

Jackie Roosevelt Robinson

Our nation's history has long been marred by the ongoing conflicts among racial classes, particularly between Whites and African Americans. Discrimination against Blacks, which began with slavery, created an atmosphere of distrust and hatred. Blacks were denied the opportunity to advance in almost all aspects of American life. Over the years, however, a few Black leaders have exhibited the courage to stand up for their rights. One man in particular shaped the future for African Americans in the field of sports. This man, Jackie Robinson, ignored harsh criticisms and a lack of support to change the game of baseball for all races. Because of his unbreakable spirit and perseverance, Robinson impacted America's concept of equality, creating a legacy which remains today.

In order to understand the difficulties Jackie Robinson faced in his life, it is helpful to understand the political and social climate of the United States in regard racial discrimination. Race relations in America have historically created an atmosphere of turmoil. When slaves in the antebellum South began to rebel against the treatment enacted upon them by cruel slave owners, the tension between Whites and Blacks grew stronger. Slave revolts became more and more common as Blacks tried to escape their bondage. Open rebellions such as Gabriel's Rebellion in 1800 in Richmond, Virginia, as well as other uprisings, angered Whites and fueled their determination to keep Blacks in

a subservient position.¹ Even the Abolitionist Movement, which viewed slavery as a sin, and had as its purpose the liberation of all slaves and the elimination of racial discrimination did little to deter the feelings of fear and mistrust. When Lincoln was elected President in 1860,² the issue of slavery and Lincoln's position on this dangerous problem escalated the conflicts between the North and the South. Their differences on slavery, as well as tariffs and states' rights, carried the country into the Civil War, dividing the country and leading to death and destruction. Trying to force the emancipation of slaves, Lincoln put forth the Emancipation Proclamation which denounced slavery throughout the country and called for an end to this despicable practice. However, not all states honored this mandate, resulting in even more negative attitudes and actions between Blacks and Whites. Realizing that a constitutional amendment would be necessary to fully achieve his goal, Lincoln worked for the passage of the 13th Amendment passed in 1865 which formally insured forever that "neither slavery nor involuntary servitude... shall exist within the United States."³ However, even this important document failed to achieve its purpose fully. Then when Congress passed the 14th Amendment addressing the rights of citizens, particularly "the equal protection of the laws," further problems emerged.⁴ Some southern states retaliated by passing their own laws regarding segregation. These laws, disrespectfully called the Jim Crow Laws, created a "separate but equal" condition for Blacks and only

¹ "Antebellum Period." History Net Where History Comes Alive World US History Online. Accessed May 14, 2015. <http://www.historynet.com/antebellum-period>.

² Brinkley, Alan. *The Unfinished Nation: A Concise History of the American People*. 4th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004.

³U.S. Const. amend. XIII.

⁴U.S. Const. amend. XIV.

made the discrimination worse. By the 1960's another rebellion occurred in which Black riots and demonstrations brought the problem of segregation to a crisis. Finally, Blacks forced Whites to hear their voices. During all the turbulent years of racial equality, life for Blacks was filled with hardships. It was almost impossible for a Black man to succeed in life. Blacks experienced disappointment and failure in their attempts to create a good life for themselves. This was true for Jackie Robinson, a Black man who had to fight in order to rise out of poverty, discrimination, and hatred.

Born January 31, 1919, Jackie Robinson was the son of Mallie and Jerry Robinson, poor sharecroppers in Cairo, Georgia. Robinson also had four siblings: Edgar, Frank, Mac, and Willa Mae. Jerry Robinson worked on a plantation as a “half cropper” and did as well as possible for an African American at the time. In 1919, Jerry Robinson left his family and began to live a new



life with their neighbor's wife.⁵ This made life even harder for the Robinson family. Jackie Robinson's mother was forced to wash and iron clothes for White people in order to provide for her family. At the age of eight, Robinson had his first experience with discrimination. Called a

“nigger” by a White neighbor, he would remember this incident as part of a pattern which would follow him all of his life. After moving with his family to Pasadena, California, in 1920, Robinson attended John Muir Technical High School where he was

⁵ Robinson, Jackie, and Alfred Duckett. *I Never Had It Made*. New York: Putnam, 1972.

an impressive athlete, playing football, basketball, track, and baseball. After high school, he attended Pasadena Junior College where he also played the same three sports. He was named the region's most valuable player in baseball in 1938. Robinson decided to continue his collegiate athletic career at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he lettered in four varsity sports: baseball, basketball, track, and football. Despite his success at UCLA, he left the university after two years, convinced that a college education was futile for the success of a black man.⁶ This attitude of defeat followed him into the next phase of his life, the military.

