

Module 08: Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights Leader?

Evidence 8: Transcript of the "Meet the Press" Television Interview, April 14, 1957

A

Introduction

Below is a transcript of Jackie Robinson's "Meet the Press" interview from 1957. The show, produced by Lawrence E. Spivak, aired on Sunday, April 14, 1957.

Document

Produced by: Lawrence E. Spivak

Guest: Jackie Robinson

Sunday, April 14, 1957

Panel:

William H. Lawrence, New York Times

Frank van der Linden, Nashville Banner

Jim Simpson, National Broadcasting Company

Lawrence E. Spivak, Regular Panel Member

Moderator: Ned Brooks

Announcer: Now, MEET THE PRESS. The prize-winning program produced by Lawrence E. Spivak. Ready for this spontaneous, unrehearsed conference are four of America's top reporters. Please remember, their questions do not necessarily reflect their point of view; it is their way of getting a story for you. Here is the moderator of MEET THE PRESS, Ned Brooks.

Mr. Brooks: And welcome once again to MEET THE PRESS.

Another baseball season opens tomorrow. Our guest is one of baseball's all-time greats, Jackie Robinson, the first Negro to break the racial barrier in the major leagues. During his 10 years with the Brooklyn Dodgers, they won six pennants. His greatness lay in his versatility and his competitive spirit. He played the infield and the outfield with equal skill. He set records

in fielding, batting and base running, and in 1949 he was voted the National League's Most Valuable Player.

Jackie Robinson's activities have extended beyond the baseball diamond into the field of race relations. He has devoted much of his spare time to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and last year he was awarded the organization's highest honor for achievement, the Spingarn Medal. From the beginning of his career Jackie Robinson was a center of controversy. His baseball association ended on a controversial note when he was traded to the New York Giants and when he announced his retirement in Look Magazine. Since retiring he has become a vice president of the Chock Full O'Nuts Company of New York, and he is on the staff of Look Magazine.

Now, seated around the press table ready to interview Jackie Robinson are Jim Simpson of NBC, William Lawrence of the New York Times, Frank van der Linden of the Nashville Banner and Lawrence E. Spivak, our regular member of the MEET THE PRESS panel. Now, Mr. Robinson, if you are ready we will start the questions with Mr. Lawrence.

Mr. Lawrence: Mr. Robinson, for the first time in 10 years you are not in a Major League uniform finishing up the exhibition games before the pennant race opens tomorrow. How does it feel; do you have any regrets about retiring?

Mr. Robinson: None at all. I feel very, very good. I am awfully happy in my new job. I am with a bunch of fine people, and I like it very much.

Mr. Lawrence: Now that you are out of baseball, are you going to be a regular fan and root from the grandstand for your favorite team?

Mr. Robinson: My favorite team is the Dodgers, and I will root for them.

Mr. Lawrence: Will you be going to the games?

Mr. Robinson: I will occasionally, not too much.

Mr. Lawrence: Now that you are vice president in charge of personnel for a large concern in New York, what will your attitude be on Tuesday when a large number of your employees resort to that age-old dodge and report the sudden deaths of their grandmothers, so they can get the Opening Day

off to see the season open?

Mr. Robinson: We are hoping that will not happen. I have had a very fine relationship with most of the people who are with us, and I do whatever I can to teach them or tell them the importance of being on the job all the time. We hope it is not going to happen.

Mr. Spivak: I would like to get to more serious matters. Congressman Celler recently made this remark: "The few who own the Major League clubs aren't trying to benefit the public but only to make all the money they can by moving players around like pawns and chattels." You were one of the players who was moved around. Do you think that statement is true or false?

Mr. Robinson: I can't say it is completely true, no. I think in most cases many of the club owners do have the thinking of the ball players in their hearts, but there are many, many instances where ball players are moved around. What the answer to eliminate it is, I don't know.

Mr. Spivak: Do you think the reserve clause which permits a ball club to exercise virtually monopolistic rights over a player is good, either for baseball or for the player?

