

Jackie reached beyond the diamond

By Ron Thomas

Independent Journal reporter

NOW 50 YEARS after Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the modern era of major league baseball, it's impossible to imagine how powerful a figure he was in America until he died in 1972.

With little exaggeration, one could call the Brooklyn Dodgers great the father of all black ballplayers who came after him.

That does not mean that home run king Henry Aaron or one of today's brightest stars, Seattle's Ken Griffey Jr., would have been any less talented if Robinson had not appeared. But it was Robinson who literally risked his life and tolerated unfathomable abuse to integrate America's most revered sport in 1947. It was a time when racial segregation not only was customary, but often was the law.

That, alone, would constitute enough accomplishments to satisfy almost any human being. Then add that Robinson was perhaps the greatest all-around athlete this country has ever produced, and in half a century no baseball player has rivaled his ability to stir a crowd to the brink of a collective heart attack.

All that falls far short of describing Robinson's legacy. For through his uncommon intelligence and his willingness to step into a tornado of racial conflict, he virtually lifted millions of black people onto his back and carried them out of the realm of invisibility.

No longer could African Americans' talents be ignored, like a piece of brown-colored lint that could be brushed aside. For whether Jackie Robinson was stealing home plate on the baseball field, verbally sticking a burr under America's saddle because of its continued racial discrimination, or announcing which presidential candidate he would endorse, he was a black person who commanded national attention for a quarter century.

"Up until the time Martin Luther King becomes a dominant national figure, which is in the 1960s, within the public perception Jackie was arguably the most well-known and most important African American in the nation," said Jules Tygiel, a San Francisco State history

On April 15, 1947, Robinson shattered a barrier that excluded baseball players of color from the major leagues for more than half a century.

BIOGRAPHY

■ **1919** Born Jan. 31 in Cairo, Ga., youngest of five children

■ **1920** Moves with family to Pasadena, Calif.

■ **1937** Enrolls at Pasadena City College and receives an athletic scholarship to major league baseball camp

■ **1938** Signs contract with Montreal Canadiens

■ **1939** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1940** Wins national championship in football

■ **1941** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1942** Serves in the Army

■ **1944** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1945** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1946** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1947** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1948** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1949** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1950** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1951** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1952** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1953** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1954** Wins national championship in basketball

■ **1955** Wins national championship in baseball

■ **1956** Wins national championship in basketball



Baseball awards
 1947 National League MVP
 1949 American League MVP
 1950 American League MVP
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 2020 American League MVP
 2021 American League MVP
 2022 American League MVP
 2023 American League MVP
 2024 American League MVP
 2025 American League MVP

When other teams integrated

DATE	PLAYER	TEAM
July 2, 1945	Earl Lloyd	Cleveland Indians
July 17, 1947	Hank Thompson	St. Louis Browns
July 2, 1949	Hank Thompson	New York Giants
April 18, 1950	Sam Jethroe	Boston Braves
May 2, 1951	Monte Alou	Chicago White Sox
Sept. 13, 1953	Bob Trice	Philadelphia Athletics
Sept. 17, 1953	Paul Banks	Chicago Cubs
April 13, 1954	Curt Roberts	Pittsburgh Pirates
April 22, 1954	Tom Alston	St. Louis Cardinals
April 17, 1954	Nino Escalera	Cincinnati Reds
Sept. 6, 1954	Carlos Paula	Washington Senators
April 14, 1955	Elston Howard	New York Yankees
April 23, 1957	John Kennedy	Philadelphia Phillies
June 6, 1958	Ozzie Virgil	Detroit Tigers
July 2, 1959	Franklin Green	Boston Red Sox



When other major sports integrated



Charles Follis
 1920
 Akron Pros



Earl Lloyd
 1950
 Washington Capitals



Willie O'Ree
 1957
 Boston Bruins

Robinson

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professor who wrote the acclaimed book "Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and his Legacy."

"I've been thinking," said Ron Walters, a professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Maryland, "where does the sensibility of black people come after World War II to start the civil rights movement? Someone told me Jackie Robinson gave black people a sense of confidence."

For all those reasons, Robinson, who officially broke baseball's color barrier on April 15, 1947, is being honored throughout majors this season, which begins Tuesday.

All-around athlete

When Brooklyn Dodgers owner Branch Rickey dared to sign him to a minor-league contract on October 23, 1945, Robinson already had established himself as one of America's most remarkable athletes. After entering UCLA in 1939, the Pasadena native became the only Bruin in history to letter in four sports: football, basketball, track and baseball — and the latter was his worst sport.

After completing military service during World War II, Robinson was playing for the Negro Leagues' Kansas City Monarchs when Rickey decided he was the ideal black candidate to eventually integrate the majors. Not only was Robinson's athletic ability attractive, but he displayed the smarts, worldliness and self-control to handle the racial abuse that was sure to come.

After starring in 1946 for Montreal, Brooklyn's Triple-A affiliate, Robinson was promoted to the National League's Dodgers in 1947. Suddenly there was a black presence in major league baseball, then the pinnacle of the sports world, for the first time since blacks were banned in 1887. Later in '47, Cleveland's Larry Doby integrated the American League.

Until Robinson arrived, African Americans largely existed on the margins of society. Whites and blacks routinely lived in a world of segregated employment, places of worship, education and neighborhoods — and that separation often was viciously enforced by police and the law.



