



*This is one installment in a team effort by The Cleveland Fan, highlighting the top local sports figures by jersey number. Please weigh in with your thoughts, in the Boards. As David Letterman would say, "For entertainment purposes only; please, no wagering."*

The early crowd at the stadium could only assume they didn't get the joke. On that mid-June day in Cleveland, Indians starting pitcher Jim Grant strolled across the baseball diamond – in Minnesota Twins gear. Fans yelled at the pitcher, asking him why he was dressed in the uniform of that day's opponent. Grant could only shrug and reply that he'd been traded.

The explanation was more than had been offered to Grant himself. When he'd originally arrived at the Cleveland clubhouse early that day, he discovered his locker was cleaned out. Players' lockers weren't just used for hanging up jerseys and depositing cleats and gloves- they stored an accumulation of a player's mail and other personal items. Grant was confused so he asked the clubhouse boy where his stuff was. The reply was it was in the visitors' clubhouse. He'd been acquired by the Twins.

The trade had been finalized in the wee hours that morning, and general manager Gabe Paul's front office was apparently too embarrassed to inform Grant. In return, the Tribe received marginal pitcher Lee Stange and power-hitting, career minor league outfielder-third baseman

George Banks. And money. As you probably know, receiving money was the key to most of the player trades the Indians made in the 1960s and 1970s. They teetered on the edge of bankruptcy, and allowed their young talent to be raided to ensure sufficient cash flow.



Mudcat Grant had shown some promise as both a starter and as a relief pitcher. He had originally been signed by the Tribe at the prompting of “Bird Dog” scout Fred Merkle. Merkle had noticed Grant’s talent as a rocket-armed third baseman in the Negro Baseball Tournament in Daytona Beach while he was in high school. Since Grant was still a minor, Merkle kept his distance. Grant received a scholarship from Florida A&M University to play both baseball and football, but since his family needed money, he quit college and began working as a carpenter in New Smyrna Beach. When Merkle heard about this, he reached out to Grant and signed him to a contract with the Indians. Grant notes that his bonus was a handshake.

*Fred Merkle is a subject in baseball lore which is now over 100 years old. In 1908, he was a rookie for the New York Giants. In the Polo Grounds against the Chicago Cubs in September, he stepped to the plate in the bottom of the ninth inning. The game was tied at one. With two out and a man on first base, he singled the runner to third. Accounts of the game note that Merkle could have had a double, but he astutely played it safe and stayed at first. The lead run was all that mattered anyway. The next batter was Al Bridwell- who singled. The runner on third base, Moose McCormick, scored easily. As the home crowd stormed the field, Merkle veered off his path toward second base and headed to the home clubhouse in center field. In the commotion, Cubs second baseman Johnny Evers yelled for the baseball. The center fielder threw in his direction- but some said Giant pitcher “Iron Man” McGinnity retrieved the ball and threw it into the stands. Furthermore, Christy Mathewson (who stood to be the winning pitcher) was said to have steered Merkle back to second. The official decision was that the Cubs got the*

*force out on Merkle. The tied game was replayed. The Cubs won the game- and the National League pennant as well. League president Harry C. Pulliam was completely destroyed in the press over his indecision about scheduling the makeup game. Poor Mr. Pulliam ended up taking several months away from the game, and upon returning, took his life in his apartment.*

*Interestingly, this episode is commonly described on the internet as “Merkle’s Blunder”. For nearly a century, the story was widely known as “Merkle’s Boner.” Sorry if that offends modern sensibilities; it remains “Merkle’s Boner” here. Just be careful if Googling that story.*

Upon joining Indians camp in 1954, Jim Grant received the “Mudcat” nickname. Someone who thought Grant was from Mississippi first used the name. The moniker stuck.



*There are accounts that credit Indian Larry Doby – Grant’s roommate- with coming up with the nickname. Two thoughts on that: one, the spring training explanation is just more believable to me. It is said that Doby told Grant he was ‘uglier than a Mississippi mudcat’. I don’t buy that, although I have nothing to back it up. Second thought is that Grant has not been bashful in saying he embellishes stories because it makes them interesting. So while I don’t believe Doby gave him the nickname, I can accept the possibility that Grant has said he did.*

*Jim Grant's brother, Julious, pitched in the minors. He was given the nickname "Swamp Fire". Not on the level of "Mudcat", but a good try. The minor league executive who gave him that nickname was late '50s/early '60s Indians GM Frank Lane.*

Mudcat Grant became a major leaguer just about a decade after the color barrier was broken. Racial segregation remained in various levels all around the country. Even in Cleveland, which had clearly separate communities and establishments based on race. Grant does give credit to Cleveland for its efforts to improve the state of racial harmony, and expresses his appreciation today. Segregation – and intimidation- were especially intense in Florida, where the Indians and several other teams held spring training.

*(Sweet photo above: Grant with Doby and Satchel Paige. Appears to be related to an old-timers game.)*

*Back to Larry Doby: since blacks had to stay in the same hotels and eat at the same restaurants, Grant became accustomed to seeing performers such as Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday. Doby would introduce Grant to such stars. One day, Ms. Holliday's ankle was sprained and she could not get on the stage. Grant picked her up and carried her to her spot. His mother is said to never have really believed his account of meeting the singer!*



