

DEFINING MOMENTS JACKIE ROBINSON AND THE INTEGRATION OF BASEBALL



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Chapter Three

ROBINSON JOINS THE SHOW



Let's face it, baseball was at the very core of American life. And all by himself, enduring all that he endured, Jackie Robinson proved what African Americans were capable of accomplishing. Every American, the low and the mighty, had to take note of that.

—Civil rights leader Roger Wilkins

After spending one season in the minor leagues, Jackie Robinson made his major-league debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. He overcame resistance from his teammates and hostility from opposing players and fans to have an amazing season. Robinson not only claimed the National League Rookie of the Year Award and led the Dodgers to the World Series, he also earned the admiration of millions of Americans with his quiet courage. “For blacks, Robinson became a symbol of pride and dignity,” wrote baseball historian Jules Tygiel. “To whites, he represented a type of black man far removed from prevailing stereotypes, whom they could not help but respect.”¹ Robinson’s success opened the door for future generations of African-American baseball players to enter the major leagues.

Joins the Dodgers

After the 1946 season ended, Robinson’s focus shifted from his baseball career to his personal life. He was thrilled when his wife gave birth to their first child, son Jackie Jr., in November 1946. A few months later, however, Robinson had to leave his family behind to report to a joint Montreal Royals-Brooklyn Dodgers training camp in Cuba. Dodgers president Branch Rickey had decid-



Robinson and his wife, Rachel, welcomed their first child, son Jackie Jr., shortly before he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers.

ed to relocate spring training to the racially diverse Caribbean island nation in order to avoid some of the discrimination that Robinson had encountered the previous year in Florida. He hoped that the move would reduce some of the pressure on Robinson, give him time to get to know his future teammates, and ease his transition into the big leagues.

Unfortunately, playing in Cuba did not help Robinson feel more comfortable. He struggled to find his way around because he did not know Spanish, which is the primary language spoken in Cuba. He also experienced some digestive problems from consuming unfamiliar food and water. Robinson's discomfort also extended to the ball field, as he unexpectedly learned that the Dodgers wanted him to switch from second base to first base—a position he had never played before.

Despite these obstacles, Robinson performed well in spring training. Rickey set up a series of exhibition games between the Royals and the Dodgers. He hoped that Robinson would impress the big-league squad so much that the players would be clamoring for him to join the team. "I want you to be a whirling demon against the Dodgers," the executive told Robinson. "I want you to concentrate, to hit that ball, to get on base by any means necessary. I want you to run wild, to steal the pants off them, to be the most conspicuous player on the field—but conspicuous only because of the kind of baseball you're playing."² Robinson took Rickey's advice. In seven exhibition games, he hit a remarkable .625 and stole 7 bases.

Faces Opposition from Teammates

Although the Dodgers were duly impressed by Robinson's talents, many of the players continued to resist the idea of having an African-American teammate. Several of the team's biggest stars hailed from the South, where racial segregation remained firmly in place at that time. Growing up in this environment had created deep-seated prejudices that were difficult to overcome. "I can't say that we really looked down on the blacks," said Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese, who was raised in Kentucky. "We just thought that [segregation] was the way it was supposed to be."³

A few of the Dodgers, like Dixie Walker—a veteran outfielder from Alabama—held even stronger racist views. "[They] believed that taking a shower in the same larger shower room with a black ballplayer would infect and contaminate them. They lived by the racial clichés of the time," explained sportswriter Maury Allen. "They thought of blacks as slaves, a generation removed: maids, porters, local laborers, shiftless, dirty, unintelligent. Dixie Walker was a kind, decent, and gentle man [who] saw no question of hatred.... He was a God-fearing man who saw the separation of the races as part of the divine order."⁴

When it appeared likely that Robinson would make the big-league roster for the 1947 season, Walker responded by circulating a petition in the Dodgers' clubhouse. The petition stated that those who signed it would refuse to be on the same team as a black player. Walker and several other southerners affixed their signatures. Most team members who came from northern states refused to sign, however, as did a few key southerners. "I wouldn't sign it," Reese remembered. "I wasn't trying to think of myself as being the Great White Father, really, I just wanted to play the game ... and it didn't matter to me whether he was black or green, he had a right to be there too."⁵



Dodgers outfielder Dixie Walker and several other players signed a petition that said they would refuse to play on the same team as a black man.

When Rickey and Dodgers manager Leo Durocher learned about the petition, they called a late-night meeting of the players responsible. Rickey threatened to trade anyone who had a problem playing for an integrated team. Although a couple of players requested a trade, most of them bowed to Rickey's authority and gave up their protest.

Makes Major League Debut

On April 10, Rickey posted an understated message in the Dodgers' press box that read: "Brooklyn announces the purchase of Jack Roosevelt Robinson from Montreal. Signed, Branch Rickey." With this announcement, Robinson officially became the first African-American player to make a major-league roster in the twentieth century. Still, the mainstream media did not treat it as a big story. Many sportswriters recognized both Robinson's talent and Rickey's deter-

mination, so they had fully expected Robinson to be promoted to the Dodgers by the end of spring training. The *New York Times* merely commented that it would have happened earlier if Robinson were white.

The nation's black-owned newspapers welcomed the news with greater fanfare. A headline in the *Boston Chronicle*, for instance, said "Triumph of Whole Race Seen in Jackie's Debut in Major League Ball." At the same time, though, some African-American journalists noted that Robinson's promotion was only one step in the long journey toward racial equality in America. "This of course is just a token victory," wrote Dave Egan in the *Pittsburgh Courier*. "The war against bigotry in baseball will not be won until every team in the major leagues judges every man on his ability to play ball."⁶

Robinson made his first regular-season appearance in a Dodgers uniform on April 15—opening day of the 1947 season. As he prepared to leave the house

that morning, he joked with his wife that “in case you have trouble picking me out, I’ll be wearing number 42.”⁷ Over 25,000 people, including about 14,000 African Americans, were in the stands at Ebbets Field to witness his historic shattering of baseball’s color barrier. Robinson’s performance at the plate did not rise to the occasion, as he went hitless in four at-bats. Nevertheless, the Dodgers defeated the Boston Braves by a score of 5-3 (see “A Sportswriter Recalls Robinson’s Major League Debut,” p. 176).

