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REMEMBERING JACKIE ROBINSON

By Peter Dreier. *Tikkun*. Mar/Apr 1997. Vol.12, Iss. 2; pg. 32

Nineteen ninety-seven marks the 50th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's courageous triumph over baseball's apartheid system. When Robinson took the field for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947, he was the first black player in modern baseball.

To commemorate this milestone, Major League Baseball will honor Robinson by sewing patches on all players' uniforms. This year will see a proliferation of books, TV movies, and conferences about Robinson, who has not received the respect he deserves. Today, many Americans under 30, including some African American superstars, can't even identify Robinson, much less appreciate his accomplishment.

Many consider Robinson (1919-1972) America's greatest all-around athlete. The grandson of a slave and son of a sharecropper, he was a four-sport athlete at UCLA, played professional football and then briefly in baseball's Negro Leagues. He spent his major league career (1947 to 1956) with the Brooklyn Dodgers, was chosen Rookie of the Year in 1947 and Most Valuable Player in 1949. An outstanding baserunner with a .311 lifetime batting average, he led the Dodgers to six pennants and was elected to the Hall of Fame.

Like baseball, America is more racially integrated than it was in Robinson's day. We've seen the dismantling of legal segregation, growth of the black middle class, and a virtual end to the overt daily terror imposed on blacks. Without discounting the persistence of segregated neighborhoods, black poverty, and racial bigotry, the progress is undeniable.

Even so, American race relations seems to have reached an ideological impasse. The dominant race relations metaphors of Robinson's era--integration, the melting pot, and assimilation--were unambiguous. Progressives believed in a color-blind society. It was easy to answer, which side are you on? Today's disputes over multiculturalism, affirmative action, racial preferences, and even (in the views of some black educators and playwright August Wilson) self-segregation make the political landscape more confusing.

Robinson's legacy is caught in contemporary culture wars. He was often criticized by 1960s black nationalists for being an Uncle Tom or a symbolic token. Some of their heirs now view baseball's integration with ambivalence for its role in destroying the Negro Leagues. And a writer in the conservative *National Review* last year used Robinson's success to argue against government policies like affirmative action, claiming it was a "triumph of the competitive market" and that "[b]aseball owners finally realized that the more they cared about the color of people's money, the less they could afford to care about the color of their skin."

In reality, black Americans welcomed baseball's integration as much as they welcomed the end of separate drinking fountains. The demise of the Negro Leagues was a small price to pay to defeat Jim Crow. And contrary to the conservative view, the dismantling of baseball's color line was a triumph of social protest in the pre-King era, not of enlightened capitalists. As historian Jules Tygiel explains in *Baseball's Great Experiment*, the Negro press, civil rights groups, and progressive whites waged a sustained campaign to integrate baseball that involved demonstrations, boycotts, political maneuvering, and other forms of pressure that would gain greater currency the following decade. Martin Luther King once told Dodgers pitcher Don Newcombe, "You'll never know what you and Jackie and Roy [Campanella] did to make it possible to do my job."

Dodger general manager Branch Rickey selected Robinson to break the sport's color barrier as much for his personal characteristics as for his baseball skill. He could have chosen other Negro League players with greater talent or name recognition, but he wanted someone who today we call a "role model." He knew that if the "experiment" failed, the cause of baseball integration would be set back for many years. Robinson was well-educated and articulate, born in the segregated deep South, but raised among whites in Southern California.

Rickey knew that Robinson had a hot temper and strong political views. As an Army officer in World War II, Robinson was

court-martialed (although later acquitted) for resisting bus segregation at Ft. Hood, Texas. Rickey calculated that Robinson could handle the emotional pressure while helping the Dodgers on the field. Robinson promised Rickey he wouldn't respond to the inevitable verbal barbs and even physical abuse.

Rickey could not count on the other owners or most players to support his plan. But the Robinson experiment succeeded--on the field and at the box office. The Dodgers soon hired other blacks who helped turn the 1950s club into one of baseball's greatest teams. But as late as 1953, only six of the then-16 major league teams had black players. It wasn't until 1959 that the last hold out, the Boston Red Sox, hired a black player. Today Black and Latino players are well represented. The Cleveland Indians hired the first black manager, Frank Robinson, in 1975; today there are four.

Robinson's achievement did more than change the way baseball is played and who plays it. His actions on and off the diamond helped pave the way for America to confront its racial hypocrisy. The dignity with which Robinson handled his encounters with racism among fellow players and fans drew public attention to the issue, stirred the consciences of many white Americans, and gave black Americans a tremendous boost of pride and self-confidence.

By hiring Robinson, the Dodgers earned the loyalty not only of blacks but also among many white Americans--most fiercely American Jews--who believed that integrating our national pastime was a critical steppingstone to tearing down many other obstacles to equal opportunity.

After Robinson had established himself as a superstar, Rickey gave him the green light to unleash his temper. On the field, he fought constantly with umpires and opposing players. Off the field, he was outspoken--in speeches, interviews, and his newspaper column--against racial injustice. He viewed his sports celebrity as a platform from which to challenge American racism. Many sportswriters and most other players--including some of his fellow black players, content simply to be playing in the majors--considered Robinson too angry and vocal.

Until his death, Robinson continued speaking out. He was one of the NAACP's best fundraisers, but resigned in 1967, criticizing the organization for its failure to involve "younger, more progressive voices." He pushed major league baseball to hire blacks as managers and executives and even refused an invitation to an Old Timers game, "until I see genuine interest in breaking the barriers that deny access to managerial and front office positions."

When Robinson retired from baseball, no team offered him a position as a manager, coach or executive. He joined the business world and became an advocate for integrating corporate America. His initial faith in free enterprise led Robinson into several controversial political alliances, including a 1960 endorsement of Richard Nixon--a stance he later regretted.

Baseball has changed dramatically since Robinson's day. Then, baseball had little competition from other sports for fan loyalty. Subject to the feudal reserve clause, players remained with the same teams for years, binding them to local fans. Most players' salaries were not much higher than those of average workers; indeed, players lived in the same neighborhoods as their fans. Sportswriters rarely probed players' personal lives or potential scandals, allowing athletes to become All-American heroes. Today, the public is angry with both spoiled million-dollar players and greedy owners. Teams are no longer family businesses, but owned by corporate conglomerates. Baseball is now beset by strikes and footloose teams threatening to move unless cities build tax-funded megastadiums.

The celebration of Robinson's achievement comes as Americans, disenchanted with the current corporatization of baseball, are awash in baseball nostalgia. His saga offers America a chance to remind disillusioned fans about a time when baseball occupied the nation's moral high ground and helped move the country closer to its ideals. But Robinson's legacy is also to remind us of the unfinished agenda of the civil rights revolution.

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