Mr. Robinson: If there were some other means to handle the situation, I would think it should be handled, but I don't know of any other. If they didn't have the reserve clause, when we came down to the last month of the season where a ball club may need a good ball player to have them win the pennant, a club with a lot of money who would only be interested in a pennant could, by offering this ball player - if there wasn't some kind of a law to keep him from it - a lot of money, and I doubt very seriously if the player would refuse it.

Mr. Spivak: Isn't it true, though, that a team like the Yankees - that is, a club that is very rich - has been able to garner a great many of the best ball players simply by having money? Does the reserve clause stop that in any way?

Mr. Robinson: I don't think that is the reason why the Yankees are so successful. I think that, very frankly, a lot of ball players when they are young are very, very anxious to join the Yankee chain. I think that tradition

that they hear about so much has a lot to do with it, and they get in the organization. I believe that is what it is, personally.

Mr. Spivak: Mr. Robinson, professional baseball is now, I think, the only professional sport which has specifically been held by the Supreme Court to be outside the anti-trust laws. Do you think baseball should be exempt on the grounds that it is a sport and not a business?

Mr. Robinson: I can't say that baseball is a sport, no, not if that is the reasoning. In my opinion, baseball is as big a business as anything there is. It has to be a business, the way it is conducted.

Mr. Spivak: Do you see any reason why it should be given special treatment when football, basketball and hockey have all been held to be monopolistic when they have special arrangements of the kind that baseball has?

Mr. Robinson: Since I don't know too much about the football and the basketball and the other situations, I would hate to get mixed up in it. I don't know what their situation is, actually. The only thing I know is that baseball, being the game that it is, there has to be some protection for them.

Mr. Simpson: Mr. Robinson, in this reserve clause, Robin Roberts, who is the representative of the National League Players, says that he feels there should be some kind of revision of the reserve clause. He did not say what it should be. He didn't like the idea that the player could be stuck in the minor leagues for 7 years before he could be drafted by some other club.

Affidavits evidently have been sent out to all players asking that they back up Major League baseball and its reserve clause. Eddie Yost of the American League feels that the players will be almost unanimous and back up the club owners and say the reserve clause is necessary.

As a former player and being just out of baseball, do you think it is necessary to run the sport, or business, of baseball?

Mr. Robinson: At the present time I would have to go along with it, because there has to be some sort of protection. Until they find some other way to handle all these situations, I think that - it is a personal observation, but I think they have to continue it. In all my years of baseball I have always

expected to be traded. I never liked the idea. I expected it because that is the way baseball has been run all along, but I don't see at this time any way that they can handle the situation.

Mr. Simpson: Have you ever run across, aside from the obvious ones that have gone to court, anybody in baseball who is unhappy and dissatisfied because of the reserve clause? Specifically, can you tell us the case?

Mr. Robinson: Well, there have been - there is no need for me to mention any names - just fellows who feel they could be better off on another team, and because of the clause they can't display their abilities on another team. One ball club may be overloaded with talent. I have heard complaints that they can't show what they can do because they are on a team which has such good talent they sit on the bench, and, therefore, they are not able to do the things they would like to be able to do, at least insofar as their playing is concerned.

Mr. Van der Linden: Mr. Robinson, you are the Chairman of the Freedom Fund Campaign of the NAACP and, according to news reports, you are trying to raise \$1 million.

Mr. Robinson: That is correct.

Mr. Van der Linden: If you get the \$1 million, what will you do with it?

Mr. Robinson: Me personally, I am not going to do anything. It is going to be used in our efforts to secure first-class citizenship for all American citizens.

Mr. Van der Linden: As a leader of NAACP, would you use the money to hire lawyers, for instance, to press school segregation cases?

Mr. Robinson: I want to make one thing clear: I am not what you call a leader of the NAACP. I happen to be vice president of a restaurant firm. They have asked me if I would head the Freedom Fund for this year - their campaign - and I said yes. I just don't believe in being a person who signs his name to letters. If I am going to do something, I like to get in and do the job that I think can be done by actually applying myself.

