2

Jackie's Legacy

For black athletes who integrated sports teams in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Jackie Robinson was like a ghost who rearranged all the furniture and removed all the clutter in the house without leaving an identifying fingerprint. Because his racial breakthrough came in major league baseball, one could argue that he literally had nothing to do with the integration of the NBA. Yet there's no doubt that without Robinson there might not have been any black players wearing NBA uniforms in 1950.

Two other black athletes had dominated the sports scene before Robinson, heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis and track and field's hero of the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens. But their achievements came in individual sports, and both lacked Robinson's willingness to stir the racial pot with candor.

World War II, which ended two years before Robinson's major-league debut, also nudged America toward an integrated society and inspired the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. "Partly, it was because black soldiers came back from the second world war," said Ron Walters, a professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Maryland. "They had been abroad, imbibed some of that [culture], and some of them had been in places where for the first time they didn't experience racism. He [Robinson] fit right in with new aspirations of a new stage of black life."

Robinson displayed extraordinary ability and charisma after integrating major league baseball in 1947 with the Brooklyn Dodgers, and incomparable courage in the face of opponents' pitches and spikes aimed at his body and several death threats aimed at his psyche. (In *Baseball's Great Experiment* [1983] author Jules Tygiel wrote that Robinson received ten death threats in his first seven seasons.) Those factors made him a heroic figure to black Americans everywhere. Whites, too, were generous (though far from unanimous) with their praise. Robinson's brashness on the baseball field and in the field of racial politics caused him to

achieve two things that had been impossible for several centuries: he forced many white people to actually "see" black people for the first time, and he presented a black person that America couldn't help but admire. He helped set in motion the forces that opened the door for the NBA's quartet of racial barrier breakers.

Until Robinson's arrival black people largely existed on the margins of U.S. society. Whites and blacks routinely lived in a world of segregated housing, employment, places of worship, education, and neighborhoods. That separation often was enforced by brutal police, racially biased courts, and gratuitous violence, especially in the South. When blacks and whites mingled, blacks were easily overlooked because they typically worked as maids, railroad porters, janitors, and laborers. "When Ralph Ellison wrote *The Invisible Man*, he wasn't pointing toward discrimination, he was pointing toward invisibility," said historian Howard Zinn, a former professor at Boston University and Spelman College. "Blacks not being in the major leagues didn't occur to the American public until Jackie arrived."

Leonard Koppett, a reporter who covered the New York Knicks from their inception in 1946 until 1973, gave an example of the disconnection between white and black people when he talked about never attending Negro League games as a child. Logistically doing so was a cinch; Yankee Stadium was just one block east of his house. Socially the possibility was as remote to him as walking across the floor of the Grand Canyon. "When I was a kid in the 1930s, the Negro Leagues played in Yankee Stadium and clearly I knew [when] it was happening because every Sunday when the Yankees were away, there would be twenty to twenty-five thousand black people coming to the game, [then] leaving the game," Koppett said. "But with not a word about it in the sports pages I was reading. With no one saying anything about it, it never even occurred to me to go. Eventually I came to feel outraged about what I had been deprived of, as well as what they had been deprived of."

But the nation couldn't ignore Robinson. "When he came, oh wow," Zinn said. "The most important thing he did was to change that invisibility of racial segregation, not just in baseball but in all of society." Robinson's mere presence on the Dodgers roster also formed an impermeable bond with black Americans across the country. They lived thousands of miles from Brooklyn, in an era when television at home was rare and the birth of ESPN video

highlights was still three decades away. Yet Robinson had become their neighborhood hero.

"I was ten at the time he was maturing as a famous baseball player and was able to watch him and watch black people's reaction to him," said Walters, a black person raised in Wichita, Kansas. "I can tell you that 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.' Everybody was tuned into the radio and there was this hush when Jackie stepped 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. His exploits were the very stuff of black culture."