Endures Hatred and Hostility

Robinson first experienced racial hostility from an opposing team a week later, during the first game of a home stand against the Philadelphia Phillies. Led by Phillies manager Ben Chapman, who grew up in Tennessee, the opposing dugout launched a vicious verbal assault on Robinson that lasted through most of the game. The Phillies shouted epithets and insults, made obscene gestures, and pretended their bats were machine guns being fired at him.

Some people excused the Phillies’ behavior, explaining that verbal exchanges involving taunting, name calling, and even ethnic slurs were common among major-league teams in those days. “You have to realize that baseball is a game in which the guys on the other bench will say almost anything to upset you,” said Dodgers pitcher Carl Erskine. “They yell about your mother. They yell about your wife. They call you names. If it gets to you, then it makes you less effective.”⁸ Yet many people—including families seated in the stands nearby—felt that Chapman’s antics went far beyond the level of routine big-league rivalry. “At no time in my life have I heard racial venom and dugout abuse to match the abuse that Ben sprayed on Robinson that night,”⁹ declared Dodgers traveling secretary Harold Parrott. Outrage over the incident prompted dozens of fans to send letters of protest to Major League Baseball commissioner A. B. “Happy” Chandler.

At the time, Robinson claimed that the behavior of Chapman and the Phillies did not bother him. He never responded to the endless stream of taunts and gestures coming from the opposing dugout, and he earned widespread praise in newspapers for his restraint. Years later, though, he acknowledged his true feelings about the incident in his autobiography. “I have to admit that this day, of all the unpleasant days in my life, brought me nearer to cracking up than I had ever been,” he wrote. “Perhaps I should have become inured to this kind of garbage, but I was in New York City and unprepared to face the

kind of barbarism from a northern team that I had come to associate with the Deep South.”¹⁰

Robinson found the abuse so terrible, in fact, that he seriously considered abandoning Rickey’s “noble experiment” and retaliating against his tormentors. He admitted that he was sorely tempted to “stride over to that Phillies dugout, grab one of those white sons of bitches, and smash his teeth with my despised black fist.”¹¹ Rachel Robinson could only watch and try to support her husband as he endured such hostility on an almost daily basis. “Every stadium that year was a battleground,” she remembered. “For Jack the greatest struggles were internal; the pact he had agreed to with Branch Rickey at his signing—that he would not allow himself to be provoked regardless of the viciousness of the baiting—had to be honored.”¹²

“This of course is just a token victory,” sportswriter Dave Egan wrote of Jackie Robinson’s debut. “The war against bigotry in baseball will not be won until every team in the major leagues judges every man on his ability to play ball.”

During that April 22 game against the Phillies, the abuse continued until one of Robinson’s teammates came to his defense. Dodgers second baseman Eddie Stanky, who had shown little interest in getting to know the rookie first baseman up to that point, finally reached the limit of his ability to tolerate the Phillies’ behavior. He marched over to the opposing dugout and called Chapman a coward for picking on a player who could not fight back. From that time on, the Dodgers seemed more willing to step forward and protect

Robinson, as they would any other teammate. “Chapman did more than anybody to unite the Dodgers,” said Rickey. “When he poured out that string of unconscionable abuse, he solidified and unified thirty men, not one of whom was willing to sit by and see someone kick around a man who had his hands tied behind his back.... Chapman made Jackie a real member of the Dodgers.”¹³

The ugly incident also helped Robinson gain valuable support from the commissioner of baseball. Chandler responded to complaints from fans by warning Chapman that any further racial remarks would result in his suspension. Although the Phillies manager insisted that he had treated Robinson the same way he would have treated any other opponent, the commissioner’s message clearly got through. When the Dodgers faced the Phillies again at Shibe Park in Philadelphia, Chapman sent a special request to the visitors’ locker room. He asked Robinson to pose for a photograph together to show that they had both put the incident behind them. Robinson earned the respect of many



Robinson (back row, third from left) made his debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947.

by agreeing to meet Chapman at home plate before the game. “I can think of no occasion where I had more difficulty in swallowing my pride and doing what seemed best for baseball and the cause of the Negro in baseball than in agreeing to pose for a photograph with a man for whom I had only the very lowest regard,”¹⁴ he admitted. Since neither man relished the idea of a handshake, they posed holding opposite ends of the same bat.

The Phillies incident was only the first of many trials Robinson faced during his rookie season. At one point the media reported that a large group of National League players, led by the St. Louis Cardinals, was planning to go on strike rather than play against Robinson. National League president Ford Frick threatened to suspend any players involved in such a scheme, however, and the rumored strike never happened. Robinson also received many troubling letters

in the mail throughout the season, including some in which the writers made death threats against him and his family. The situation became so frightening to Robinson and his wife that the Dodgers assigned a staff member to open their mail and contact the police whenever it contained threatening letters. The authorities followed up on a few of the more credible threats. Before one Dodgers game in Cincinnati, for instance, agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) searched the rooftops of buildings around the stadium looking for a gunman who had vowed to shoot Robinson if he took the field. They never found the man.

In addition to these major scares, Robinson also faced countless minor inconveniences as the only African-American player in the major leagues. Segregation prevented him from staying at the same hotel as his teammates in many southern cities. He was also forced to carry his own luggage through airports and training facilities, while porters handled that duty for the rest of the Dodgers.

Gains Support of Teammates

As the 1947 season wore on, Robinson continued to endure hostility and hatred with courage and dignity. He also proved that he belonged in the major leagues with his daring and spectacular play on the field. After struggling at the plate for the first month of the season, Robinson's hitting improved dramatically in mid-May. On June 14 he started a 21-game hitting streak, and by the end of that month he had raised his batting average to .315 and led the league in stolen bases.

