Charleston, Oscar,

in full OSCAR MCKINLEY CHARLESTON (b. Oct. 14, 1896, Indianapolis, Ind., U.S.--d. Oct. 6, 1954, Philadelphia, Pa.), American baseball player and manager who was considered by many to be the best all-around ball player in the history of the Negro leagues. He was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1976.

In his mid-teens, Charleston left school and entered the U.S. Army. He first played organized baseball while stationed in the Philippines. He was the only black player in the Manila League in 1914. He returned to Indianapolis in 1915 and signed on with the ABCs, the local Negro club for whom he had been a batboy as a child.

The barrel-chested Charleston quickly made an impression with his expert play in centerfield and his lively bat, which helped the ABCs win a championship in 1916. A left-hander who hit for both power and average, he was best known for his exceptional speed, strong throwing arm, and volatile temper that often led to fights on and off the field. He joined the Chicago American Giants in 1919 but returned to the ABCs the following year, when the team joined the newly formed Negro National League. In 1921 he enjoyed a typically strong year, batting .434, stealing 35 bases in 60 games, and leading the league in doubles, triples, and home runs.

Charleston played with the St. Louis Giants, the Harrisburg Giants (serving also as manager), and the Philadelphia Hilldales in the 1920s. He joined the Homestead Grays in 1930 and was part of the 1931 team that also starred Josh Gibson, Smokey Joe Williams, Ted Page, and Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe. From 1932 to 1938 he was player-manager for the Pittsburgh Crawfords.

Charleston retired as a player in 1941 with a lifetime batting average of .357. He then managed various teams; in 1954 he guided the Indianapolis Clowns to a Negro World Championship.