Patterson in 1943, he and three other Patterson athletes enlisted in the Royal Canadian Air Force in June, which had been desegregated in 1942. During his RCAF training in Halifax, he played baseball in the Halifax Defense League for the Air Force team.⁸ Upon being honourably discharged from the RCAF at the end of WWII, Thomas enrolled at Assumption College (now University of Windsor) where he played collegiate basketball and football.

In breaks between collegiate sports seasons, Thomas was active in local sports and his name appears on many baseball and softball rosters during his four years at Assumption. Thomas can be found playing for both predominantly Black teams as well as integrated teams. In 1945, Fred Thomas' name shows up on various baseball and softball teams in Windsor. On May 5th, he is listed in the lineup for the Windsor Coloured Giants⁹ in the Essex County Baseball League's season opener, and on July 19th Thomas can be found on the roster for the Cock Brothers Seed Store team in the Windsor Softball League, a mostly Black team.¹⁰ In September, 1945, Thomas played for the American Auto Wreckers in a best-of-seven OBA series against the London Majors. The Auto Wreckers were coached by Ross Nantais, brother of Red Nantais who was Thomas' Assumption basketball coach. The Wreckers were

8 See Colin Howell's "The Halifax and District League: Postwar Baseball in the Maritimes, 1946-1960," in *Our Game, Too: Influential Figures and Milestones in Canadian Baseball*, Andrew North, ed. (Phoenix, AZ: Society for American Baseball Research, 2022), 364-370.

9 On the roster for the Coloured Giants was a member of the 1934 Chatham Coloured All-Stars, Cliff Olbey. In addition to Olbey, the roster for the 1945 Windsor Coloured Giants included Ronald Smith, Fred Thomas, Harry Morgan, Louie Hall, Warren Allen, Archie Ball, Fred Kirby, Lorne Foster, Richard Johnson, Lloyd Jenkins, Bud Milburn, Lloyd Washington, Cliff Walls, Joe Porter, John Day, Earl Walls, and Jack Evans. In other box scores from 1945, the team was also called the Border Giants. See "If Old Man Weather Agreeable, Essex County League Ready," *Windsor Daily Star*, May 5, 1945, 27.

10 "Cock Brothers Edge Dayus," *Windsor Daily Star*, July 19, 1945, 22.

league leaders in the Essex County Baseball circuit.¹¹ In October of 1945, Thomas is found playing for Windsor's Dayus Roofing team in the Ontario Amateur Softball Association Senior B final series against the Toronto Firefighters. Thomas appears to have played on many of these teams throughout his Assumption College years.

While not a lot of research has been done about Black Canadian players in the formal or informal Negro Leagues in the US, Fred Thomas' story shows the fluidity of the US and Canadian border for Black players. After the academic year in 1946, Thomas played baseball for the Cincinnati Crescents,¹² an all-star Black barnstorming team that played one season in 1946. On July 25, 1946, an article from the Harrisburg, PA *Evening News* refers to Fred Thomas as "the fly-chasing whiz from Windsor, Canada" and he is listed as one of the three players who make "the Ohio nine figure it can knock off" the Negro National League's Baltimore Elite Giants in their forthcoming match-up.¹³ The Crescents provide an interesting overlap between baseball and basketball as the team was owned by Abe Saperstein, the founder and owner of the Harlem Globetrotters (1926-present).¹⁴ The Crescents, sometimes known as the Seattle Steelheads, were formed to complement Saperstein's basketball team. The Steelheads played in the West Coast Negro Baseball League which only lasted about three months.

Recent research into Fred Thomas' baseball career shows links between Black Windsor players and Negro Leagues baseball in Detroit, connections which have not been well-documented. An *Indianapolis Star* article from May, 1947, for example, lists Thomas as a Detroit Senator alongside James "Cool Papa" Bell in a match-up against the Atlanta Black Crackers.¹⁵ This small news clipping is one of the few extant pieces of print evidence that Black players from the Windsor area played with and against Negro Leagues players.¹⁶ These connections merit more attention to more fully understand the history of Black baseball in North America.