IJ file photo

POLITICKING: Jackie Robinson visited Marin City in 1960 to encourage residents to vote for Richard Nixon for president.

by pitches at a record-breaking rate and was the frequent target of beanballs before batting helmets were used. He had promised Rickey that he wouldn't retaliate, yet he hit .297 with 29 stolen bases and 125 runs scored as a rookie.

Role model for blacks

Black people everywhere could relate to his struggle. Walters remembers assemblies in his all-black elementary school in which Robinson was extolled as a role model.

"They would say about his character that he couldn't yield to his temper, that he had to make it because he carried the hopes and aspirations of black America on his shoulders."

Robinson drew huge crowds of white and black fans wherever he played, and in his first eight seasons he hit between .296 and .342, while usually playing second base. He was fiercely competitive, the perfect catalyst to drop into the annual, intra-New York passion play between the New York Yankees and the Dodgers.

Tygiel was born in Brooklyn in 1949 and lived in a predominately Jewish neighborhood. By 1956, when Tygiel saw his first game in Brooklyn's Ebbets Field, he was a Robinson worshiper.

"He was so much of the folklore I grew up with," Tygiel said. "People talked about Jackie Robinson all the time."

Easily overlooked

"Blacks were invisible in the same way that people that clean office buildings are invisible to people who work there," said historian Howard Zinn, a former professor at Boston University and Spelman College. "It's partly a class phenomenon and partly a race phenomenon. They're not part of your existence."

Even when black people worked in whites' homes as maids, laborers or child-care providers, they were easily forgotten. "They came, they worked and they left," Zinn said.

The Negro Leagues provided a fertile setting for talented black baseball players such as Satchel Paige. But major league owners were so opposed to integration that during talent-starved World War II, one-armed, white outfielder Pete Gray and 15-year-old pitcher Joe Nuxhall reached the majors. Meanwhile, black stars remained unwanted and black fans chafed.

"Most whites had vaguely heard of Satchel Paige," Zinn said. "I don't think it entered their minds that he's not in the major leagues."

"There was never any feeling that you've got to keep them out. You didn't think about it," said Jules Becker, a San Rafael public relations counselor who was a Chicago sportswriter in the '40s.

Rookie of the year

Robinson changed all of that. Not only was he an instant success as a first baseman, winning the first National League Rookie of the Year award, but his presence also sparked reactions from bigots that no one could ignore.

For instance, Philadelphia Phillies manager Sam Chapman tongue-lashed Robinson with crude, racist taunts, receiving hate mail and death threats from the public were a constant in Robinson's life.

They all tried to intimidate him. Instead, they made him a national hero.

Professor Walters was a 10-year-old growing up in Wichita, Kan., when Robinson broke the color barrier. Television broadcasts were almost nonexistent at the time, but he vividly recalled how black people were mesmerized by radio broadcasts of Dodgers games.

Excitement at bat

"Every time he got up to bat there was a catch in people's throats, and everything stopped: 'Let's see if he can get a hit,'" Walters said. "Everybody was tuned in to the radio and there was this hush when Jackie stepped up to bat.

"I imagined, 'Are black people all over the country doing this?' And yes, they were.

"It was a shared reality, and that's how powerful his position was. When he got a hit, oh my God the jubilation. And when he didn't, the whole race was troubled."

It helped that Robinson was such a dynamic and stubborn player. Tygiel said that when Robinson first entered the majors he was hit

America's hero

"In Brooklyn, Jackie was a hero. I think throughout America, Jackie came to symbolize all that was good about America and optimism about solving racial problems. In the neighborhood I grew up in, Jackie was close to a saint.

"I think the vast majority of whites really came to respect him on the field. He made an undeniable case for integration. How could you deny that talent?"

Especially for black people, his stature also stemmed from Robinson's public stance against inequality in baseball and general society. During and after his career, Robinson seldom held his tongue.

"He fit right in with new aspirations of a new stage of black life," Walters said.

Impact beyond baseball

Labor leader A. Philip Randolph had pressured the federal government to integrate the labor force during World War II. Black soldiers who had been stationed in Europe had tasted freedom, and upon their return, they wanted a full meal of it at home. And in 1954, the Supreme Court's Brown vs. Board of Education decision had mandated school integration.

Robinson set foot in the trenches of that battle for equality.

In 1952, he accused the Yankees of prejudice because they had no black players. He bitterly complained about the bigotry black players faced in Florida during spring training. On the national front, by Robinson's third season he was decrying racism at a Congressional hearing.

After he retired from baseball in 1956, Robinson remained controversial. Politically, he was a Republican, yet he maintained his independence. Every presidential election, Republican and Democratic candidates sought his endorsement.

Fighting to the end

When Robinson was honored in Cincinnati during the 1972 World Series, he was almost blind and extremely ill from diabetes and heart disease. Yet, just nine days before his death, Robinson used the occasion to chide baseball for having no black managers.

His stances often riled white people. "In the South and (other areas), he was the uppity black, he was too pushy," Tygiel said. Their thinking was, "He had gotten this wonderful opportunity. Why can't he be satisfied with what he has instead of asking for more?"

That same refusal to settle for less endeared him to black people, and others committed to social change.

"If Roy Campanella (a much more compliant Brooklyn star) had broken the color line, we would not celebrate it in the same way we celebrate Jackie Robinson," Tygiel said. "What really elevated this beyond the story of integration was his intelligence, the fieriness of his personality. He was just a unique individual by any measure."