Robinson also was a powerful figure when it came to sports business. Not only was he a tremendous attraction in the National League—where attendance jumped from approximately nine million in 1946 to an average of 10,079,000 in his first two seasons—but the Dodgers' quality of play and team camaraderie also prospered with Robinson aboard. He won the first Rookie of the Year Award, won the Most Valuable Player Award in 1949, and during his ten years with Brooklyn the Dodgers played in the World Series six times and won it in 1955. Although some teammates, especially those from the South, stayed aloof from Robinson when he first joined the Dodgers, Tygiel wrote that "Robinson's acceptance by the Dodger players occurred with surprising rapidity. . . . Within six weeks, says [teammate Bobby] Bragan [,] the barriers had fallen. Eating, talking, and playing cards with Robinson seemed natural."[1] If anyone doubted whether a black player would be accepted by his white teammates, one needs only to look at the famous 1948 photograph of Dodgers team captain Pee Wee Reese, a son of the South from Kentucky, standing at second base with his arm around Robinson, defying hecklers among the Boston Braves fans.

Sports reporters working for black newspapers leveraged Robinson's success as they made the argument that pro basketball also should integrate. Sam Lacy, a columnist with the *Baltimore Afro-American* who had chaperoned Robinson through his first few years with the Dodgers, said the Negro Sportswriters Association was pressing for the integration of all professional sports. He and other association members such as Bill Nunn with the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Romeo Daugherty, Bill Clark, Dr. W. Rollo Wilson, and Ed Lawson were ever watchful: "The fact that the baseball experiment

had proved successful, that was the basis for some of my writings," Lacy said. "I used that as a sort of lever—that baseball had undertaken it and it was time for basketball. I do remember for a while there was some opposition, that the fans were closer to the players and [management] feared some of type of misbehavior. But the argument was this was a for-pay sport and blacks were supporting it. I do know the Renaissance were doing very well and were playing the Original Celtics and the South Philadelphia Hebrew Athletic Association, and then the Harlem Globetrotters [drew well], and there was every indication blacks could play and produce and draw crowds."

Several other factors made the league ripe for integration. Not only had Robinson integrated baseball, but during the previous year black players had returned to pro football after a twelve-year absence. Black players had played in the National Football League (NFL) from 1920 to 1933, but after white players pressed for their exclusion, blacks were banned from the league until 1946. Then the rival All-America Football Conference (AAFC) was formed in 1946 and announced that it would integrate its rosters. The Cleveland Browns of the AAFC signed Marion Motley and Bill Willis, and the NFL responded when former UCLA stars Kenny Washington and Woody Strode signed with the Los Angeles Rams. In 1950 the two leagues merged, with Cleveland, San Francisco, and Baltimore joining the NFL. It certainly didn't hurt that Motley and Willis were exceptional talents who eventually were named to the Pro Football Hall of Fame. In addition, a sprinkling of blacks were playing for high-profile college teams at predominantly white schools. "What the white world talks of as gradualism is just an inch at a time, and that's what this first group of [black NBA] players were entering," Koppett said.

There also was the "who cares?" factor. If the NBA wanted to integrate, hardly anyone noticed. When Robinson debuted with Brooklyn it was comparable to an earthquake shaking up the entire sports world, because major league baseball was king. But pro basketball was way, way down on the totem pole of sports. Pro baseball, hockey, and football were far more popular than pro basketball, and college basketball's popularity almost smothered all notice of the NBA.

When Koppett started writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, his primary assignment was covering baseball's Yankees, Dodgers, and Giants when the regular beat reporter was gone. In New

York college basketball doubleheaders were the craze, especially since local teams like City College of New York, New York University, Long Island University, and St. John's were among the nation's best. Koppett was the *Herald Tribune*'s third-in-line basketball writer, so he covered the Ivy League and small colleges and wrote feature stories about the doubleheaders.

Then, as Koppett said, in 1946, "Here come the Knicks—perfect assignment for the number three guy. Basketball meant colleges. The NBA is a little thing that got a couple paragraphs and maybe a box score, but when a [former] big college star, like a George Mikan, is playing and that team comes to town, that's a big story. In fact, it was a blow to his prestige that he was playing this cheap pro game, having been an All-American."