One of Robinson's most important contributions to the game was adding an element of Negro League-style "tricky baseball" to the majors. He turned bunting into an art form, posting a phenomenal .913 success rate (14 hits and 28 sacrifices in 46 attempts). Once on base, his speed and aggressiveness intimidated opposing pitchers and ignited the competitive fire in his team. "Robinson on base—on any base, first, second, third—was the most exciting player I've seen," said legendary Dodgers announcer Red Barber. "When Robinson was on base, every eye in the ballpark was on him."¹⁵

Robinson's outstanding play served as his personal revenge against fans who taunted him, pitchers who threw at him, and base runners who spiked him in the leg as they crossed first base. "Jack found that the most powerful form of retaliation against prejudice was his excellent play. He 'hurt' the opposition by performing well," Rachel Robinson explained. "We knew that achieving one's



Robinson agreed to pose for a photo with Philadelphia Phillies manager Ben Chapman, who had led a vicious, racially motivated verbal assault against him, in order to advance "the cause of the Negro in baseball."

goals was the most potent method for triumphing over oppressors ... and he did so with great glee."¹⁶

Robinson's competitive spirit and playing ability helped him gain the support of more and more of his teammates. "Within thirty days, maximum, those of us who were reluctant to sit with Jackie in the dining room car would readily sit down with him," said Dodgers catcher Bobby Bragan, who had signed the petition protesting Robinson's addition to the team. "It soon became apparent to all of us that there wasn't any way we were going to win without Jackie."¹⁷

One of Robinson's closest allies on the Dodgers was shortstop Pee Wee Reese (see biography, p. 126), who talked and joked with the rookie and invit-

“I had started the season as a lonely man,” Jackie Robinson said of his rookie year. “I ended it feeling like a member of a solid team.”

ed him to play cards and golf with the rest of the players. Reese also demonstrated his support and respect publicly, which helped Robinson feel more confident on the field. During a game in Cincinnati, for example, fans and opposing players began shouting taunts and insults at both Robinson and Reese. They expressed outrage that Reese, as a southerner, was willing to play alongside a black man. The Dodgers captain responded with a subtle but effective display of sportsmanship and camaraderie. “Reese heard the shouting but refused to even glance in the direction of the stands,” explained Robinson’s daughter Sharon. “Instead, he walked over to my dad on first base. Reese put his hand on my father’s shoulder and started talking to him. His words weren’t important—in fact, afterward neither man remembered what was said. It was the gesture of comradeship and support that counted.”¹⁸

Dodgers pitcher Rex Barney also found the shortstop’s gesture memorable. “Pee Wee went over to him and put his arm around him as if to say, ‘This is my boy. This is the guy. We’re gonna win with him,’” he recalled. “Well, it drove the Cincinnati players right through the ceiling, and you could have heard the gasp from the crowd when he did it. That’s one reason Pee Wee was such an instrumental person contributing to Jackie’s success.”¹⁹

With the team captain setting an example, the rest of the Dodgers soon began challenging some of the discriminatory practices that affected Robinson. “I remember Jackie would sit there and wait until everyone else had showered,” said outfielder Al Gionfriddo, who joined the team midway through the 1947 season. “One day I hit him on the butt and I said, ‘You’re part of this team. Why are you waiting to be the last guy in the shower? Just because in some states Negroes can’t shower with whites, that doesn’t mean it has to apply here in our clubhouse.’ And he just looked at me and laughed, and we both got up and took a shower.”²⁰

Wins the Hearts of Baseball Fans

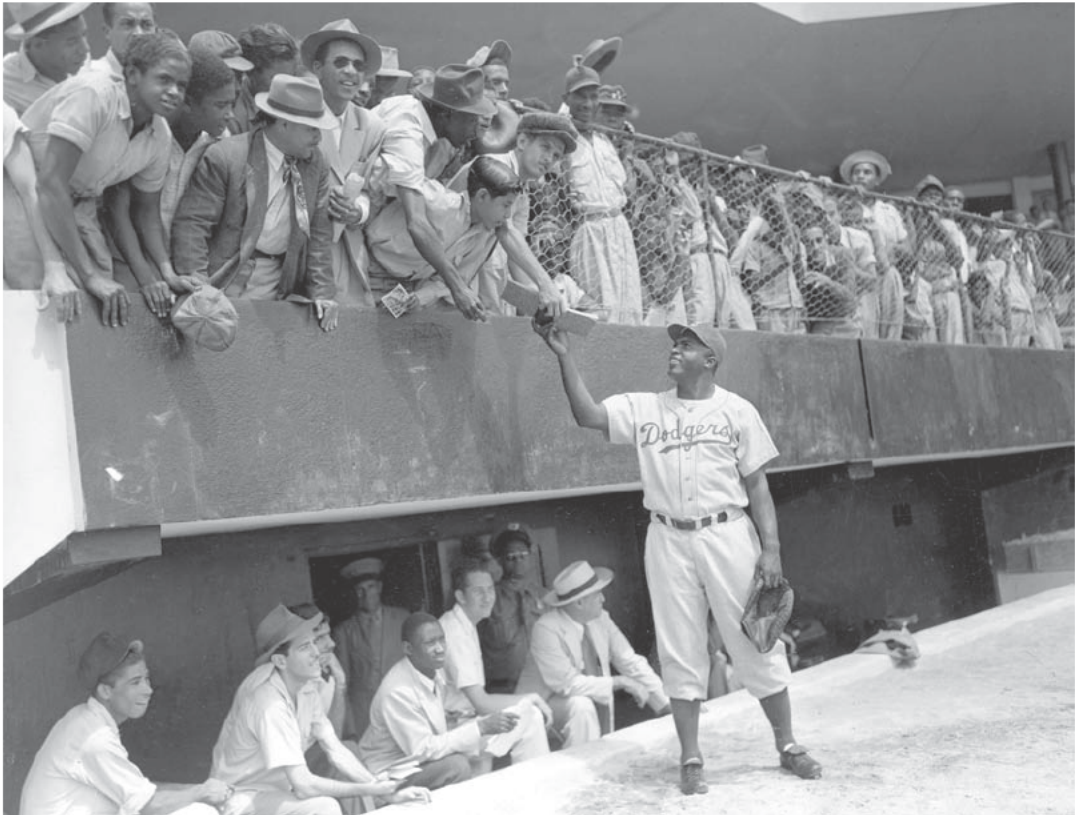
As the 1947 season continued, people across the country followed Robinson’s struggles and triumphs closely. They gathered around their radios to listen to broadcasts of every Dodger game, and they combed through the sports sections of newspapers to get daily updates on Robinson’s statistics. The *Pittsburgh Courier* convinced Robinson to write a regular column, “Jackie Robinson



During his rookie season, Robinson gradually gained the support of Dodgers teammates like (from left) Spider Jorgensen, Pee Wee Reese, and Eddie Stanky.

