

INTERVIEW WITH: Gary Pryor

BREAKING THE COLOUR BARRIER: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE CHATHAM COLOURED ALL-STARS
A collaboration between the University of Windsor and the Chatham Sports Hall of Fame

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Name of interviewee: Gary Pryor (G.P)

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S._: I'm here today with Gary Pryor on August 6th at St. Clair College in Chatham, and we're going to get started today. So to begin I just have some background questions for you to kind of just identify who we are talking about today. So what is the name of the person you knew from the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

0:00:24.5

G.P: Well, it would be my grandfather.

S._: And your grandfather's name was?

0:00:27.9

G.P: Louis Pryor.

S._: Louis Pryor. And when and where was he born?

0:00:31.3

G.P: Actually, he was born in Salem Michigan.

S._: Oh okay, and where did he grow up?

0:00:38.1

G.P: A good portion of his life was in Salem Michigan but he came and married in Canada here, so he spent quite a bit of time here in Canada also.

S._: Okay, can you tell me anything about his family, who they were, and what they did for a living?

0:00:53.1

G.P: Well he worked at CIL here in Chatham until they basically closed down. Still searching on a lot of the information myself, like I say I'm down the list here, one of the grandkids.

S._: Yeah.

G.P: So there's a lot of information that, you know, we haven't had privy to. A good portion of the family has passed on now, so there's basically, the one that I can draw most of the information from, she's in the hospital right now so. It's kind of a hard journey to try and get this information together. But it's a project and work in itself so.

S._: Good. So, how important were sports to him growing up?

0:01:32.0

G.P: Well it was the outlet. They didn't have the roller-skating like when I came up. They didn't have numerous other things. They were pretty limited as to what, and plus, with the level of racism that was on in the area they had to make, basically, entertain themselves. So they became very good at the sports they excelled in.

S._: Do you know which sports they were?

0:01:53.3

G.P: Most of it was baseball. That was the hook. They fell in love with it and that just took them to the place where it did. So, it broke them into other areas and it changed, you know, it changed baseball before Jackie Robinson was even involved in the States. These guys were playing, like, literally professional baseball.

S._: Right.

G.P: They played, you know, in and around the Detroit area they kind of grew up—that was their passion.

S._: Right. Do you know approximately when he became involved with the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

0:02:29.5

G.P: No, that's another one of those loose-end things and I mean it's hard to garner the information since so much of the family is gone.

S._: Of course.

G.P: There's very few people that you can draw a lot of that information from. I mean there may or may not be records, we're still searching it out ourselves.

S._: Right, yeah. So, what was his role on the team?

0:02:49.2

G.P: Let's see, I'm trying to remember what—I think he was third baseman. Yeah. I'm thinking he was third baseman or....

S._: Oh, was he a coach at any point?

G.P: I think for a time he was also.

S._: Yes.

G.P: Because I've heard, you know, different stories.

S._: Yeah. Okay, do know of any memorable events or stories that were passed down your family either while he was a coach or a player or?

0:03:18.1

G.P: Just different names being dropped over the years from different fellows that he played ball with. And some of the issues they had to deal with and overcome, the level of racism that they had to deal with. And they played through it, that was the biggest thing, and still held their heads high and enjoyed the game.

S._: Yeah. Okay, can you tell me anything about the team itself? Do you know what they were known for, a particular style they used to play in?

0:03:51.5

G.P: Not a whole lot, because, like I say, I came later.

S._: Right. So, you touched on this briefly already, but were people's reactions to their playing, particularly the fans or the spectators at the time, so far as you know?

0:04:05.8

G.P: Well, the information that I've garnered was from one of his sons, Larry Pryor.

S._: Okay.

G.P: He was at the park at Stirling's Park there, and he was basically, the information that he's given me just recently was that Art Stirling, who basically had the park and stuff, he was—like he lived in the area—and he was basically watching these guys play and he realized how good these guys were. They were competing at a level that he just had to get them involved in baseball.

S._: Absolutely. Do you know what he enjoyed about the game, or why he played it?

0:04:44.2

G.P: It was a camaraderie.