The NBA had so little status locally that for many years New York Knicks playoff games either were not played on their Madison Square Garden home court or were played during the day because at night the circus was a much better draw at the Garden. Consequently, if the NBA wanted to bring in black players, who would even bother to object? Abe Saperstein, that's who.

The fact that there were no black players in the Basketball Association of America or its offspring, the NBA, raises the question of whether black players were banned from the league before 1950. "I never looked at it that way," said Danny Biasone, the owner of the Syracuse Nationals, for whom Lloyd eventually played from 1952 to 1958. "In those days, a black player never got the recognition, never got the ink from the newspaper. The white player got all the headlines, but if somebody watched a black player and [the player was] capable, I think they would have signed the black player."

Red Auerbach, who became Chuck Cooper's first coach in the NBA, was sure that a ban never existed. "No. Absolutely not," he said. "They [management] just never thought of it [signing black players]." He nevertheless acknowledges that owners feared the wrath of Globetrotters owner Abe Saperstein, who had helped keep many NBA teams financially afloat by letting the Trotters be the main attraction at doubleheaders that featured at least one game between two NBA teams. "It was just thought that if he [Saperstein] wanted a player, nobody would stand up to him because he wouldn't play in their building. Everybody needed the extra income." Perhaps that doesn't qualify as an outright ban, but it was a mighty strong incentive for the owners in a fledgling

league to help keep intact Saperstein's virtual monopoly on black players.

Harvey Pollack has been employed by either the Philadelphia franchise or the NBA since the BAA was formed in 1946. He remembers the days when Eddie Gottlieb, who ran the franchise at the time and who later coached and owned it, was badly strapped for cash and needed to maintain a good relationship with Saperstein in order to survive. The stories that Gottlieb was a tight-fisted negotiator are legend, yet Pollack said the description reflects his circumstances, not his personality. "He wasn't a penny pincher; he didn't have any money," Pollack said. "When the BAA was formed in 1946, they had a salary cap. The salary cap for the whole team was $55,000. The first year he felt so bad that Joe Fulks won the scoring title and led them to a title. Gotty couldn't give him any more money because of the salary cap, so at the end of the year he gave him a new Buick. . . . Basketball wasn't popular. If you averaged five to six thousand people, you were doing great." The Warriors didn't reach the five thousand per-game mark until their eighth season.

Gottlieb had been a schoolteacher and then a sports promoter. According to Pollack, the Homestead Grays of baseball's Negro Leagues was one of Gottlieb's clients. Gottlieb had been the coach–general manager of the Warriors, but was far from rich. When he purchased the team from Walter Annenberg in 1952 he bought it for $25,000, but only $15,000 was his money; two other men chipped in the other $10,000.

He and Saperstein were close friends, and Gottlieb depended upon doubleheaders with the Globetrotters for a revenue boost because attendance was so low. In the 1946–47 season, the team's first, the Warriors averaged only 4,305 fans at thirty home games. During the 1952–53 season that average dropped to 3,346 for seventeen games in Philadelphia. "The Globetrotters were the big attraction," Pollack said. "Whenever you had Globetrotters, you had a sellout. They played first—in your city. When Gotty bought the team in '52, he was very friendly with Saperstein so he arranged to take a lot of his home games out of Philadelphia and play wherever the Globies were playing."

How much did Gottlieb cherish those doubleheaders? NBA records from the early 1950s are so sketchy that the league could not verify it, but Pollack vividly recalled an incident involving a doubleheader at a neutral site during which the Philadelphia

Warriors played the Milwaukee Hawks owned by Ben Kerner. A league rule stated that a maximum of ten players could be placed on a roster, but if a sixth player fouled out he could stay in the game so that each team could keep five players on the court. At that particular game a sixth Warrior did foul out, but rather than keep him on the court Gottlieb brought in a different player who had fouled out earlier and Philadelphia won the game. Kerner protested the outcome, which meant that if he won the protest, the Warriors' victory would be nullified and the game would be replayed.