The Fred Thomas baseball story also highlights Canadian contributions to and additional context for the integration of organized baseball. It's both too simplistic and inaccurate to consider integration in terms of binaries. It is true that baseball teams in Canada had never been formally segregated and Black and white players played on white teams in the early part of the twentieth century. But it is also true that Canadians of colour encountered racism and race-based exclusion in Canada in the same ways as Americans of colour.

Windsor and Detroit are separated by the Detroit River, which functions as the Canada and US border. It would seem logical that the border would offer a barrier against segregated baseball in Canada. Numerous stories, however, reveal that was not the case. Laws and practices established in the US around race and sport were often upheld in Canada. One such story comes from Archie Stirling, one of the early supporters of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars. Stirling recalls that in the 1930s, he helped organize charity baseball games in Chatham that pitted the city's star players against professional ball

11 "Wreckers Open O.B.A. Series," *Windsor Daily Star*, August 31, 1945, 22.

12 Players on the roster included Luke Easter, Johnny Markham, Bill Blair, Al Saylor, Willie D. Smith, Jim Ford, John Hundley, Paul Hardy, Joe Spencer, Greene Farmer, John Smith, Ulysses Redd, Percy Howard, George Alexander, Joe Brooks, Lefty Napoleon, Fred Thomas, W.C. Duffy, Frank "Groundhog" Thompson, Everett Marcell, and Joe Wiley.

13 "Cincinnati Team Tests Baltimore," *Evening News* (Harrisburg, PA), July 25, 1946, 24.

14 Alan Cohen's research into the Crescents reveals that Thomas wasn't the only baseball-basketball crossover player. Richard "King Tut" Kelly was better known for his antics with the Harlem Globetrotters. See Cohen, "Tigers and Crescents and Clowns, Oh My! Negro League Baseball at Crosley Field," in *Cincinnati's Crosley Field: A Gem in the Queen City*, Gregory H. Wolf, ed. (Phoenix, AZ: Society for American Baseball Research, 2018), 25-28.

15 The line-up for W.S. Welch's Detroit Senators includes Jim Bell, Alvin Gipson, Fred Thomas, Leamon Johnson, Orinthal Anderson and Bill Ellis. Former Indianapolis Clowns players Brennan King, Phil Holmes, Thad Christopher, Johnny Ray, and Dave Harper are included on the roster of the Atlanta team. See "Negro Baseball Clubs Will Vie Here Tonight," *Indianapolis Star*, June 14, 1947, 16.

16 I am grateful for Christian Trudeau's bringing this clipping to my attention as well as for providing numerous details about Thomas' time in Quebec.

players from nearby MLB teams. Around 1934 or 1935, Stirling included Chatham Coloured All-Stars players Flat Chase and Don Washington in the Chatham lineup. Stirling recalled that he knew that National and American league players weren't allowed to play against Black players, but was told that they could, however, play against Indigenous players.¹⁷ When told the visiting American players could not play against Black players, even in Canada, Stirling passed Chase and Washington off as Indigenous and the game went on.

The year after Robinson and Doby broke the MLB colour barrier, Fred Thomas was still navigating the colour barrier when playing against an American team in Canada. In 1947 and 1948, Thomas played for Russ Nantais' predominantly white Ryancretes, a team in the Windsor Baseball League "A" Division, who played in the Canadian Sandlot Congress and in the Senior "A" OBA playdowns. In May 1948, the Ryancretes team were playing in the Detroit Federation Class "A" League. Prior to a game held at Windsor's Stodgell Park against the Gratiot team from Detroit, Nantais was asked why Fred Thomas wasn't played in the previous week's game in Windsor. He responded: "The Federation League says it's no go having mixed clubs. . . They've let one Negro team in this year for the first time, but they say they won't let us play Thomas."¹⁸ "We could sure use him," Nantais continued and added, "If enough Windsor fans out there want to see Fred play, we'll fight to have him in there." It's unclear whether Fred Thomas' thoughts on this segregationist exclusion were sought but, if they were, they were not recorded.

Several days later, Ken Johnson, a sports columnist for the *Windsor Daily Star* wrote of the Detroit Federation games held in Windsor's Wigle and Stodgell¹⁹ Parks, challenging the league on its race-based exclusion of Thomas:

The Detroit Baseball Federation has a ruling against "mixed" clubs. That was the word given to Manager Russ Nantais of Windsor Ryancrete when he applied to have Fred Thomas, Windsor basketball and baseball star play with his club.

