

*New Orleans University alum Dave Malarcher was a gentleman, a poet, and a brilliant baseball player*

By Ryan Whirty



David Julius Malarcher was one of the greatest unheralded players and managers in baseball history. But he was also a passionate poet who used the language skills he learned at New Orleans University, one of Dillard's parent institutions, to express his loves, longings and sorrows. Later in his life, Malarcher thanked NOU for his education in verse:

"Alma mater, alma mater!

-- You who gave me this new birth

To the world of priceless knowledge

Opening wide the doors of earth

You laid aside its mystery

And showed its treasures all to me”

While he attended New Orleans University from 1912-16 — first in the College Preparatory Department, and then for two years as an undergraduate — Malarcher nurtured his baseball talent, playing for and coaching the school’s hardball squad to an unbeaten record.

His gifts caught the eye of C.I. Taylor, who managed the Indianapolis ABCs, one of the best professional African-American teams at the time. When the squad stopped in New Orleans on its way back from a round of winter ball in Cuba, Taylor sought out Malarcher and signed him to a contract on the spot.

Thus began one of the most successful but unheralded careers in Negro League baseball history. After cutting his teeth and learning the game with Taylor and the ABCs, Malarcher inked a deal in 1920 with the Chicago American Giants, who were owned and managed by the great Andrew “Rube” Foster, founder of the first sustained black baseball league and a towering figure in Negro League history.

After Foster began suffering from a crippling health crisis in the late 1920s, Malarcher took over as manager of the American Giants, whom he led to multiple Negro National League pennants and Negro World Series crowns.

But Malarcher never forgot the lessons he learned both on and off the baseball diamond at New Orleans University, which merged with Straight College in the 1930s to form Dillard University. Malarcher's rich education earned him great respect among his baseball peers. His talent for poetry and modest, well-spoken demeanor led journalists and other players to call him "Gentleman Dave," a sobriquet he carried with him until his death in May 1982.

"If you mentioned Aristophanes, Pericles, Sophocles, Thucydides, Euripides or Socrates, this scholar knew of their talents," says Larry Lester, an author and researcher of Negro Leagues history. "Off the playing field, Julius was known for his prose and philosophy.

"Rube's star student had the gentle demeanor of a lap dog, but had a Rottweiler appetite to win," Lester adds.

Malarcher's education began when he was a youngster growing up in Union Parish, La. "My mother educated all of her children to some degree," he told author John Holway in a transcript for the Baseball Hall of Fame.

After attending both public and private schools in rural Louisiana, he headed to the Big Easy to enroll in the New Orleans University Elementary Department. After graduating from the elementary institution and the preparatory department, he enrolled in a bachelor's degree program. He funded his education by working for a wealthy white family in return for room, board and clothing.

"I went to New Orleans University and worked for a rich family," he told Holway. "I worked in the afternoons and morning, cleaning the yard, a yardman as we called it. I was living on the place, had all the food I could eat, and in the summer time they'd give me clothes. Most boys who went to college in those days lived right out in the rich neighborhood, with the rich white people. I was making \$2.50 a week, but with food and clothing and a place to stay, and doctors' bills if necessary, that kept me in school."

Malarcher's college experience included, of course, many hours on a baseball diamond, playing third base and serving as captain of the New Orleans University Tigers from 1912-16. In his interview with Holway, Malarcher revealed a quiet pride in his tenure with the Tigers, citing a written history of NOU.

“It says, ‘Between 1913 and 1916 the baseball team lost not a single game,’” he read to Holway. “That’s right. ‘The success was due to two stars, David Malarcher and Robert Williams.’ It says my nickname was Gentleman Dave.”

In addition to representing his school team, Malarcher also played second base for the semi-pro New Orleans Tigers before C.I. Taylor and the ABCs snagged him. A budding professional career, and his induction and service in the Army from 1918-19, ended his tenure at NOU after two years of college education.

Perhaps the greatest thing that happened to Malarcher in his time at NOU was meeting his future wife and lifelong love, Mabel Sylvester, a student and singer at Straight College. In a 1973 letter to former Dillard University librarian Carole Taylor, Malarcher described his instant infatuation with Mabel.

One night in 1914, when he was a student in NOU’s College Preparatory School, Malarcher attended a Flint-Goodridge Medical School graduation ceremony that was held in NOU’s chapel. That’s when he heard Sylvester sing for the first time.

“Hers was the most beautiful and sweet soprano voice I had ever heard,” he wrote to Taylor. “And she was beautiful! ... I shall never forget that night and the thrill of enjoyment which I experienced thereby.

“From time to time thereafter,” he added, “she came to our school to sing on musical programs and individually. I was always there. And on one occasion, when she had sung, I met her. And I fell in love with her; a fact from which I have never recovered.”

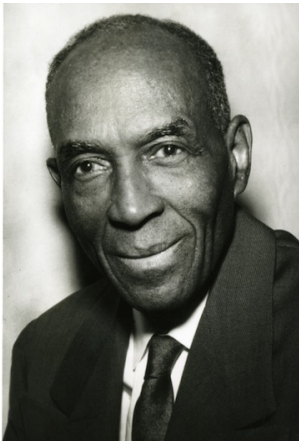
Malarcher and Sylvester wed in June 1920 and moved to Chicago soon after he joined Foster’s American Giants. They built a house in the city in 1927 and lived there together until her death in 1946. A year after her passing, Malarcher used his writing skills and feelings of love and loss to pen a book-length poem dedicated to his wife; he donated a copy of the work to the Dillard archives in 1973. Malarcher lived in the same house they constructed for the rest of his life. Although he never completed his bachelor’s degree, he attended night school and became a

successful real-estate agent and appraiser.

He died in 1982, but not before leaving an impressive legacy as a Renaissance man. He was an intellectual who parlayed his academic and athletic education into a brilliant career as a fleet-footed, sure-handed, clutch-hitting third baseman and a crafty, tactically brilliant manager. Although not a member of the Hall of Fame, many Negro League experts believe he should be.

He expressed his passion for the game and his pride in the Negro Leagues in a 1974 letter to Joseph Molitor of Chicago's Old Timers Baseball Association.

"It is to be remembered that the history of American Baseball is far vaster than merely the history of Organized Baseball," he wrote. "It comprises the great game from the sandlots and campus, the backwoods and the city independent teams to the countless yet independent and un-organized teams through North and South America, Cuba, Mexico and the Virgin Islands. Thus the Old Timers Association of Chicago is one representative of the beginning and continuation of what we so jubilantly describe as 'The Great American National Game!'"



But Malarcher's most worthy historical endowment might be his reputation as Gentleman Dave, a respected scholar who savored his educational experiences at one of Dillard's founding schools. He brought the same passion to all the aspects of his life – his marriage, his poetry, and his university education – that he took to the baseball diamond throughout an historic career.

"Alma mater, alma mater! --

Parent of my progress all! --

You who bred my soul's refining Stemming its primeval thrall --

O, temporal shrine of Godly love, Our God and you are all above!" --

David Julius Malarcher

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