Says,” in which he shared his thoughts on various topics and offered insights into his private life and baseball experiences. His portrait appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine, and a public opinion poll found that he was the second-most-popular man in America, after singer and actor Bing Crosby. All of the media attention helped Robinson go from a curiosity to a sensation to a national hero. “Robinson’s aggressive play, his innate sense of dignity, and his outward composure under extreme duress captivated the American people,”²¹ Tygiel noted.

Although Robinson’s fan base was diverse, his popularity was greatest among African Americans. Everywhere the Dodgers played, black fans would fill the stadium to capacity. Some black communities arranged for special trains to



Robinson became a huge fan favorite and helped set attendance records at stadiums across the country.

transport residents to New York or other cities to see Robinson in action. Many black fans arrived at the ballpark dressed in their finest clothes. Some of them did not even know the rules of baseball—they just wanted to witness history in the making. “There’s people who come out to see ball games who didn’t know who the umpire was. I’ve heard them holler about that little old man in the blue suit, ‘Why don’t he get out of the way?’ They didn’t know he was [the] umpire,” recalled former Negro League pitcher Bill Drake. “They used to bring baskets of chicken out there just like going on a picnic. They was just that crazy about Robinson, they was really crazy about Robinson when he was with the Dodgers.”²²

Robinson’s extreme popularity was reflected in National League attendance figures. Thanks in part to his presence, the total attendance for 1947 beat the all-time record set the previous year by 750,000 people. Rachel Robinson

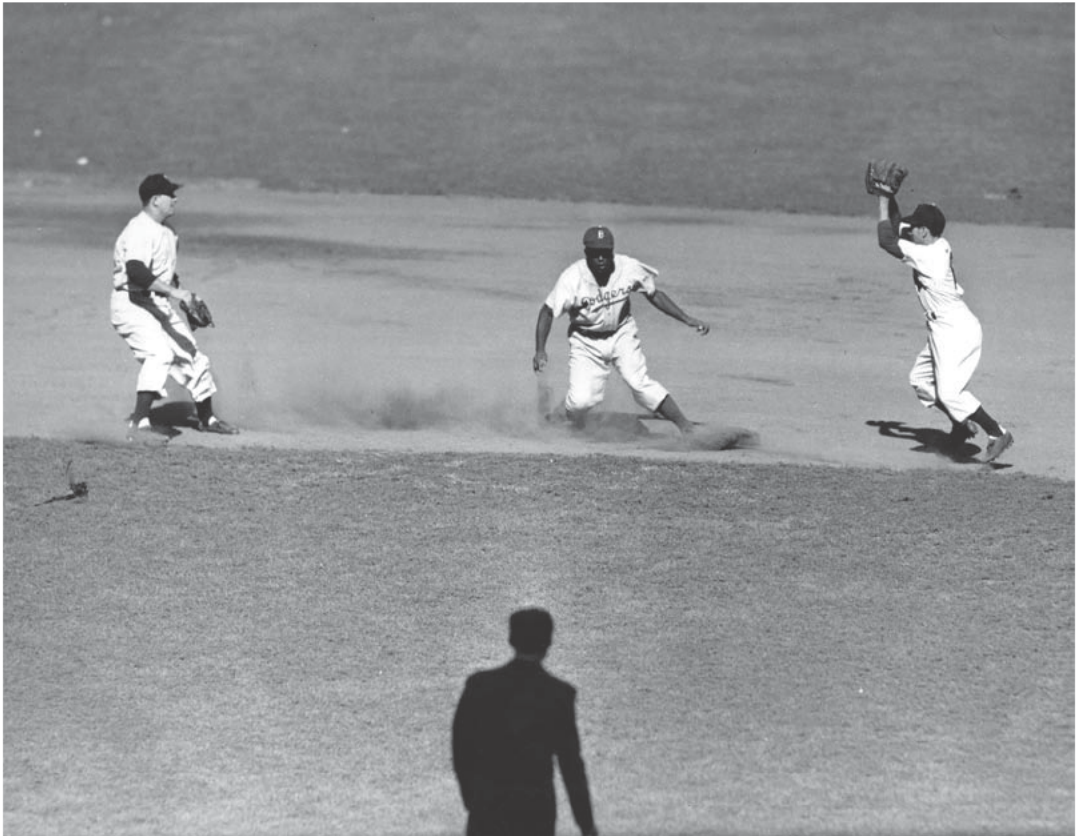
understood that her husband's achievements carried great meaning for African Americans, and she noted that the support they received from the black community was meaningful for them as well. "Jack and I began to realize how important we were to black America, and how much we symbolized its hunger for opportunity and its determination to make dreams long deferred possible. We would witness the swelling attendance and thunderous support of black fans as the team traveled around the country," she stated. "As a group, black people knew we were involved in something momentous."²³

Dodgers Capture the NL Pennant

Robinson's outstanding play and the surge in fan support helped lift the Dodgers to the World Series in 1947. Brooklyn posted a 94-60 record on the year to win the National League pennant by five games over the St. Louis Cardinals. Robinson appeared in 151 of the team's 154 games. He batted an impressive .297, led the league in stolen bases with 29, and ranked second in runs scored with 125 runs. He also adjusted well to his new defensive position and became a solid first baseman. At the conclusion of the season, the *Sporting News* presented Robinson with the first-ever National League Rookie of the Year Award. The magazine's editors insisted that they made their choice solely based on his performance on the field. "The sociological experiment that Robinson represented, the trail blazing that he did, the barriers he broke down, did not enter into the decision,"²⁴ they wrote.