For the first time in its history, a Federation has allowed a Negro team to play in its vaunted Class "A" division. But it won't allow a "mixed" club. In the many teams under its jurisdiction, there are players of English, Irish, Scottish, French, Assyrian, Armenian, German, Russian, Polish, Hungarian, Romanian, Austrian, Italian, and other nationalities, singularly and collectively.

Those players call themselves Americans or Canadians. Since Fred Thomas is a good Canadian citizen, we see no reason why he shouldn't be allowed to play for Ryancretes if Manager Russ Nantais wants him.²⁰

Johnson concludes his column arguing, "Windsor baseball fans would like to see Fred Thomas playing baseball in the class of ball to which he belongs. That company is Class "A" baseball. There should be no reason why Thomas may not play ball in this city for a team representing this city."²¹ Discussions of who could replace Thomas in the lineup reveal none of the white substitutes could match Thomas' skill.

These occurrences were not limited to baseball. Thomas' tremendous accomplishments were many but there were also disappointments. Two years after the Canadian Press called Fred Thomas the second most significant Canadian basketball player in the first half of the twentieth century, Thomas was

17 Jacobs, 48-49.

18 "Nantais Hopeful about Fed Circuit Hookup," *Windsor Daily Star*, May 7, 1948, 31.

19 For more information about Windsor's Stodgell Park, see Colin Martin's "Biography of a Neighbourhood Ball Park: Development and Decline of Stodgell Park since 1926," *Journal of Canadian Baseball* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.22329/jcb.v1i1.7702>.

20 Ken Johnson, "Out on a Limb," *Windsor Daily Star*, May 13, 1948, 28.

21 Ibid.

left off Canada's basketball Olympic team roster. An all-white team represented Canada. It was thought to be Thomas' greatest athletic disappointment. Woody Campbell, a classmate of Thomas' said, "To this day I don't know why he wasn't selected for our [Olympic] team because we [were] really only one player away from winning a medal."²²

Shortly after the incident with the Federation League in 1948, Thomas left Windsor to play right field for the Farnham Pirates who were in the Quebec Provincial Baseball League between 1946 and 1951.²³ A wire story published in the *Windsor Daily Star* reports that Thomas had been elected manager of the Dayus Roofers softball team but turned it down "when he made his sudden move" to Quebec.²⁴ This same article describes how Thomas, "at times, has been sought by the Brooklyn Dodgers and was rumoured last winter to be headed to Montreal, [to] Brooklyn's farm team in the International League."²⁵ Thomas, the article concludes, is "very popular with fans" all over Windsor and "regarded as one of the best all-around athletes Windsor has turned out in a number of years." In his time with Farnham, Thomas led the league in stolen bases, had 23 doubles, 5 triples, 4 home runs, and was batting .351. On June 28, 1948, the *Windsor Daily Star* reported that Thomas was leaving Farnham to join the Cleveland Indians' farm team in Wilkes-Barre, PA. The following day Windsor sports columnist Doug Vaughan writes, "There can be no denying the fact that the former Assumption College basketball ace is, potentially, one of the best ball players to get his start locally. He is a long-range slugger and is fast enough to have the makings of a good outfielder. . . Although Thomas has already reported to the Indians, it is hardly likely that he will stay with the parent club, despite the leg injury suffered by the Tribe's other sensational Negro outfielder, Larry Doby."²⁶

Thomas arrived in Wilkes-Barre on July 3rd, 1948. When he stepped onto the field on July 4th as an outfielder, he was the first Black player in the Eastern League²⁷ and made history for breaking its colour barrier.²⁸ Thomas played in a double-header against the Scranton Miners. In the first game he was hitless, but in the second he got two singles, drove in a run, and stole a base.