Ordinarily Gottlieb would have contested the protest to try to keep his team's victory. But Pollack said that in that instance, Gottlieb didn't fight it. Why not? "If [Kerner wins] the protest, we have to play the game over," Pollack recalled Gottlieb saying. "We'll play another game with the Globetrotters and we'll make money." Pollack said that it was one of the few upheld protests in the history of the league, and the game was replayed. "The Warriors played home games in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Fargo, North Dakota," Pollack said. "That was the only way they could survive. An average of ten games were taken out of Philadelphia, scheduled and played on the road as neutral games."

Since keeping Saperstein happy was crucial to the league's financial health, does Pollack believe there was a ban on black players before 1950? He doesn't know for sure. "There might have been an understanding, but nobody would ever dare put it in writing," he said. In fact, such an unwritten ban existed until New York Knicks owner Ned Irish forced its removal, said Carl Bennett, general manager of the Fort Wayne Pistons and a member of the NBA's Board of Governors from 1948 to 1953. Irish's insistence on opening the NBA rosters to black players was fueled by his desire to sign the center his team desperately needed, Harlem Globetrotters star Sweetwater Clifton. Irish even threatened to pull his team out of the league if he didn't get his way.

Fort Wayne was one NBL team that joined the BAA in 1948 (which then renamed itself the National Basketball Association in 1949). Were black players officially banned then? "I can't answer that truthfully, except I knew [commissioner] Maurice Podoloff would never allow anything that banned any individuals from the league because, even back in those days, you're always making sure you don't get in trouble with the law," Bennett said. "There was nothing to my knowledge like [a rule stating that] the BAA or NBL

can't have black players." However, "the understanding was it was not allowed to have the black player."

In a 1949 meeting, held in the NBA offices on the eightieth floor of the Empire State Building, Ned Irish brought the unwritten ban out of hiding when he stated that he wanted to sign Clifton. Irish then left the room while his fellow governors voted on the matter. Bennett said Fort Wayne voted to admit black players because that was the desire of team owner Fred Zollner. "I talked with him: 'It's going to come up. How do you feel?' " Bennett recalled. "He said, 'If they're good enough, they should play.' " However, when the votes were counted, the governors had rejected Irish's request. "He was turned down the first time because the Harlem Globetrotters jammed the arenas when they played their games," Bennett said. "The Board of Governors, I don't think they were against [black players]. I think their biggest concern was the Harlem Globetrotters being the greatest income producer filling these big stadiums. They were afraid that Abe Saperstein, if they took one of his players, he would tell them to jump in the lake, which would cost them hundreds of thousands of dollars."

About six months after Irish was turned down a second meeting was held prior to the 1950 league draft. Owners that wanted to admit black players had been lobbying others that wanted to keep the ban, so perhaps it would have been lifted at the second meeting anyway. But Irish heaped pressure on the owners when he came into that meeting with "firepower," as Bennett put it. "Ned Irish, I give him credit for being the upfront person," Bennett said. "He came into the room and hammered [with his fist] on the table and said, 'Either I get Sweetwater Clifton or we may not stay in the league!' New York was the catalyst for the whole league—he was the big city. . . . How serious Ned Irish was, I don't know. But he was persuasive."

When the vote was taken again it was six to five in favor of allowing the signing of Clifton and the drafting of Cooper and Lloyd. "I think the lobbying was the biggest thing in that period [between meetings]," Bennett said. "Eddie Gottlieb was concerned. He said, 'In the first place, your players will be 75 percent black in five years and you're not going to draw people. You're going to do a disservice to the game.' He was right on one thing but not the other. The NBA draws great crowds. But when we walked out the door, he said, 'You dumb s.o.b. You've ruined professional basketball.' "

A half-century later Bennett is still extremely proud of the NBA's vote that day. "I think, frankly, it was one of the greatest things that we could have done—eliminate this rule that black players could not play. Regardless of how you say it, it's given the community, the country, a little more [momentum] toward where they have to move. . . . I think it's a great thing to allow young [black] men, and now young ladies, to play."