So, if we are going to talk about, actually, the workings of - what the money is going to be used for, that is hard to say. I don't touch the money;

I don't see it when it goes in. I have nothing to do with it.

Mr. Van der Linden: Of course, your name is being used to promote the campaign and secure money.

Mr. Robinson: That is right.

Mr. Van der Linden: And, of course, it would be of public interest to someone who is going to contribute to know whether the money would be used to hire lawyers, or to press for lobbying, say, for civil rights bills. I assume you favor the civil rights bill?

Mr. Robinson: I certainly do. The money, the way I see it, is going to be used in our fight to achieve first-class citizenship. We have had to, through legal means all of these years, go through the courts to get the things that are rightfully ours under the Constitution. We haven't picked up arms to do anything to achieve the rights that belong to us; we have done it legally through the courts. Money is needed to hire lawyers to handle these specific cases. I would imagine they are going to use a considerable amount of money. I don't know whether the Freedom Fund is used for lawyers or whether it goes through the other branch that they have.

Mr. Lawrence: I would like to return, if I might, to this reserve clause business a moment. In defending it, or saying it was necessary as you saw it, you cited the case of the closing days of a pennant race where a club with a chance to win might buy up all the players. Isn't that handled rather by the deadline on buying and trading players rather than by the reserve clause?

Mr. Robinson: If the reserve clause wasn't there, I think that they would be able to do so. I think that is one of the protections that the club owners are using the reserve clause for.

Mr. Lawrence: Doesn't the league lay down the date beyond which you may not buy a player and use him, or you may not trade after a certain date?

Mr. Robinson: Buying, I don't know - it is September 30 for buying of players; that is correct.

Mr. Lawrence: If that kind of control could be exercised so that you would avoid this problem of one club buying up all the talent, you know, towards

the end of the season, what would be the defense of the reserve clause in the winter time when a ball player would have a better chance to move from some eighth place outfit that isn't making any money to a club that is in the contention and is drawing enough patrons that it can afford to pay him a decent salary?

Mr. Robinson: It is just simply that there are a lot of club owners, in my opinion, who could not compete in that market if they threw it open for actually bidding for services of all ball players. I think most clubs in the American League today have enough trouble competing with the Yankees without worrying about their finances, too.

In the National League where you have a ball club like Milwaukee, if they could get one man that would insure them the pennant, they draw so very, very well that they could do so - I am just using this as an example. I do not say they would do this, but they could in the winter time. They start figuring "How can we improve our ball club during the winter?" They would bid for ball players during the winter that would virtually assure them of a pennant during the next year, whereas, a ball club that hasn't been going well and hasn't been taking in money couldn't compete in that market, and fellows who are in baseball for the love of the game - I know very few of them.

Mr. Lawrence: Let's translate that to the player, though. We can't get much out of it as long as he is stuck with - I won't use the name, but the 8th place club that frequents this town - why shouldn't he have a chance to go out?

Mr. Robinson: I agree. I wish that there was some way that they could do something about it, but I doubt very seriously if everybody tried to get on the Yankee ball club that many people would come out the next year to see the ball game, if they were going to run away with it any more than they do now.

Mr. Spivak: Mr. Robinson, before your trade was announced, did the Dodgers discuss this with you at all? Were you sold and then told, or was this discussed with you, or were you just treated as a chattel and told where to go?

Mr. Robinson: I was told where to go.

Mr. Spivak: No discussion?

Mr. Robinson: No.

Mr. Spivak: Nobody discussed this with you; nobody asked you whether you would like to go or anything?

Mr. Robinson: No.

Mr. Spivak: Do you think that is a good system?

Mr. Robinson: I think it is until something better comes along. I don't know what the answer would be there. Frankly, I haven't given it too much thought because we, as ball players, have been under this rule for so long that we have accepted it in most part. I agree that if there was a vote taken that most of them would probably go along until something came along that was better.