Upon Thomas' arrival in Wilkes-Barre, Chic Feldman, sports columnist for Scranton, PA's *Tribune*, notes the historic impact of Thomas joining the team: "By the time this copy is dunked into printer's ink, the first colored athlete in the history of the Eastern League, and its grandparents, the York-Penn and New York State loops, may have participated in a contest as a member of the Wilkes-Barre Barons. All of which makes Fred Thomas the Jackie Robinson of these parts, and somewhat of a novelty."²⁹ After dismissing Thomas as a novelty, Feldman goes on to write that Thomas' signing "is a tipoff regarding the desperation of the Barons and the desire of their parent Cleveland Indians to salvage something out of an otherwise dismal campaign."³⁰ The tone of Feldman's statement may be a reflection that he was writing for a rival team's town, however, his column reveals a strong subcurrent of thinking related to desegregating baseball at the time. Rather than seeing desegregation as an opportunity to sign excellent talent, some chose to see signings of Black players as opportunistic gimmicks intended to bring in

22 Quoted in Sam Riches, "The Greatest Canadian Athlete You've Never Heard Of," *TVO Today*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.tvo.org/article/the-greatest-canadian-athlete-youve-never-heard-of>.

23 In 1951, the Farnham team was managed by player-manager Sam Bankhead, the first Black coach in minor league baseball.

24 "Fred Thomas in Cleveland Setup," *Windsor Daily Star*, June 28, 1948, 26.

25 Ibid.

26 Doug Vaughan, "On the Rebound," *Windsor Daily Star*, June 29, 1948.

27 In the SABR biography on Al Smith, Gary Livacari calls Smith the Eastern League's "first African-American player." Smith joined the Wilkes-Barre team on July 14, 1948, ten days after Thomas. Smith might have been the first African American player in the Eastern League, but it was Thomas who broke the league's colour barrier. <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/al-smith-4/>

28 Thomas was the 21st Black player to sign a contract in the Minor Leagues and the second Black Canadian. Manny McIntyre played for Sherbrooke in the Border League, June 3, 1946.

29 "Hatchin' 'Em Out," Chic Feldman, *The Tribune* (Scranton, PA), July 2, 1948, 16.

30 Ibid.

crowds curious to see the spectacle of Black players. Thomas' time in Wilkes-Barre was unfortunately short-lived: his player card states he only played there between July 1, 1948 and July 19, 1948.³¹ After his release, he returned to Farnham.

Name	Position	Bats	Throws
Thomas, Fred Sinclair			
Born-Place	Date	Married	
Address	Height	Weight	
Teams Played With			
Wilkes-Barre 7/1/48- Rel. 7/19/48-			

Fred Thomas' Baseball Player Contract Card From The Sporting News Baseball Player Contract Cards Collection.

In the fall of 1948, Thomas returned to Assumption College in Windsor to continue his stellar college basketball activities. He graduated in 1949 with a BA and finished his college basketball career with 2,059 points making him, at the time, third on the all-time NCAA scoring list.³² To this day, his time on the Assumption College basketball team is still referred to as the “Thomistic Era.” Thomas earned and maintained a reputation as one of Canada’s best basketball players. In an undated, handwritten note, Assumption’s coach Stanley “Red” Nantais said, “He was great, as great as anyone in Canada.”³³

Thomas continued to divide his time between baseball and basketball. In 1949, Thomas reported to Farnham but was loaned to Sherbrooke. It appears that the Provincial League had a limit of 12 “joueurs étrangers”—outside players—per team and Farnham already had twelve.³⁴ There were questions about whether “joueurs étrangers” meant outside of Quebec or outside of Canada. It appears that Farnham was trying to argue that since Thomas was Canadian, he should be considered local. Since he left Farnham and went to Sherbrooke, it appears the definition of “joueur étranger” meant outside of Quebec. Thomas ended up playing only a handful of games with Sherbrooke. His time with Sherbrooke might have been cut short because, that same summer, he was invited to the Globetrotters training camp in Chicago. Thomas ended up playing with two Globetrotter affiliated teams, the New York Renaissance and the Kansas City Stars. Later that year, Thomas became the first Black Canadian and second Black athlete to play football for the Toronto Argonauts.³⁵

31 Fred Thomas' player contract card is available as part of the digitized *The Sporting News Baseball Player Contract Cards Collection*.

32 At the time, because of its proximity to the US, Assumption College teams routinely played against nearby teams in Michigan and was part of the NCAA.