After the Dodgers clinched the pennant, the team recognized Robinson's contributions by declaring "Jackie Robinson Day" at Ebbets Field. They presented him with a Cadillac, a television set, a gold watch, and other gifts. Players, coaches, and team executives all made speeches praising Robinson's accomplishments on and off the field. For Robinson, such recognition marked the successful conclusion of a season-long quest for acceptance by his teammates. "I had started the season as a lonely man," he acknowledged. "I ended it feeling like a member of a solid team. The Dodgers were a championship team because all of us had learned something. I had learned how to exercise self-control—to answer insults, violence, and injustice with silence—and I had learned how to earn the respect of my teammates. They had learned that it's not skin color but talent and ability that counts."²⁵

In the 1947 World Series, the Dodgers faced off against a powerful New York Yankees team led by star players Joe DiMaggio, Yogi Berra, and Phil Riz-



Robinson, known for his aggressive base running, is caught in a rundown by the New York Yankees during the 1947 World Series.

zuto. Robinson recalled his first World Series game as one of the best moments of his career. "My greatest thrill in baseball didn't come from any ball I hit, from any base I stole, or from any play I made. It came when I heard the national anthem played just before the start of the 1947 World Series," he declared. "It was a history-making day. It would be the first time that a black man would be allowed to participate in a World Series."²⁶ The best-of-seven-game series between the two teams is widely considered to be one of the most thrilling in baseball history. After the Dodgers and Yankees split the first six games 3-3, they played a winner-take-all seventh game to decide the championship. Unfortunately for Robinson and his teammates, the Dodgers lost 5-2 (see "Jackie Robinson Looks Back on His Rookie Season," p. 180).

Opens the Door for Other Black Players

Robinson's highly successful rookie season opened the door for other African-American players to enter Major League Baseball (see "First African-American Player for Each Major-League Franchise," p. 52). "In one incredible year, in the face of almost unanimous opposition, Jackie Robinson had proved that the Negro could not only compete in the major leagues but that he could sparkle. Because he was so spectacular, there was a rush by other teams to sign black talent," wrote Peter Golenbock in a history of the Dodgers. "All because of the courage and dignity and skill and intelligence of Jack Roosevelt Robinson."²⁷

Twenty-three-year-old World War II veteran Larry Doby (see biography, p. 121) was the second black player in the majors. He broke the American League's color barrier on July 5, 1947, when he played for the Cleveland Indians. Unfortunately, Doby faced some of the same resistance from teammates and hostility from opponents as Robinson did in the National League. "The first day I took the field in Chicago, I stood on the sidelines for five minutes and no one would warm up with me," Doby recalled. Journalist Jerry Izenberg remembered the humiliating treatment Doby endured when the Indians played in the segregated South. "Larry wasn't allowed to use the visitors' clubhouse [in Washington, D.C.]—he had to change in a black boardinghouse. No cab would pick him up, and there he was, walking down the street with his uniform on and his cleats over his shoulder, going to the tradesman's entrance at the ballpark so he could play against the Senators," he wrote. "Unless you've lived it, you don't know. Walk a mile in my shoes."²⁸

Like Robinson, though, centerfielder Doby became a breakout star for his new team and gradually gained the acceptance of his teammates. He made the All-Star team in seven consecutive seasons and led the Indians to a World Series championship in 1948. When Doby hit a home run to lift his team to victory in one of the World Series games, the winning pitcher, Steve Gromek, greeted him at home plate with an enthusiastic bear hug. A photographer captured the moment on film, and the image of the teammates' celebration appeared in the sports section of newspapers across the country. It marked the first time that a photo of a black athlete and a white athlete embracing each other had ever been published nationwide. "America really needed that picture," Doby said fifty years later in his Hall of Fame induction speech, "and I'm proud I was able to give it to them."²⁹

Several other black players joined major-league teams before the end of the 1947 season. The struggling St. Louis Browns hired two Negro League stars, out-

First African-American Player for Each Major-League Franchise

Jackie Robinson's success encouraged other major-league teams to add black players to their rosters. The following chart shows the year each team integrated, along with the name of the African-American player who broke the team's color barrier.

TEAM	PLAYER	YEAR
Brooklyn Dodgers	Jackie Robinson	1947
Cleveland Indians	Larry Doby	1947
St. Louis Browns	Hank Thompson; Willard Brown	1947
New York Giants	Monte Irvin; Hank Thompson	1949
Boston Braves	Sam Jethroe	1950
Chicago White Sox	Minnie Minoso	1951
Philadelphia Athletics	Bob Trice	1953
Chicago Cubs	Ernie Banks; Gene Baker	1953
Pittsburgh Pirates	Curt Roberts	1954
St. Louis Cardinals	Tom Alston	1954
Cincinnati Reds	Chuck Harmon; Nino Escalera	1954
Washington Senators	Carlos Paula	1954
New York Yankees	Elston Howard	1955
Philadelphia Phillies	John Kennedy	1957
Detroit Tigers	Ozzie Virgil Sr.	1958
Boston Red Sox	Pumpsie Green	1959

fielder Willard "Home Run" Brown and infielder Hank Thompson, in an effort to win games and increase attendance. When they both appeared in the Browns' lineup on July 20, it marked the first time a major-league franchise had played two African Americans in the same game. The Dodgers added a second black player, pitcher Dan Bankhead, for a brief time in August. Although he hit a home run in his first major-league at-bat, Bankhead also allowed ten hits in a three-inning relief appearance, which resulted in his being reassigned to the minors.

Over the next few seasons, a steady stream of black players poured into organized baseball. By 1952 there were 150 African-American players on major-league rosters or in minor-league farm systems. Once the initial shock of Robinson's debut wore off, "owners and players alike took up cudgels [stick-like weapons] in defense of the move, not from any altruistic motive, but because they recognized ... the competitive value of this new source of manpower,"³⁰ according to Ford Frick, the former National League president who became the commissioner of baseball in 1951.

Although it would be a dozen years before every major-league team included a black player, the integration of baseball had far-reaching effects on American society. "Through the vehicle of America's pastime, African Americans shattered Jim Crow restrictions while simultaneously challenging long-held stereotypes of racial inadequacy," wrote historian Bruce Adelson. "The mere act of hitting, fielding ... alongside white teammates and opponents, often equaling or besting their feats, not only belied the notion of black inferiority but also signaled the eventual demise of Jim Crow."³¹

One unfortunate effect of baseball integration was that it soon led to the demise of the Negro Leagues. Within four years of Robinson's major-league debut, black baseball had lost virtually all of its most talented players. Many of the younger players signed contracts with big-league teams, while most of the older ones retired. At the same time, black baseball fans switched their allegiance to the newly integrated major-league teams that showcased their heroes. Without stars to attract fans, Negro League team owners suffered financial losses and went out of business. The Negro National League disbanded after the 1949 season. Although the Negro American League managed to hold on through the 1950s, it closed its doors in 1962.