Mr. Spivak: Why should baseball be any different from life? If you make a contract in business, and you are not satisfactory, and your company is not satisfactory, after the period of your contract you can go where you want and do as you please? Why shouldn't there be a system like that? A contract, yes - if a baseball club wants to sign a man up for five years and pay him a certain amount and take that obligation, fine.

Mr. Robinson: Mr. Spivak, I don't know why I'm defending this reserve clause; really, I don't know why I am doing it, so, I will just say here, for the players' benefit certainly something should be done, but I hope it doesn't have to be done through the courts. I hope that the baseball owners will think enough of the ball players themselves to say, "Well, I'm going to do something for the players besides selling them whenever I can - maybe giving them a piece of the money when they are sold." I hope it's done that way rather than through the courts.

Mr. Spivak: You do feel that something ought to be done about it.

Mr. Robinson: Definitely, I think something should be done.

Mr. Spivak: I would like to switch, if I might, to another subject. You have

become one of the leaders of your race. The rate of crime in the Negro race is much greater than the rate in the population as a whole. I know a good deal of the responsibility is on the white people, who have treated the Negro the way they have during these past years, but what do you see as the responsibility of the Negro himself and, maybe, of the NAACP in this area?

Mr. Robinson: It is a question that certainly should be pressing in the minds of all of us. I hope that the NAACP and all groups that are interested in that, not only in the Negro but in America, will try to do something for this particular problem.

I think, and I agree with you, if I can interpret what you are saying, that the Negro himself has a responsibility, here. As you say - and I agree also - a lot of it is due to the lack of opportunities that we have had, but I think it is the obligation of the Negro leaders, not only to seek their rights as first-class citizens, but, also, to impress upon all of our people that it is very important that they cut down anything that brings discredit to us.

Mr. Spivak: How do you answer those people who insist that the NAACP is moving very, very fast to get the rights for the Negro but seems to be doing not enough to impress upon the Negro his own responsibility as he gets these rights?

Mr. Robinson: When they say that the NAACP is moving too fast - you know, I heard that, Mr. Spivak, when I was out in Pasadena, California, trying to get into the YMCA: Take your time. Be patient. Patience is fine. I think if we go back and check our record, the Negro has proven beyond a doubt that we have been more than patient in seeking our rights as American citizens. "Be patient," I was told as a kid. I keep hearing that today, "Let's be patient; let's take our time; things will come." It seems to me, the Civil War has been over about 93 years; if that isn't patience, I don't know what is.

I agree, also, that perhaps we should emphasize the importance of cutting down upon the rate of crime. There is too much, but again we've got to understand that a lot of people are oppressed, and they run into these situations because of their surroundings. It is our responsibility as much as it is anyone else's, but I must remind - this is my own opinion - I think it is not only the Negro's obligation, but it is every American citizen's obligation,

that if the Negro rate of crime is too great, then we should try to do something about it, not as Negroes but as Americans.

Mr. Simpson: You have been quoted several times as saying that you do not miss baseball. Is that because you have such a wonderful position and everything, or did you have any bad moments in baseball, or was baseball at the end of your career just a chore for you?

Mr. Robinson: Now, which one do we want to start with first?

Mr. Simpson: Let's start at the end: Did you enjoy your baseball career?

Mr. Robinson: I enjoyed my baseball career tremendously up through the years. I enjoyed it very much.

Mr. Simpson: In other words, you would recommend it as a career for someone else in spite of this reserve clause and all the rest of it?

Mr. Robinson: My little boy wants to play baseball, and I am going to help him in every way that I possibly can. I think it is a great game for youngsters. It gives them a chance to meet and know people of all faiths, and I think that is something that everyone should get an opportunity of doing.

Mr. Simpson: You were the first Negro in baseball. Now that you are out, are you satisfied with the Negro's position in baseball and in professional sports?

Mr. Robinson: Oh, no, I am never satisfied; let's face it.

Mr. Simpson: What are you facing now, if you are not satisfied? What do you think should be done, or must be done, that is not being done?

Mr. Robinson: Well, I don't know -

Mr. Simpson: Do you think anyone is being denied playing in professional sports?