33 Red Nantais, handwritten note, nd, Tony Techko Collection, Archives and Special Collections, University of Windsor (Accession 03-008 Box 51).

34 Bert Soulière, “Horizons Sportifs,” *Le Canada*, June 16, 1949, 10.

35 The Canadian Football League was desegregated in 1946.

While Thomas' true love was basketball and his energies and passions appeared focused on that sport, he continued to play baseball and softball around the province. In the 1950s he played in Ontario's Intercounty Baseball League for teams like the Galt, Waterloo, Guelph, London and others. As a member of the Kitchener Panthers in 1951, he won the Ontario Intercounty Baseball League batting title with an average of .383 and in 1955, he got 9 home runs and 42 RBIs with the Oshawa Merchants.³⁶ He ended his baseball career with the Waterloo Tigers and the Kitchener Panthers in the Intercounty Baseball League. With Kitchener, his "booming bat" brought him the MVP honours. When a knee injury and surgery ended his professional sports career, he played amateur basketball, baseball, and fastball in Ontario. He played fastball with the Windsor Jets and Toronto Beaches. He also hit the first home run over the center field fence at Windsor's Dayus Stadium with what was called "a mammoth swat."³⁷

After retiring from sports, Fred Thomas became a highly regarded Phys Ed and Math teacher at Valley Park High School and East York Collegiate in Toronto. Fred Thomas passed away from cancer on May 20, 1981, at age 57. Shortly after his death, the park at the corner of Wyandotte Street and Glengarry Avenue in Windsor was renamed "Fred Thomas Park" to honour his accomplishments.

Without a doubt, when Thomas was released by the Barons in July 1948, he was not the first or the last minor league player to be released by a minor league team after a few short weeks. Rather than quietly relegating Thomas to this category of player, sports columnist Chic Feldman used Thomas' release as a way to prove a point he had tried to make earlier about why the Barons signed a Black player:

Confirmation: Seventeen days after he became the first Negro pastimer in the history of the Eastern League, via the Wilkes-Barre Barons, Canadian Fred Thomas was released outright yesterday. To substantiate what we stated about the willing but inadequate Thomas' ability to meet the circuit requisites [and] Also to confirm a suspicion that Thomas was hired as a side-show freak rather than an extraordinary athlete. What's more it doesn't require a tremendous foresight to anticipate that the same fate will befall Satchel Paige when he's no longer useful as a box office magnate [sic] to the Cleveland Indians[,] one of whose agents signed Thomas for the Barons."³⁸

Feldman's words are shocking and disturbing to read and it's inconceivable that a white player would have received such a brutal and public takedown had they only lasted seventeen days on the team.

I cite Feldman's painful words, in part, to illustrate and remind us what Thomas and other athletes of his time endured as they broke barriers and changed sports history. But I also cite these words to prove what Thomas' childhood friend Lyle Browning said in 1994: "With Freddie, there was always a game to be played. The best way to prove the bigots wrong was to show how good you were on the court and then walk proudly out of the gym."³⁹ Both Satchel Paige and Fred Thomas proved Feldman wrong. The 2024 honour will be Thomas' sixth induction into a sports hall of fame.⁴⁰ Being awarded the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame's Order of Sport more than demonstrates that Thomas was indeed "an extraordinary athlete" who refused to let prejudice define his potential.

36 Barry Swanton and Jay-Dell Mah, "Fred Thomas," *Black Baseball Players in Canada: A Biographical Dictionary 1881-1960* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009) 162-163.

37 Techko, "Fred Thomas."

38 "Hatchin' 'Em Out," Chic Feldman, *The Tribune* (Scranton, PA), July 23, 1948, 18.

39 Qtd in Riches, "The Greatest Canadian Athlete."

40 At the time of writing, Thomas is part of the Windsor-Essex County Sports Hall of Fame (1981), University of Windsor Alumni Sports Hall of Fame (1986), Afro-American Hall of Fame (Thomas and Pele were the two international players inducted in 1994), Canadian Basketball Hall of Fame (1995), Canadian Baseball Hall of Fame (2021) and the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame Order of Sport (Athlete Category 2024).