Notes

¹ Tygiel, Jules. *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1984, p. 208.

² Rowan, Carl T., with Jackie Robinson. *Wait Till Next Year: The Life Story of Jackie Robinson*. New York: Random House, 1960, p. 175.

³ Quoted in Golenbock, Peter. *Bums: An Oral History of the Brooklyn Dodgers*. New York: Putnam, 1984, p. 146.

⁴ Quoted in Kindred, Dave. "Jackie Robinson: One Man, Alone." *The Sporting News*, April 14, 1997.

⁵ Quoted in Berkow, Ira. "Standing Beside Jackie Robinson, Reese Helped Change Baseball." *New York Times*, March 31, 1997. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/specials/baseball/bbo-reese-robinson.html>.

- ⁶ Quoted in Holtzman, Jerome. *On Baseball: A History of Baseball Scribes*. Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing, 2005, p. 149.
- ⁷ Schall, Andrew. "Wendell Smith: The Pittsburgh Journalist Who Made Jackie Robinson Mainstream." *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 29, 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.post-gazette.com/stories/opinion/perspectives/the-next-page-wendell-smith-the-pittsburgh-journalist-who-made-jackie-robinson-mainstream-300714/#ixzz20EuBK2v8>.
- ⁸ Quoted in Fussman, Cal. *After Jackie: Pride, Prejudice, and Baseball's Forgotten Heroes: An Oral History*. New York: ESPN Books, 2007, p. 73.
- ⁹ Parrott, Harold. *The Lords of Baseball*. New York: Praeger, 1976, p. 194.
- ¹⁰ Robinson, Jackie. *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography*. Hopewell, NJ: Echo Press, 1995, p. 59.
- ¹¹ Robinson, Jackie, p. 64.
- ¹² Robinson, Rachel. *Jackie Robinson: An Intimate Portrait*. New York: Abrams, 1996, p. 71.
- ¹³ Quoted in Rowan, with Robinson, p. 181.
- ¹⁴ Rowan, with Robinson, p. 184.
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Rachel Robinson (1922-)

Wife of Jackie Robinson and President of the Jackie Robinson Foundation

Rachel Robinson was born as Rachel Annetta Isum on July 19, 1922, in Los Angeles, California. She was one of three children born to Charles Raymond Isum and Zellee Isum. She grew up as part of a close-knit extended family that had already lived in Los Angeles for a generation. As a girl Rachel enjoyed walking to museums, violin lessons, and family gatherings. “Within a two-mile radius, I had everything I needed to support my growth,” she recalled. “The church was central to our social activities. It wasn’t something where you needed to have money or any social resources.”¹



After graduating from Manual Arts High School in 1940, Rachel entered the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) to study nursing. During her freshman year she could not help but notice a handsome African-American senior, Jack Roosevelt Robinson, who had recently become the first athlete to earn a varsity letter in four sports in the same year at UCLA. “He was big, he was broad-shouldered, he was very attractive physically, and he had pigeon toes you couldn’t miss,” she remembered. “He was also proud of his color, which was something many of us didn’t have at that age. . . . There was a kind of dignity about him and a sense of purpose that attracted me.”²

The two began dating and soon got engaged. While Rachel completed her nursing degree and worked as a riveter in an aircraft factory, Jackie served in the U.S. military during World War II. Once the war ended, Jackie signed a contract to play professional baseball in the Negro Leagues for the Kansas City Monarchs. His performance on the field, as well as his reputation as an upstanding citizen off the field, attracted the attention of Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey, who was looking for an ideal person to become the first black player in Major League Baseball. Following a three-hour meeting in the fall of 1945, Rickey signed Robinson to a contract with the Dodgers’ top minor-league affiliate, the Montreal Royals. A few months later, in February 1946, Jackie and Rachel Robinson were married. They would eventually have three children: Jackie Jr., Sharon, and David.

Supports the “Noble Experiment”

After spending one season with the Royals, Jackie made his historic debut with the Dodgers on April 15, 1947, shattering Major League Baseball’s long-standing color barrier. Rachel stood by her husband’s side throughout this often difficult ordeal. She supported him as he faced racially motivated abuse from opposing players and fans, and she endured discrimination in cities and stadiums across the country during the era of segregation. “She was not simply the dutiful little wife. She was Jack’s co-pioneer,” wrote journalist and civil rights activist Roger Wilkins. “She had to live through the death threats, endure the vile screams of the fans, and watch her husband get knocked down by pitch after pitch. And because he was under the strictest discipline not to fight, spike, curse, or spit back, she was the one who had to absorb everything he brought home. She was beautiful and wise and replenished his strength and courage.”³

Throughout Jackie’s ten-year career with the Dodgers, Rachel attended as many games as possible. Although she found it difficult to hold her tongue in the face of vicious name calling and race baiting, she felt it was important to bear witness to her husband’s experiences so that she could provide much-needed understanding and support. “My most profound instinct as Jack’s wife was to protect him—an impossible task,” she noted. “I would, however, be a consistent presence to witness and validate the realities, love him without reservation, share his thoughts and miseries, discover with him the humor in the ridiculous behavior against us, and, most of all, help maintain our fighting spirit. I knew our only chance to survive was to be ourselves.”⁴ Rachel always tried to comfort her husband during the drive back from the stadium, so that their home would remain a sanctuary from the tensions of baseball integration.