Mr. Robinson: Not today; not in baseball; I will put it that way - not in baseball. I think they are in golf, but in baseball I think if a person has the ability to make the major league, he will be able to get there on ability

alone. I think that is what nine out of ten of the major league owners are looking for, ability and ability alone.

Mr. Simpson: Golf is the only sport that you would put your finger on as one that does not allow an equal chance?

Mr. Robinson: I would say golf. In the over-all picture there are cases where Negroes are allowed to participate in the golf tournaments, but in the great majority of tournaments they are not allowed.

Mr. Brooks: You mentioned the circumstances under which you were notified that you were to be traded to the New York Giants. Hadn't you at the time made up your mind that you were going to retire this year?

Mr. Robinson: I had. As a matter of fact, I had placed a call to Mr. Bavasi, I got his secretary two days before I made my decision, or my final decision. My reason for calling Mr. Bavasi was to tell him not to get rid of Randy Jackson, that I wasn't sure what I would do the next year.

Mr. Brooks: But you had certain commitments that didn't enable you to tell the Dodgers that you were going to retire, isn't that true?

Mr. Robinson: That is correct.

Mr. Van der Linden: Mr. Robinson, you said a few minutes ago that you favored the Civil Rights Bill. There have been some amendments offered to the bill. Do you know of any reason why Congress should not adopt the proposed amendment which would give a jury trial to anyone who is accused under that bill?

Mr. Robinson: I know very little about that bill, Mr. Van der Linden.

Mr. Van der Linden: As an individual, yourself, if you should happen to be accused in any court case, on any matter, would you prefer to have a jury trial?

Mr. Robinson: I think I would, yes, as an individual, yes.

Mr. Spivak: Mr. Robinson, the Brooklyn Dodgers hired a clown, recently, for this season. Is that an indication that they don't think their ball team is

going to keep the people interested?

Mr. Robinson: I hope not. I think that the Brooklyn Baseball Club will be a very, very interesting one this year. I think their pitching is as good as there is in baseball, and when you have good pitching, you have an interesting ball team.

Mr. Spivak: Sports Illustrated, I think, last week referred to them as a "team of old and ailing players." Do you think they are not too old and too ailing to win this pennant again, as you predicted?

Mr. Robinson: I certainly don't think so. I think when you have fellows on the ball club like Pee Wee Reese, for instance - I think Pee Wee is perhaps the oldest player outside of the pitchers on the ball club - even when he is ailing and hurting, he is out there playing better baseball than a lot of the younger fellows, so, therefore, he is able to do a good job. I think his leadership will enable them to do a good job again.

Mr. Spivak: May I ask you a personal question?

Mr. Robinson: Indeed.

Mr. Spivak: You seem so calm and gentle here today. How did you get your reputation for being so "tart-tongued" and "terrible-tempered?"

Mr. Robinson: I don't know, Mr. Spivak, very frankly. I am calm; I like to be calm. When I am playing baseball, I give it all that I have on the ball field. When the ball game is over, I certainly don't take it home. My little girl who is sitting out there wouldn't know the difference between a third strike and a foul ball. We don't talk about baseball at home. I finish any game, give it all I have, but I don't take it home.

Mr. Spivak: Is it the game itself that stirred up the competitive spirit or was it partly the way you were treated as the first Negro in baseball that resulted in your so-called tart tongue and terrible temper?

Mr. Robinson: Oh, indeed not. Mr. Spivak, I can say this honestly; things weren't as bad as a lot of people would have liked to have made them out to be. I received very, very fine treatment in most cases. So, therefore, my activities on the ball field had absolutely nothing to do with the way that I

conducted myself at any time.

Mr. Brooks: I am sorry to have to interrupt, but I see our time is up.

Our sincere thanks to Jackie Robinson, and before closing I would like to call your special attention to next week's program. Our guest will be Vladimir Poremsky, the head of the Russian underground called the NTS, and it is known by Soviet intelligence agents as the most dangerous enemy to the Soviet regime.

Again, thank you very much, Jackie Robinson, for being with us; now here is our announcer.

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