



**Jackie Robinson (1919-1972)**

*Player Who Broke Major League Baseball's Color Barrier*

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born on January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia. His father, Jerry Robinson, was a sharecropper who farmed a plot of land on a large plantation owned by a wealthy white family. His mother, Mallie McGriff Robinson, was the daughter of freed slaves who had worked on a nearby plantation. Jackie was the youngest of their five children. He had three brothers, Edgar, Frank, and Mack, and one sister, Willa Mae. Jerry Robinson abandoned the family when Jackie was six months old, leaving Mallie to raise the children as a single parent. "I could only think of him with bitterness," Jackie wrote of his father years later. "He had no right to desert my mother and five children."<sup>1</sup>

In the area of southern Georgia where Robinson was born, discriminatory "Jim Crow" laws kept people strictly segregated by race. Blacks were expected to "know their place" in society, which meant they served as farm labor and domestic help, deferred to white people, and never complained about unfairness or mistreatment. White supremacists used intimidation and violence to keep this system in place. Mallie Robinson decided that she was unwilling to raise her children in the Jim Crow South. Six months after her husband left, she packed up their belongings and joined a small group of relatives in a cross-country migration to Pasadena, California.

Jackie grew up in a mostly white, working-class neighborhood of Pasadena. Although some neighbors initially resisted the idea of having a black family on the block, Mallie eventually won them over with patience and determination. "My mother never lost her composure," Jackie remembered. "She didn't allow us to go out of our way to antagonize the whites, and she still made it perfectly clear to us and to them that she was not at all afraid of them and that she had no intention of allowing them to mistreat us."<sup>2</sup>

### Shows Athletic Ability and Racial Pride

Throughout his youth, Robinson competed in soccer, tennis, football, basketball, baseball, and track and field. He appreciated how sports enabled him to relate to white teammates and opponents on equal terms, and how it placed an emphasis on ability and performance rather than skin color. Following in the footsteps of his brother Mack—a world-class sprinter who won a silver medal (behind American superstar Jesse Owens) in the 200 meters at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany—Robinson earned varsity letters in football, baseball, basketball, and track at John Muir Technical High School.

After graduating from high school in 1937, Robinson continued to pile up athletic achievements at Pasadena Junior College before transferring to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1939. Robinson became the first athlete in UCLA history to earn varsity letters in four sports (football, basketball, baseball, and track) in a single year. He earned All-American honors as a running back on the Bruins' undefeated football team, led the Pacific Coast Conference in scoring as a guard on the basketball team, and won the 1940 collegiate national championship in long jump. Robinson's performance in his single season of baseball was the least impressive, as he posted a weak .095 batting average while playing shortstop for the Bruins.

In 1941 Robinson ran into financial difficulties and had to leave UCLA without earning a degree. He went to Hawaii to play semi-professional football and work in construction. He returned to California shortly before the December 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor convinced the United States to enter World War II. Robinson then enlisted in the U.S. Army and was assigned to a segregated unit at Fort Riley, Kansas, where he successfully protested against a policy that prohibited black soldiers from becoming officers. He completed officer training and was commissioned as a lieutenant in 1943.

While stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson was involved in a racially charged incident that threatened to end his military career. When a bus driver on the base ordered Robinson to move to the back of the bus to make room for white soldiers, he refused to leave his seat. Robinson then faced a court martial for willful disobedience and conduct unbecoming an officer. Thanks to intervention by civil rights organizations and black-owned newspapers, though, Robinson was exonerated on all charges. He left the service in 1944 with an honorable discharge.

### Shatters Baseball's Color Barrier

In 1945 Robinson played professional baseball for the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro National League. He had a great season, batting .387 and earning a spot as starting shortstop for the annual East-West All-Star Game. Like much of the rest of American society, organized baseball was segregated by race at that time. A longstanding "color barrier" prohibited black ballplayers from playing for Major League Baseball teams or their minor-league affiliates. Branch Rickey, president and part-owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, was determined to change this unfair system. After scouting the Negro Leagues and various international leagues, he identified Robinson as the ideal subject for a "noble experiment" in baseball integration.

A short time later, the two men discussed Rickey's scheme in a three-hour meeting. Rickey made Robinson promise not to retaliate, no matter how much racial hostility he might encounter as the first black player in the majors. Robinson realized that fighting back would inflame the passions of African-American spectators and confirm the dire predictions of critics, while passive resistance would increase public support for integration. "It was one thing for me out there on the playing field to be able to keep my cool in the face of insults," he acknowledged. "But it was another for all those black people sitting in the stands to keep from overreacting when they sensed a racial slur or an unjust decision. They could have blown the whole bit to hell by acting belligerently and touching off a race riot. That would have been all the bigots needed to set back the cause of black men in sports another hundred years."<sup>3</sup>