Robinson's first major experience with prejudice occurred when he was drafted into the US Army and sent to Fort Riley, Kansas. Most of the discrimination came when he and other Black soldiers applied for Officer Candidate School and faced a great deal of resistance from those in command. Due to the persistence of these determined men, they were finally accepted into the school. After completing all of his instruction, Robinson was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the United States military and was assigned to Fort Hood, Texas, where he hoped a Black officer could be more accepted. However, he learned that this was not to be the case. After the Presidential executive order by Harry S. Truman desegregating the military in 1948,⁷ Robinson was charged with insubordination when, like Rosa Parks, he would not move to the back of a

⁶ "The Jackie Robinson Foundation." *The Jackie Robinson Foundation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 16 Apr. 2015. <<http://www.jackierobinson.org/about/jackie.php>>

⁷ "The Civil Rights Movement And The Second Reconstruction, 1945-1968 | US House of Representatives: History, Art & Archives." *The Civil Rights Movement And The Second Reconstruction, 1945–1968*. Accessed May 18, 2015. <http://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Civil-Rights-Movement/>.

military bus.⁸ He felt wronged in this treatment and spoke up for his rights belligerently. He admitted later that “I was naive about the elaborate lengths to which racists in the armed forces would go to put a vocal black man in his place.”⁹ He was taken into custody and charged with insubordination and transferred to another unit. He was then court-martialled after false accusations by an unfair jury and a prejudiced officer who ruled to remove him from the military. He was finally exonerated and discharged honorably from the military to enter into his career in baseball.

Before Jackie Robinson began his baseball career, the game of baseball had maintained a policy which discriminated against blacks. After all, the White baseball commissioners argued, there were separate leagues where Blacks could play. The color line had been drawn as a result of post-Civil War ideas about race and civil rights. While the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution had abolished slavery, in the eyes of many Whites, the Negroes had no rights. However, the discrimination in baseball which had begun in 1867 was ready for a change.¹⁰ That change began in the late 1940's when Jackie Robinson came onto the baseball scene.

Robinson's baseball career began in the American Negro Baseball League. At this time, no African American was allowed to play on a major league baseball team. Robinson, however, was not satisfied in playing in such a segregated atmosphere. His big break came when he was recruited to a Brooklyn Dodger's developmental team through the efforts of Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey

⁸ "Military Career." Jackie Robinson: A Man Who Changed Sports Forever. Accessed May 14, 2015. <http://jackierobinsonchangedsports.weebly.com/military-career.html>.

⁹ Robinson, Duckett.

¹⁰"Negro Leagues." Major League Baseball. Accessed May 14, 2015. http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/history/mlb_negro_leagues_story.jsp?story=kaleidoscopic.

believed that it was his mission to prove that the color of one's skin should not affect the person he is. Fortunately for Robinson, he was the perfect candidate for Rickey to prove his point. According to Robinson, Rickey knew there would be those critical of his stance.



Robinson commented on Rickey's bravery saying, "There would be deep resentment, determined opposition, and perhaps even racial violence. He (Rickey) was convinced he was morally right, and he shrewdly sensed that making the game a truly national one would have healthy financial results."¹¹ Because of his determination, Rickey obtained permission to allow Robinson to play for Brooklyn's club team, one step closer to permitting Blacks to play in the big leagues. Even more important, many people believe that the changes that took place in desegregating baseball were important in the desegregation of the nation. The changes begun by Rickey and Robinson in 1947 occurred seven years before the Supreme Court's actions in Brown versus Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas.¹² In those actions, the process of desegregation included allowing Blacks equal rights in sports. Prior to this time, there were efforts to give equality to Negro players, but those efforts had been largely blocked. Robinson's entrance into White baseball brought about the beginning of the end of the color barriers in the sport.

¹¹ Robinson, Duckett.

¹² "Negro Leagues." Major League Baseball. Accessed May 14, 2015.
http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/history/mlb_negro_leagues_story.jsp?story=kaleidoscopic.