S._: Yeah.

G.P: It was a camaraderie. The exercise. The fun of, you know, being just as the Olympics are on now.

S._: Yeah.

G.P: These guys excelled. And they literally could have been at that level.

S._: Absolutely. Again, you touched up on this briefly already but did he talk about any of the challenges or difficulties to some of your other relatives that were passed onto you, that came with playing at the time?

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G.P: Well, as for other things that happened, my father—he played baseball also. And he was on a travel league and they played Peterborough and numerous other areas. They—the racism wasn't as bad, it was bad, but nonetheless not as bad as it was. The colour barriers, because, they couldn't go into, you know, the dining rooms. They couldn't go into restaurants. They couldn't go into the theatres and stuff to even watch the shows, like I mean they had to go on the balcony to access stuff like that. I mean it was an ugly history, Canada its own, you know, slavery.

S._: Of course.

G.P: And it wasn't, you know, all that long ago. The stories that are handed down, it was more or less—they insulated a good portion of us from a lot of the disdain that they had to deal with. Which was, you know, in part their pain, they ate it. You know, but as for the sport itself, it got handed down to a few family members, you know, they became pretty good at it themselves.

S._: Right.

G.P: Even the older brother, well he was Muhammad Ali's body guard when he comes to Canada.

S._: Wow, that's pretty amazing. So, did he talk about doing any travelling with the team for exhibition games or for league play? Did they have any stories about what it was like to travel to other towns or maybe some of the reactions from people there?

0:06:35.9

G.P: Once again it – it's sad that, you know, to always be focused on the level of racism that was in place, but this is what the guys were up to.

S._: Right.

G.P: They had to tolerate it. And maintain their character and play through all that. Like in Wallaceburg, the issues that they dealt with there. Other small towns like I mean, there was areas that, at sunset, they had to be out of town. I mean I did the research myself

when I was at this college here, and up in Ottawa, and finding out some of the little towns like Blenheim and, as I say, Wallaceburg, and Tilbury. These guys couldn't, as the sun was going down they had to be out of town. I mean it was rough on these guys. Everything from their travel vehicles being egged, I mean just the numerous things that happened. I mean when you think about slavery down south, well it was here too. It was here too. And they had to persevere. I mean they had strong characters, strong will, and they basically had to stay strong for their families, without being caught up into the grinder of going through the law.

S._: Right.

G.P: But, all in all, they—their passion became, and getting their anxieties out and stuff—it was the games. It was the games that they had to play, and they played it, you know, not just for fun, or to, and even I mean it was a great release. It was a great release.

S._: Absolutely. Was he a part of the 1934 Championship team?

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G.P: I could say yes, but I'd like to, you know, research that myself to be absolute.

S._: Okay, have you heard anything relating to what it was like to be a part of that team, that winning team, or?

0:08:31.8

G.P: Not a whole lot, but more so the stories that were handed down to me was basically the guys' passions for the game, and some of the nicknames that these guys had. It was pretty funny. I mean you know it even today, and it's just that they're nicknames are really unique, like this one fellow's name was "King Turtle", and he worked at the William Pitt as a bell hop there. And it was like, you know, my uncle talking about it. And I says "King Turtle?" That's the first I've even heard that name, I'm like what is that, you know? But there's, they had their humor.

S._: Absolutely. So would you like to share anything about his life after life with the All-Stars? Like how he made a living or his family life.

0:09:21.7

G.P: As I say, I wasn't, I wasn't here yet. But some of the research that I did, he worked for a company called CIL, it was a fertilizer plant, until they closed. Not a whole lot in the way of anything else, there's a fairly large family.

S._: Okay.

G.P: And, they, he made the best of what he could.

S._: Absolutely.

G.P: As for, like I say, his daughters and some of his kids, he sent them to Catholic school. And they kind of went through the grinder pretty good, and as I say my Aunt Blanche, she became the top RN at the local hospital, and my other—her sister, Madeleine, or sorry Margaret—she became one of the meat inspectors for Ontario. My father and his brother Clyde, they went on to military service and done quite well, and the uncle he served in France and Italy for quite a while, and he could actually speak fluently about six different languages. So these, guys, I mean, they were disciplined.