After spending one season with the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers' top minor-league affiliate, Robinson made his historic major-league debut on April 15, 1947. Robinson faced resistance from some of his teammates and endured vicious verbal and physical abuse from opposing players and fans. He withstood this ordeal with courage and determination, however, and never wavered in the commitment he made to Rickey not to retaliate. "I had to fight hard against loneliness, abuse, and the knowledge that any mistake I made would be magnified because I was the only black man out there," Robinson remembered. "I had to fight hard to become 'just another guy.' I had to deny my true fighting spirit so that the 'noble experiment' could succeed.... But I never cared about acceptance as much as I cared about respect."<sup>4</sup>

After shattering baseball's color barrier in 1947, Robinson batted .297, led the league in stolen bases, and received Rookie of the Year honors. He went on

to have a spectacular ten-year career with the Dodgers, highlighted by six National League pennants, six All-Star Game appearances, and Most Valuable Player honors in 1949. Robinson also led the Dodgers to the World Series championship in 1955. His daring decision to steal home in Game 1 set the tone for the entire series, in which the Dodgers finally defeated their hated rivals, the New York Yankees, in seven games.

Robinson's electrifying performance on the field brought him the respect of fans and teammates, while his strength in overcoming obstacles helped make him a symbol of hope for millions of Americans. His trailblazing career and on-field exploits—.311 batting average, 1,518 hits, 137 home runs, 947 runs scored, 734 RBIs, 197 stolen bases, and .983 fielding percentage—enabled him to win election to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility in 1962. He was the first African-American player ever to be inducted. "Robinson could hit and bunt and steal and run," Roger Kahn wrote in *The Boys of Summer*. "He had intimidation skills, and he burned with a dark fire. He wanted passionately to win. He bore the burden of a pioneer and the weight made him stronger. If one can be certain of anything in baseball, it is that we shall not look upon his like again."<sup>5</sup>

### Becomes a Notable Civil Rights Activist

Following his retirement from baseball at the end of the 1956 season, Robinson became a business executive with the Chock Full o' Nuts restaurant chain. He also wrote a newspaper column, hosted a radio show, and provided commentary for sports telecasts. In 1965 he launched the Freedom National Bank in New York City, which provided loans to help black entrepreneurs start up small business ventures. He also established a construction company to build affordable housing for working families.

Robinson expanded his involvement in the civil rights movement after his baseball career ended. He gave speeches and raised money to support the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for instance, and organized an annual jazz concert to benefit various causes. Robinson attended the 1963 March on Washington, where the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. presented his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, and kept up a lively correspondence with presidents and other public figures on the topic of civil rights. His status as an early pioneer in the fight for racial equality gave him tremendous credibility and influence within the movement.

Throughout his post-baseball years, Robinson suffered from health problems related to diabetes. He died of a heart attack at his home in Stamford, Connecticut, on October 24, 1972, at the age of fifty-three. He was survived by his wife, Rachel Isum Robinson, and two children, daughter Sharon and son David. His eldest son, Jackie Jr., had been killed in an automobile accident a year earlier.

Robinson made an enduring impact on the game of baseball and on American society. He opened the door for other black athletes to make their mark in professional sports, inspired millions of African Americans to break down barriers to participation in other aspects of life, and forced white Americans to confront their prejudices and change their attitudes about race. “[Integrating Major League Baseball] was earth-shattering,” explained former president Bill Clinton. “It was a milestone for sports, but also a milestone in the fifty-year effort that really began at the end of World War II to change America’s attitudes on the question of race. It was not long after that President Truman signed an order to desegregate the military... A whole series of things happened and they were triggered by Jackie Robinson.”<sup>6</sup>

Robinson’s legacy has been honored in many ways over the years. His widow established the Jackie Robinson Foundation in 1973 to provide scholarships and other assistance to help underprivileged youth to attend college. In 1984 Robinson posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which is the nation’s highest civilian honor. In 1997 his uniform number 42 was permanently retired by every team in Major League Baseball, and in 2005 MLB designated April 15 of every year as Jackie Robinson Day, to be marked with special events and celebrations at stadiums across the country.

## Sources

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rampersad, Arnold. *Jackie Robinson: A Biography*. New York: Random House, 1997.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Rampersad.
- <sup>3</sup> Robinson, Jackie. *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography*. Hopewell, NJ: Echo Press, 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Quoted in Newman, Mark. “MLB Celebrates Robinson’s Enduring Impact.” MLB.com, April 14, 2011. Retrieved from [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110414&content\\_id=17767716&c\\_id=mlb](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20110414&content_id=17767716&c_id=mlb).
- <sup>5</sup> Kahn, Roger. *The Boys of Summer*. New York: Harper and Row, 1972, p. xix.
- <sup>6</sup> Quoted in Bodley, Hal. “No Measuring Robinson’s Impact.” MLB.com, April 15, 2010. Retrieved from [http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20100415&content\\_id=9331356&vkey=news\\_mlb&fext=.jsp&c\\_id=mlb](http://mlb.mlb.com/news/article.jsp?ymd=20100415&content_id=9331356&vkey=news_mlb&fext=.jsp&c_id=mlb).