Thanks to Jackie’s courage and Rachel’s support, Rickey’s “noble experiment” turned out to be a tremendous success. Robinson went on to become the first African-American player inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, and his achievements helped open the door for a new generation of black athletes in baseball and other professional sports. “I think the lesson for us is: if you have an overriding goal, a big goal that you’re trying to achieve, there are times when you must transcend the obstacles that are being put in your way. Rise above them,” Rachel stated. “Jack wanted to integrate athletics.”⁵ Jackie insisted that he could not have done it without Rachel by his side, “strong, loving, gentle, and brave, never afraid to either criticize or comfort me.”⁶

Launches Her Own Career

While her husband maintained the busy travel schedule of a professional baseball player, Rachel relished her role as a homemaker. “Being home allowed me to enjoy my children and support their development,” she explained. “I was one of those suburban mothers so often caricatured as a den mother, scout leader, the works: participating in neighborhood drives and causes; racing here and there with a car full of children to events, lessons, games; and present when they came home for talks, snacks, and homework.” But when Jackie retired from baseball and became a business executive, and their youngest child went to school full time, she began pursuing her own career goals. “I needed to develop as a separate person with interests, skills, personal challenges, and victories all my own,” she stated. “I was indeed buoyed by the changing role of women. I knew that what I wanted for myself wasn’t aberrant and that women had the right to pursue their dreams.”⁷

In 1959 Rachel earned a master’s degree in psychiatric nursing from New York University. Over the next five years she worked as a psychiatric nurse, therapist, and medical researcher at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine. In 1965 she became an assistant professor at the Yale School of Nursing and director of nursing at the Connecticut Mental Health Center. Rachel also managed to find time to contribute to the civil rights movement during these years. When police in Birmingham, Alabama, threw the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. and other peaceful protesters in jail in 1963, for example, she helped organize an outdoor jazz concert to raise bail money. The concert—held on the Robinsons’ property in Stamford, Connecticut—became an annual event that benefitted many causes over the years.

Honors Her Husband’s Legacy

The early 1970s proved to be a tough time emotionally for Rachel and her family. Her oldest son died in an automobile accident in 1971, and Jackie Robinson died from complications of diabetes in 1972. Rachel immediately began looking for ways to honor her husband’s memory and legacy. One of her first acts was to establish the Jackie Robinson Development Corporation to build housing for low- and moderate-income families. She served as president of the company for ten years and oversaw the construction of more than 1,300 housing units.

In 1973 Rachel created the Jackie Robinson Foundation (JRF), a nonprofit organization aimed at helping deserving young people go to college. “It had to

be more than just naming a building or a street for him,” she explained. “It had to be something active, alive, and something in the area of education.”⁸ As of 2013, JRF had provided more than \$22 million in scholarships to help more than 1,400 minority students graduate from colleges and universities across the country.

Rachel participated in many ceremonies honoring Jackie Robinson and the integration of baseball. She used each of these opportunities to spread her husband’s message of racial justice and equality to new generations of Americans. “This [fiftieth] anniversary [of Jackie Robinson’s debut],” she said at Dodger Stadium in 1997, “has given us an opportunity as a nation to celebrate together the triumphs of the past and the social progress that has occurred. It has also given us an opportunity to reassess the challenges of the present. It is my passionate hope that we can take this reawakened feeling of unity and use it as a driving force so that each of us can recommit to equality of opportunity for all Americans.”⁹

Rachel also protected her husband’s image by carefully controlling the manner in which his name, number, and likeness were used. She has turned down countless requests over the years, for instance, to produce a Jackie Robinson bobblehead doll. “If there’s one thing that man always had, it was dignity,” she stated. “I could not see Jack’s head bouncing around.”¹⁰

Receives Awards for Her Own Contributions

Rachel received a number of prestigious honors for her own involvement in breaking baseball’s color barrier and promoting civil rights for all Americans. In 2007 MLB commissioner Bud Selig presented her with the Commissioner’s Historic Achievement Award. “We give this great honor very rarely to people who have had a major impact on the sport,” he explained. “She’ll be the first person to receive it for what she has done off the field. But she’s made an enormous impact. Jackie had her to talk to in 1947 and ’48 during those extraordinary years. Their participation in the civil rights movement. Her work with the Robinson Foundation. She not only made baseball better, she made society better.”¹¹ In 2009 Rachel received the UCLA Medal, the highest honor presented by her alma mater.

As she entered her ninth decade, Rachel Robinson offered the following advice for young people seeking to honor the legacy of Jackie Robinson in their own lives and make a difference in their own communities:

I think at any age, one can look around in your own setting and in your own family and find ways to contribute to social change.

When you see attitudes that hurt others, or limit their opportunities, you can say to yourself: what is my part in this? Can I be a catalyst for change in my school, on my block, in my church, wherever I am? The question is: do I have a responsibility for others? I would say yes because I passionately believe that we are linked as human beings. Our destinies are intertwined. And what is happening to me ultimately is having an impact on you. So, if someone is homeless, uneducated, without medical care, without support, I have to feel some responsibility for them, and do whatever I can think to do. We all need to stand up and be counted.¹²

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A Sportswriter Recalls Robinson's Major League Debut

When Jackie Robinson made his major-league debut on April 15, 1947, sportswriter Jim Becker was there covering the game for the Associated Press. Sixty years later he published an article, which is reprinted below, recalling the sights, sounds, and atmosphere he experienced at the ballpark on that historic day.

On a chilly, gray, early spring day, a black man in a sparkling white baseball uniform walked, alone, from the dugout onto the green grass of Brooklyn's Ebbets Field.

It was April 15, 1947, and Jackie Robinson was about to break the shameful color line in major league baseball, a feat that would have a lasting impact on sports and society.

There was a feel of history in the air overlaid, perhaps oddly, by a sense of somewhat calculated nonchalance.

I was standing by the batting cage along with a handful of other sports reporters when Robinson strode onto the field with that slightly pigeon-toed walk of the natural athlete.

About 10,000 of a crowd that would swell to almost 26,000 at the tidy old park, many of them black, had gathered well before game time. They made no special sound when Robinson appeared. No cameras flashed. Television was in its infancy, and there were no TV cameras on hand.

It was as if all of us—writers, fans and players on both teams, the Dodgers and the visiting Boston Braves—had come to an unspoken agreement to behave as though it was just another opening day at the ballpark. And, by the way, a black man played for the Dodgers.

There were good reasons for this. The writers knew that the owners of the other 15 teams in the major leagues had voted unanimously to oppose the introduction of a black player.

We knew that Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' major-domo who had signed Robinson against all opposition to a minor league contract the year before (he was the Most Valuable Player in the International League in 1946), had hoped his Brooklyn players would have been impressed by Robinson's obvious talent to ask that he be added to the roster. Instead Rickey had been greeted with a

petition signed by some key players—with the conspicuous exception of captain and shortstop, Pee Wee Reese, a Kentuckian—that they did not want to play with a black man. We had heard rumors that at least one national league team was organizing a strike rather than play against Robinson.