S._: Absolutely.

G.P: Vey disciplined, I mean they came from a pretty strong hard-nosed family, trust me. My grandmother was quite the character. Here's one of the pictures of him.... [Gary pulls out two photographs, one of his grandfather, and one of both his parents.]

S._: Oh wow, love the suit!

G.P: Yeah, shark skin.

S._: Wonderful.

G.P: That's one of my father and my mother.

S._: Wow, how special! That's amazing, thank you.

G.P: As I say they were pretty hardcore guys. And the grandmother, wow. She was about as authority as you're going to get.

S._: Yeah?

G.P: Oh man, you sat up straight, you did everything in the most proper mannerism or you dealt with her wrath.

S._: Do you know if he continued sports throughout his life after the Coloured All-Stars?

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G.P: Coaching, I think, some of the smaller leagues. He did that for a time—

S._: Okay, in baseball as well?

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G.P: Baseball, yes. But it's more so, you know, committed to the family, and the war, and of the other efforts that came along.

S._: Right. Were his children involved in any sports?

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G.P: My aunt Claudine, she played softball, and softball league. My father, he played baseball in the leagues, it was a travel league.

S._: Okay. So, we kind of touched on this already, but do you have a sense of the place sports had in the black community while your grandfather was growing up or throughout his life?

0:12:29.8

G.P: Was is it a part of the black community? It was a subtle part because, like, there were certain parks that they weren't even allowed to play in, and it's too bad because the quality of ball like—Tecumseh Park was a softball park, and these guys played hard ball. And while hard ball was basically a central sport, soft ball was kind of like, you know, something different. But, the diamonds weren't really good shape at some of the other parks where they did get to play. I mean, they were maintained to a certain degree, but not highly. The crowds in the community, they, you know, it was something for them to do, other than the toil of their jobs. They didn't have the TVs and all the other distractions, they basically raised their family and when they had time to enjoy they got to enjoy it.

S._: Did he talk about barriers or difficulties in participating in sports within the wider mainstream community, and did this change over time?

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G.P: They dealt with a lot of the issues, as I mentioned earlier—racism is something that hasn't gone away even as of today. You see what's going on in Canada even still. It's not just the front line fellows that the police and stuff, it's the criminal system itself, like the

judges being corrupt, the politicians that refuse to change some of the policies in place. There's numerous things in place. Is it gradually changing? Well hopefully with this Prime Minister that's basically opening up a few doors, which is great, I mean I got people say well "about time," but you know, this country wants to be considered multicultural, but yet it still has a Euro-centric leadership in place. Will it change even more other than a spattering of a few ethnic people here and there? Hopefully they go for the higher ender, the person that's capable for the job. I mean, you don't want somebody just because of their colour to be bounced into a position, you want the person with the best credentials to basically do the job.

S._: Yeah. So, overall, what do you think was the impact or significance of the Chatham Coloured All-Stars?

0:14:54.6

G.P: It was breaking colour barriers. It was, I mean, from within.

S._: Right.

G.P: It was the kind of thing that's like, you know, you either sit still, shut up, go away, disappear, hide like a ghost in the background, and come out when we need you. Or, you enjoy your life to its fullest, in spite of the adversaries about you. I mean, these guys were going to play one way or the other. I mean, as young men have to burn the energy, you've got to be out there, you've got to do stuff. Even though they put in their jobs, they weren't glorified jobs, they didn't have office jobs, these guys were physically doing a lot of work. A lot of the box came from out of the South for that reason. Some were runaway, some were basically free. This area has a very incredible and rich history, and it's not being taught in the schools. In the most subtle ways that they teach it in the schools, I mean even as a child in grade 7. The version of the history, the books, like you know, I love studying history and politics, even as a kid myself, but when it came to rating history in the schools, through the school system, I opened up the book and all you see is a slave ship, and that's all it was. And I'm looking for the rest of the story, like we come from more than just slaves, my god, we came from an entire country. You know?

