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**FAST PACE:** Brooklyn Dodgers' Jackie Robinson steals home during a game in 1948 against the Boston Braves.

AP photo

# Jackie's speed disrupted games

By Ron Thomas

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No baseball skill eluded Jackie Robinson. He had a .311 lifetime batting average, reached double figures in home runs in nine of his 10 seasons, scored more than 100 runs six times, fielded competently and played at least 50 games at four different positions, mostly second base.

Yet, it was Robinson's daredevil baserunning that endures in the minds of Marin residents who wrote or called the IJ about his exploits. How they loved to see Robinson give opponents a nervous breakdown as he darted long the basepaths.

He stole 197 bases during his career, which isn't an astounding number. But it was how he swiped them — and the fact that he stole some 19 times — that made Robinson so unique.

Jules Becker's devotion to the Chicago Cubs runs deep, which is understandable since he remembers seeing Hall of Famer Grover Cleveland Alexander pitch for Chicago in 1929. When Robinson broke into the majors, Becker was a Chicago sportswriter who detested the Dodgers' star because he loved Chicago pitchers crazy.

Particularly Bob Rush, a 6-foot-4, 205-pound right-hander whose slow delivery made him an easy target for Robinson's fleet feet. "He was all arms and legs, and Jackie Robinson used to steal his jockstrap," said Becker, who lives in Ross.

Once Robinson reached first base, he was always threatening to steal second.

"He would dance back and forth so they would keep throwing over to first, and he would take a little longer lead," Becker said. "Robinson would taunt you to try and pick him off, and you knew he was going to go."

Eventually, the anxious second baseman would start edging toward second, which would open a hole in the infield that the batter could punch a hit through.

"The next thing you know they've got men on first and third and there's nobody out," Becker said. "Now Jackie's jockeying back and forth, and you're wondering if he's going to steal home on you. Meanwhile, you forget all about the guy at first, and the pitcher's not



IJ photo/Frankie Frost

**TIED TO THE GAME:** Jules Becker was a sportswriter in Chicago when Jackie Robinson integrated baseball. He displays his favorite baseball tie at his San Rafael office.

even thinking about the batter. Robinson would disrupt the entire defense."

Here's how Theodore Belsky, a reader from San Geronimo, described the chaos that followed.

Because Robinson was pigeon-toed, he wasn't a classic-looking, smooth-striding sprinter. "With the loose-fitting uniforms of the time and his body motions, he seemed to be moving in different directions at the same time. But it was a deception," wrote Belsky, who then was a high school student in nearby New Jersey.

"He would take a longer lead off third base than anyone else. The pitcher would begin his windup. At the precise moment, Jackie would accelerate at full speed down the road to home plate. Most of the time he would make a dead stop at the halfway point.

"Of course, the pitcher wouldn't know if he was going all the way, and would frequently

throw the pitch off mark. Sometimes he would throw it wild and Jackie would walk home, scoring a run that he alone had forced to happen."

Occasionally, Robinson would start his sprint and never stop.

"Thirty thousand people in the stands would hold their breath," Belsky continued. "The pitcher would tense. The catcher would tense. Everyone but Jackie Robinson would tense. It was like you were watching the event in slow motion and normal speed at the same time.

"Finally, when he reached home plate, sliding away from the waiting catcher, everyone would watch for the umpire's call. If he was safe, the stands would explode in screaming and yelling and applause! It all took place 50 years ago, but one cannot forget such excellence of performance in 100 years!"

Unlike today, when fame and riches separate fans from their heroes, players of Robinson's era lived in working-class neighborhoods and even rode the subway to games. Yet meeting or just getting close to Jackie Robinson could be a mind-blowing experience.

Tim Devault, a retired post office station manager who now lives in Mill Valley, was a 12-year-old living in the San Joaquin Valley when Robinson was a rookie. Devault's family soon moved to Los Angeles, and Devault was in high school when Robinson played in an offseason game in Southern California.

Devault worked in the concessions stands so he could watch the big leaguers play at the stadium of the minor-league Los Angeles Angels.

"This white kid was a clubhouse boy for the Los Angeles Angels," recalled Devault, who later had a tryout with the then-Milwaukee Braves. "He asked me 'Do you want to see Jackie Robinson? You can see him up close if you carry these bats.'

"Jackie was sitting in a chair soaking his feet and I wanted to shake his hand, but I said no, just leave him alone. I figured he must have been bombarded by millions of people. Don't go over and bother him. Just watch him. I didn't want to invade his space, and I think he probably would have shaken my hand. But I saw him — and I was just awestruck."