



PHOTOS BY MARTHA GREENON

## Talking with Willie Wells

By R.U. Steinberg

Austin is home to Willie Wells, an American baseball hero. After all, Wells is one of the greatest shortstops that ever lived, with a lifetime batting average of .332 that spans over a quarter of a century. He's considered to be the first professional player to use a batting helmet, having fashioned one out of a hardhat after being knocked out during a game in 1942, and he once took on a project that even the Dodgers' coaching staff wouldn't touch — teaching Jackie Robinson how to play second base — although this probably wasn't too difficult, since he'd already coached the likes of Larry Doby, Monte Irvin and Don Newcombe.

So, you've heard of Willie Wells, right? No? Maybe his nickname, "El Diablo"? Well, he played all over the country, in Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Puerto Rico, even Japan. Still can't place him? That's because Wells never made it to the major leagues — racial barriers kept him confined to the relative obscurity of the old Negro leagues.

But talking to Wells, you'd find that he's not bitter about it. No, quite the contrary, he's happy, proud of his past. "God was so good to me. He gave me so much talent. Wisdom, too." He's even good natured about the fact that the Baseball Hall of Fame has yet to admit him: "There are just so many players to choose from." Actually, Wells is more hurt by the fact that when Cooperstown was considering admitting him in 1977, the *American-Statesman* sent out a reporter named John Kelso who decided to make fun of his house instead of reporting fully on the hall of fame situation.

Wells' home, built in 1912 in the heart of old South Austin, is the same house he left in

1923, after attending Anderson High School, to become a professional baseball player. It has a rich array of mementos from his career, which ended in the late 1940s — pictures, articles, books, correspondence, and a television set that's almost always tuned to ESPN. Although almost completely blind from glaucoma, he remains an avid sports enthusiast. "I listen to the players being interviewed (on TV) — the blacks, the whites. Some of them are all messed up with their egos, their temperaments, their attitudes." Today's athletes on television remind him of when he was a manager on such teams as the Newark Eagles and young players would come to him looking for a job. Some he hired, some he didn't, even if they had talent, because they had a bad attitude. Wells also can't understand the drugs in sports — a situation that existed even in his time. "I've met all the undesirables. I've met all the good people . . . I just don't understand a person with that sort of background — all that dope and stuff. I've been with those people that did all that. They talked like it wasn't anything."



Wells himself hasn't had a drink in 30 or 40 years. After he retired from baseball, he did pick up one nasty habit — smoking cigarettes — and he recalls a time when he was 21 that he tried something a little stronger — chewing tobacco. "I drank a coke with it. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I got so sick, I was lucky it rained and they called off the game."