S._: Absolutely.

G.P: It wasn't our fault to be, you know, existing, I mean, slavery is never a good thing. Whether it's the Jewish people who have been enslaved by the Germans, whether it's— I mean every race has been enslaved on this planet to some degree. We're just the last largest group that have been put to that position and we're still in recovery.

S._: Have any of the members of your family been involved in public commemoration of the All-Stars? For example, there was a 50th anniversary celebration in 1984, do you know if they have been involved in anything like that?

0:17:04.2

G.P: Other than the dedication at the WISH¹ Centre, most of the information you could draw from there. Not that I can think of just now, I know the oldest brother, well he was one of the big power lifters in Ontario here. He competed in the States and numerous different states and all, and I've been involved by going to some of these events also. As I say, he became quite the all-star himself. A lot of his records still stand, like I mean, 30 years later some of these records still stand, which is pretty amazing, you know?

S._: So we kind of touched on this already, of course, but is this a story you think more people should know?

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G.P: Of course. I think there's this, and a lot more. There's an incredible history. I would also like to see more money put in to the—whether its colleges or libraries that allow people to access this information, of a sort. And I'd like to see it actually taught in the schools even more. I mean the history that has been taught in school from LaSalle, Frontenac, everybody else. On the building of this country, and yet it still doesn't consider a lot of the indigenous people of this country who were here long before those folks. And, they show them, the Europeans, how to survive in this country. That's that not being taught in the regular schools, you have to go to college or university to get access to that information, and I really question why certain histories are still being taught when they're completely wrong. I mean, I understand the, you know, the pace of people that win the wars and stuff, yeah, they wipe out every person's histories, and they impose their own, accordingly. Information is as it is, I mean when a country comes in to take over other countries one of the first places they attack is the libraries and museums. I mean we've seen it in our own lifetime in Iraq. You know, it's sad, but that's just how war is, it's an ugly thing. It's hopefully, it doesn't happen anymore. I mean, that's the greatest hope. We all try to get along and live your life as best you can, and have your families grow up and get decent jobs and have a good life, travel, whatever.

S._: Absolutely. So finally, do you have anything else you would like to say about Lou Pryor, before we go? Any other tidbits you have.

0:19:44.8

¹ Community centre in Chatham where the Black History Museum is located.

G.P: Pieces of gems and stuff?

S._: Yes, anything you think is worth sharing.

G.P: Well basically the best part is I never got to know him personally myself, because as I say I wasn't here yet, but some of the stories that were handed down from aunts, uncles, you know, back yard barbeques, or you know, formal meals at Christmas, you know, Thanksgiving or whatever, every time you know, they kind of, they start talking about the—your grandparents or something, you lean an ear in, you know. You stay quiet, lean an ear in, and try to learn a little more. Its where you're from, and you know, they try to insulate you, largely from a lot of the personal heartache and sweat equity that they had to put in, so they insulate, insulate their kids from a lot of that stuff that took place. So, certain things that we did get to hear, I heard that he was a quiet man, he, you know, soft spoken, he worked, too, in the hardest of times to, you know, provide for his family. And he provided very good for certain family members, instilled upon them that, you know, it's worthwhile, don't let these people take you down, you have your own life to live. And each one of them became individuals, and they excelled in their own right. I mean in spite of the adversarial aspect of this country and the other people that dominated the area. But they persevered nonetheless. And I'm here.

S._: That is true.

G.P: I'm here and I'm doing my part, so, you know it's good to know that I come from a good strong family. And it's something that, yes you take pride in it, and you move forward in spite of whatever adversarial positions you find yourself in, you know where you come from. It makes you strong, and even in quiet moments, if you're reading and stuff like, quiet moments give you time to self-reflect and if you're down and out, you kind of go well "wait a minute", things aren't as bad as you perceive to be at the moment, you'll get through this. So knowing the history of where I come from and where I can go by using that information, yeah the world is your oyster.

S._: Absolutely, okay well thank you so very much, those are my questions for today.

G.P: You're welcome, okay.

0:22:20.6