It was a time in our country when in many places blacks couldn't stay at the same hotel as whites, eat in the same restaurants, attend the same movie theaters or even drink from the same water fountains in the South. They rode in the back of the bus there.

Schools were segregated in the South, where the majority of major league players had grown up. So were neighborhoods, north and south, some by law, others by tacit agreement.

It was into this atmosphere that the black man in the dazzling white uniform strode, alone, carrying for all of us the banner of decency and dignity and fair play that is the American promise.

There is no rooting in the press box, but many of us in it that day, like Robinson, had served in the Armed Forces and had just helped to defeat Hitler and thought it would be a good idea to defeat Hitlerism at home.

So those of us assigned to cover the game seemed to be of one mind that to turn this day of uncommon courage into a media circus would be both unseemly and unfair.

In the Dodger clubhouse before the game we talked to Robinson one at a time, and then only after interviewing a couple of veteran players first. Robinson said he was nervous, as he always was before a big game, but he was sure the feeling would wear off when the game started. He said he had been made to feel welcome by his new teammates, which may or may not have been true.

On the field Robinson was carrying, somewhat awkwardly, an unfamiliar first baseman's mitt. A middle infielder by trade, he played first for the Dodgers that season.

Robinson glanced around for a few seconds, then picked up a baseball and began playing catch with a utility outfielder named Al Gionfriddo, who would make one of the most famous catches in World Series history that fall, and then disappear from the major leagues.

The PA [public address] announcer read the lineups in a matter-of-fact tone. This was before the hysterical homers took over the PA mikes, and the PA system at Ebbets Field never worked properly anyway.

Robinson, batting second, was thrown out by a whisker at first on his first time at bat. He went 0-for-3 with a sacrifice on the day. He reached base in the seventh on an error and scored on Pete Reiser's two-run double.

The Dodgers won, 5-3.

After the game a half dozen or so writers combed the Dodger clubhouse, making a point to talk to several players. Robinson said he went hitless not because of the pressure, but "because Johnny Sain was pitching." Sain was the Boston ace.

I gave the dressing room quotes to Joe Reichler, the AP's baseball writer, who led his story with the result of the game. So did many others.

Some years ago I traded letters about Robinson's first game with Jack Lang, longtime secretary of the Baseball Writers Association. He reminded me that there were nine mainstream daily newspapers in New York then, and not one of them led its game story with Robinson. This approach persisted for some time. In late December I wrote the wrap-up of the sports year for AP. I relegated Robinson's achievement to the 11th paragraph of a very long story, although when I got to him I pulled out all the stops. Robinson had been named Rookie of the Year, and the Dodgers had won the National League pennant, one of six they would win with Robinson.

I drew the assignment to assist Reichler on Robinson's first day because I had grown up in Los Angeles and had watched Robinson play all sports for UCLA. Robinson was the greatest all-around athlete I ever saw.

In his senior year, 1940-41, he led the nation in yards per carry and was a ferocious defender on the football field. He also led the conference in scoring in basketball, played baseball, ran the sprints, broke the NCAA long jump record set by his older brother Mack (second to Jesse Owens in the 200 meters in the 1936 Berlin Olympics), was a scratch golfer and won two tennis tournaments.

When he left UCLA, the door to all pro sports were closed to him, so he went to Hawaii and played for the Honolulu Bears, one of four teams in a semi-pro league there. He left by ship for the mainland on Dec. 5, 1941, two days before the attack on Pearl Harbor. Robinson served as an Army lieutenant during the war, and then came Rickey and his banner season with the Montreal Royals.

Robinson had agreed with Rickey to hold his fiery temper and natural competitiveness in check, to endure the racial taunts from fans and opposing players. When the wraps came off and he was free to argue with the umpires and

return with interest the foul bench jockeying, Robinson told me: "I can hardly wait for an umpire to throw me out of a game." In other words, to treat him like everybody else.

But there was, there is, no way to treat Jackie Robinson like everybody else. His victory was his victory. Alone. His defeat would have been our defeat. All of us. He did not lose.

Source

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IMPORTANT PEOPLE, PLACES, AND TERMS

Aaron, Hank (1934-)

African-American baseball star who set a major-league record with 755 career home runs and became the last active player to have begun his career in the Negro Leagues.

Affiliate

A minor-league baseball team that is owned by or under contract to a major-league team and helps develop its young players.

Barnstorming

A form of loosely organized baseball competition in which teams traveled to various cities and towns and played against whatever opponents they could find.

Brooklyn Dodgers

A Major League Baseball team in the National League; Jackie Robinson played for this team from 1947 through 1956.

Brown v. Board of Education

A 1954 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* and declared the segregation of public schools to be unconstitutional.

Campanella, Roy (1921-1993)

First black catcher in Major League Baseball; longtime teammate of Jackie Robinson on the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Chandler, A. B. “Happy” (1898-1991)

Politician who became the second commissioner of Major League Baseball in 1945 and expressed support for integration.

CHRONOLOGY

1846

The first known baseball game using modern rules takes place on June 19 in Hoboken, New Jersey, between the New York Baseball Club and the New York Knickerbockers. *See p. 10.*

1861

The U.S. Civil War begins. *See p. 7.*

1865

The U.S. Civil War ends in victory for the North. *See p. 7.*

The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution makes slavery illegal. *See p. 8.*

1867

The postwar Reconstruction period begins. The federal government sends military troops into the former Confederate states to protect the civil rights of African Americans. *See p. 8.*

1868

The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution extends U.S. citizenship to African Americans and requires states to provide equal protection under the law to all citizens, regardless of race. *See p. 8.*

1869

Baseball becomes a professional sport when the Cincinnati Red Stockings offers salaries to players. *See p. 11.*

1870

The Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution grants all male citizens the right to vote. *See p. 8.*

1876

The National Base Ball League (now known as the National League) is formed. *See p. 11.*

1877

When Reconstruction ends in the South, white Southerners pass discriminatory Jim Crow laws that restrict the rights of African Americans and force them into a position of second-class citizenship. *See p. 9.*

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