Moving up into the majors, Robinson still had an abundance of critics because of his color in spite of the success he was experiencing on the field of play. Some fans and players welcomed him to the team, while others had negative reactions. Some admired his athletic abilities and were enthusiastic about what he could offer to his team, the Dodgers. However, when he stepped out onto the field, it was obvious that some fans did not want a Black player to participate in what had always been a White game. Fans shouted racial insults such as, "They're waiting for you in the jungles, black boy!" and "We don't want you here, nigger."¹³ While Robinson tolerated the insults, he also created more controversy by protesting umpires' calls and arguing against opposing teams' managers. He also spoke out against hotels that barred him as well as other teams who would not hire black players.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Robinson's impressive play overcame the negativity.

Defeating his obstacles, Jackie Robinson went on to become one of baseball's heroes. When signing his contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson had to promise not to retaliate against any racial discrimination. Instead of dwelling on negative criticism, he focused on what was more important to him and his team. He was named the National League Rookie of the Year in 1947, his first season with the Dodgers. Even more important, he won this honor as the only African American in major league baseball. That same year he contributed to the Dodgers' National League Championship. Robinson was also named the league's most valuable player in 1949

¹³ PBS. Accessed May 14, 2015. http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/history/spotlight_august3.html.

¹⁴ "Baseball and Jackie Robinson." - Baseball, the Color Line, and Jackie Robinson (American Memory from the Library of Congress). Accessed May 14, 2015. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/robinson/jr1947.html>.

with an impressive batting average of .342. In both 1947 and 1949, Robinson also held the record for the most stolen bases in the National League. Twenty years later Robinson was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame and his jersey number forty-two was retired for every major league team.¹⁵ His legacy has continued for generations and because of his presence in the major leagues, he has paved the way for many other Black athletes.

After his death, Robinson's wife Rachel founded the Jackie Robinson Foundation in 1973 in honor of Jackie's life and his work. The mission of the foundation is to raise money for a four-year college scholarship to underprivileged Black students deserving of a higher education. The foundation also includes hands-on professional mentoring in which teenagers experience leadership training. The foundation has been successfully providing a higher education to underprivileged teenagers for over forty years. Certainly this foundation is accomplishing the goal set by Robinson's wife to perpetuate his memory and to honor his achievements. (See The Jackie Robinson Foundation Addendum)

Jackie Robinson's struggle to earn equality for the Black man in his beloved game of baseball opened the door for others like him in the world of sports. The hardships which had held him back now serve as inspiration for those caught in the middle of poverty and discrimination. When Mallie Robinson gave her son the middle name of Roosevelt, she intended to honor President Theodore Roosevelt who spoke out against racism.¹⁶ Jackie Robinson lived up to this name, fighting for his own freedom

¹⁵ "Jackie Robinson." History.com. Accessed May 14, 2015. <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/jackie-robinson>.

¹⁶ Accessed May 18, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/r/rampersad-robinson.html>.

from discrimination and for the freedom of other Blacks. This country still has far to go to completely bind men as one, but pioneers such as Jackie Robinson serve as important people, making important changes in the way race and color are viewed.

On a personal note, I would like to add my comments about the way that people like Jackie Robinson have inspired me to reach out to others who are leading lives of hardship. It is easy for young people like me to concentrate on their desires, dreams, and goals and overlook the needs of others. However, studying the life of Jackie Robinson has reinforced my intentions to move outside my small world to do something of value for those who have not been as privileged as I have been. Learning about Robinson's foundation connected me more closely to a project in which I have become involved. As one of the "founding fathers" of Cougars 1004100, I know the value of giving a helping hand. This community service project helps raise money for underprivileged children in order for them to enjoy the Christmas holiday. We meet with businesses around the Richmond area, asking them to donate money to our project. Our yearly goal is to raise a total of \$10,000 so that 100 children can each have their own \$100 gift card to Dick's Sporting Goods store. Every December we hold an event where all the selected children arrive at the store where we help them pick out their gifts with their gift cards. On that occasion, I feel I am doing the right thing and that my hard work in planning and executing the project is of benefit to the children. I am just one small person in one small group, but I believe firmly that my efforts mean something to these children. The Jackie Robinson Foundation has made me aware of the needs of

others. Yes, Robinson the man fought for his right to do the thing he loved and in doing so, changed the lives of others.

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