

Emilio "Millito" Navarro

By: **Tony (The Marine) Santiago**
(as written for Wikipedia)

Emilio "Millito" Navarro (born September 26, 1905) was the first Puerto Rican to play baseball in the Negro Leagues. At 104, Navarro is also the oldest living professional baseball player to have played in the Negro Leagues.



Emilio "Millito" Navarro

Early years

Navarro was born in Patillas to Botello and Pepa Navarro, and raised in Ponce, Puerto Rico. His father was a well-known shoemaker in Patillas who died when Navarro was 6 years old. His widowed mother soon moved to Ponce where she had family and at a young age he helped his family economically by selling newspapers, peanuts and ice. In Ponce he attended Castillo Public School and worked after school shining shoes and delivering the foods which his mother prepared to sustain the family. His first contact with the game came about when he went to watch the school team play. Navarro developed a burning desire to play baseball. On one occasion he didn't have enough money to pay for an entrance ticket to watch a game between the Castillo and Reina teams. He therefore, jumped a fence, which happened to be in the outfield. It so happened that one of the Castillo team members became sick and when the coach saw Navarro jump the fence he asked him to play. He did and ever since then he's been playing baseball.

Baseball career

In the 1920s, the United States was a racially segregated nation and his color was therefore a problem; in baseball, blacks were not permitted to play together with their white counterparts. As a consequence of this policy, a group of white and black businessmen joined forces and organized their own "Negro Leagues". The teams played against each other and even had their own "World Series". Two of those teams were the "Cuban Stars", owned by Alex Pompez, and the "Cuban Giants". Both of those teams consisted mainly of African-American or Afro-Latino players. Navarro played for two years with the Cuban Stars and had a batting average of .337. The experience was bittersweet for Navarro, especially when they played in the South. Not only did he feel discriminated because of the color of his skin, but also because he didn't speak English. After playing with the Negro Leagues, Navarro traveled and played for teams in the Dominican Republic and in Venezuela. By the time baseball had become integrated in the U.S., Navarro had returned to the island. The experience and knowledge that he gained served him well when he became one of the founders of the Puerto Rican baseball team, "Leones de Ponce" (Ponce Lions). He played,

coached and did a little bit of everything for the team. He dedicated 20 years to the team.

Later years and legacy



**Emilio "Millito" Navarro (center)
pictured with great-grandsons**

In 1938, Navarro was voted the "Ideal Professional Baseball Player" by Emilio Huike, considered by many as one of Puerto Rico's Best Sports Writers. After Navarro retired from active baseball, he was named administrator of the "Francisco "Paquito" Montaner Stadium" in Ponce, a position that he held for 20 years.

Navarro turned 104 on September 26, 2009. Many tributes to honor him have been planned in Puerto Rico and the United States. His life and experiences in baseball will be part of an American documentary called "Beisbol" which will be about the contributions and influence of Hispanics in American's national pastime. He was elected to the Puerto Rico Baseball Hall of Fame in 1992 and the Puerto Rican Sports Hall of Fame in 2004. The Senate of Puerto Rico presented him with the resolution #1026 in recognition of his contributions to baseball on June 7, 2005. On December 29, 2006, Navarro was inducted into the "Hispanic Heritage Baseball Museum". Former Astros great José (Cheo) Cruz presented the Museum's, which is located in Ponce, the Pioneer plaque of induction to Navarro as the 39th inductee into The Hispanic Heritage Baseball Museum. Navarro, who considered to be the last surviving member of the American Negro League and the oldest baseball, softball player and trainer in the world, is also a member of the "Puerto Rican Baseball Hall of Fame" and the "Puerto Rican Sports Hall of Fame".

On June 6, 2008, Major League Baseball held a ceremonial Negro League draft prior to the Amateur draft, in which Navarro was honored by the New York Yankees, being symbolically drafted by the team. Navarro was honored at a game during the final homestand in Yankee Stadium history on September 18, 2008. In 2010, Navarro was honored by the "Experience Works" who recognized him as one of the outstanding active Senior Citizen on the United States.