

Jackie robinson – breaking baseball's color barrier



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Sport can be seen as a microcosm that mirrors the cultural, political, and ethical views of society as a whole. This is especially true of professional baseball as it evolved from its infancy to the sport we now know. As the most widely played sport of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, America's pastime shows how our country's views have changed and how we have dealt with issues such as racial inequality. The bravery of individuals like Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey helped to pave the way for the civil rights movement and minimize racial discrimination in American sport.

Although our country has unquestionably progressed towards racial equality there is also evidence that shows that prejudice still exists in sport today. Baseball began as an amateur sport in the early 1800's and became popular in the New York metropolitan area in the mid 1850's. By 1856 local journals were referring to baseball as the "national pastime". A year later, sixteen area clubs formed the sport's first governing body, the National Association of Base Ball Players.

As the sport's popularity and commercial potential grew, the first fully professional baseball clubs emerged and they formed a "gentleman's agreement" (a discriminatory tactic) that barred the participation of non-whites until 1947. Contrary to popular belief, Jackie Robinson was not the first African-American major-league ballplayer; he was actually only the first after a long gap. Moses Fleetwood Walker and his brother Welday Walker participated in major and minor-league clubs until they were barred in the 1880's along with other African-Americans in baseball.

Although no formal ban existed in the major leagues, African-Americans faced discrimination from other players. As prominent players such as Cap

Ansen refused to take the field with or against teams with African Americans on the roster, it became formally accepted that African Americans were not to participate in Major League Baseball. Many continued to play in the minor leagues but in the majors, however, it was not until the signing of Robinson (in the National League), and Larry Doby (in the American league) that baseball began to remove its color bar.

One of the most notorious opponents of baseball's integration was Kenesaw Mountain Landis. He was appointed baseball's first commissioner in 1920 and no African Americans played professional ball until his death in 1944. Many baseball historians have attributed Landis as a racist who did nothing to push team owners towards integration. Bankes (2001) stated that Landis "made little effort to disguise his racial prejudice during 25 years in office" and "remained a steadfast foe of integration". In 1945, A. B. "Happy" Chandler was elected the second commissioner of Major League Baseball.

Chandler's six-year tenure in this post would prove to be a momentous period in the history of the national pastime. Attendance surged due to the postwar economic boom and the major leagues established the first pension plan for players. Yet the far most significant development of Chandler's term occurred in 1947 when Jackie Robinson became the first black player in the major leagues in more than sixty years. Chandler often declared that Robinson "couldn't have played" without his intervention. It has also been argued that Chandler's leadership was indispensable to integration's success.

American society in the 1940's was rigidly segregated by race. Public schools were segregated by law in the South and by custom and policy in the North. Public facilities such as hospitals, parks, streetcars, buses, railroad stations,

and bus stations excluded or segregated black patrons, as did theaters, amusement parks, hotels, and restaurants. Neighborhoods were also segregated by race, and racial discrimination locked African Americans out of most professional, managerial, and white-collar jobs. The armed forces were also racially segregated. In sum, African Americans possessed little or no political power.

Branch Rickey, part owner and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers proved successful in his attempts to integrate Major League baseball. The color line was breached when Rickey, with Chandler's support, signed the African American player Jackie Robinson in November 1947. Rickey, who called the move baseball's "great experiment," knew that the player chosen to cross the color line would have to be a strong individual, able to stand up to intense public observation and also be able to avoid confrontation even when met with insults and hostility (Knee, 2003).

As Rickey anticipated, the experiment did not go smoothly. In his first 37 games, Robinson was hit by pitches six times (Glasser, 2003). There were death threats in some cities where the Dodgers played, including threats to shoot Robinson from the stands if he took the field. Ballplayers and fans berated Robinson with racist epithets when he came up to bat and many opposing players went out of their way to spike him with their cleats. Even with all of these pressures Robinson played extremely well. He was a solid hitter, an outstanding base stealer, and he excelled defensively.

He handled the pressure well even though at times he felt like exploding. Robinson not only persevered, he was great. He went on to win the first ever Rookie of the Year award, a Most Valuable Player award, six pennants, a

World Series, and induction into the Hall of Fame in 1962 (Purvis, 1999). Robinson's integration of baseball had repercussions far beyond the sports world.

He actively spoke out against Jim Crow, was a leader within the NAACP, a co-founder of the Freedom National bank in Harlem, the founder of the Jackie Robinson Construction Co. to build low-income housing, and an active member of church groups and community organizations. For some Americans it may be hard to understand the significance of Robinson playing in the big leagues. But Robinson broke that color barrier before our military was desegregated, before the Civil Rights marches in the South, before some of our major universities admitted African-Americans, and before the historic ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Through the courage of his actions, Robinson engaged Americans in a constructive conversation about race long before the significant events of the 1960's.

He was a true pioneer. Despite the preceding reasons to believe that racial inequalities would be minimal or absent in baseball, the issue remains. Jobu (1984), in his research of minority baseball player's career mortality rates, observed that marginal white players are retained longer than marginal black players. Frey and Eitzen (1991) argued that discrimination at both the college and professional levels occurs by "stacking". This term refers to situations in which minority group members are relegated to specific team positions and typically excluded from others.

Blacks tend to be "stacked" in positions that require physical skills; while whites are disproportionately found in positions that require intelligence, leadership, and that have greater outcome control. A study by Pattnayak and

Leonard (1991) shows evidence that Major League Baseball's positional segregation has evolved into a three-tier system. Whites predominate the first tier (pitcher and catcher), which is the most central, Blacks largely inhabit the third tier (outfield), which is the most peripheral, and Hispanics mostly populate the second tier (the infield).

This kind of positional segregation may sustain stereotypes about racial minorities. In conclusion, although Robinson's debut did not end discrimination in organized baseball, it gradually opened the door to hundreds of athletes who had long been excluded due to their race, and it served as a rallying point for millions of blacks across America. Major League Baseball did in 1947 what the country didn't do until the 1970's thanks to the progressive actions of Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson.