

Module 08: Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights Leader?

Context

Racial Segregation in Society

Jackie Robinson's performance as Major League Baseball's first black player helped pave the way for the civil rights movement. American society in the 1940s 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. Strict covenants segregated neighborhoods 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.

Segregation in Sports

Professional sports proved equally discriminatory for African Americans, with the exception of college football, Olympic sports, and boxing, where stars like Joe Louis, Henry Armstrong, and other African Americans competed with whites. Most professional sports leagues, including the National Football League, the Basketball Association of America, and Major League Baseball, excluded or segregated African Americans. In response, black athletes created the Negro Leagues, out of which rose such great teams as the Kansas City Monarchs, the Homestead Grays of Pittsburgh and Washington D.C., the Baltimore Elite Giants, and the New York Cubans. Some of the greatest baseball players of all time — pitcher Leroy "Satchel" Paige, catcher Josh Gibson, centerfielder Oscar Charleson — played for Negro League teams. In exhibition games against Negro Leaguers, white athletes were most impressed with the talents of their black counterparts, and some regretted their exclusion from Major League Baseball.

Challenging Segregation

African Americans began to challenge racial exclusion in sports during World War II. Led by black sportswriters Wendell Scott of the *Pittsburgh Courier* and Sam Lacy of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and joined by black advancement organizations and northern black politicians, the black community pressured Major League Baseball to end its unwritten agreement to exclude black ballplayers. By

June 1945, the movement had persuaded the commissioner of baseball to appoint a committee consisting of Larry McPhail, president of the New York Yankees, and Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, to investigate the feasibility of African Americans playing in the Major Leagues. Little of value, however, came out of the committee. Meanwhile, Bill Veeck, an innovative baseball executive who longed to own a baseball team, planned to buy the Philadelphia Phillies in 1943 and stock the team with Negro League baseball stars. Word of his intentions, however, leaked to commissioner of baseball Kennesaw Mountain Landis, a staunch segregationist who arranged for multimillionaire Robert Carpenter to buy the team instead.

Jackie Robinson and the Brooklyn Dodgers

Branch Rickey, part owner and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, proved more successful in his attempts to integrate Major League Baseball. Disturbed for quite some time by racial exclusion in professional baseball, Rickey decided to award a contract with the Montreal Royals, Brooklyn's AAA farm team in the International League, to Jackie Robinson, the talented shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League. Robinson, a track and football star at UCLA and an army officer during World War II, seemed well qualified to become the first black player in twentieth-century professional baseball. After leading the International League in batting and his new team to the pennant in 1946, Robinson found himself promoted to the Major League Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Rookie of the Year

Jackie Robinson's breach of a seemingly unbreakable color barrier with his transfer to the Brooklyn Dodgers made racial integration in other areas of American life seem possible. Jackie Robinson himself seemed a logical choice for the first African American to play in the Major Leagues. His years at UCLA and with the Kansas City Monarchs demonstrated his athletic abilities, while his time as an army officer gave him discipline, pride, and experience with racism, all of which armed him to deal with the racial challenges he faced in Minor League and Major League Baseball. Rickey ordered him to "turn the other cheek" to racial taunts and assaults. To someone who had been court-martialed for protesting racial segregation on army base buses, ignoring injustices proved difficult. Nevertheless, he stoically endured unending racial abuse during his year with the Montreal Royals and his first two years with the Brooklyn Dodgers. Despite racial slurs, catcalls, and bean balls, Robinson excelled in his rookie year with the Dodgers, leading them to the National pennant and the World Series, where they lost to the

New York Yankees in a hard-fought, seven-game run. Robinson, playing at first base, batted .297, scored 125 runs, and was awarded the first ever Rookie of the Year award.

African Americans in the Major Leagues

In 1947, as owner of the Cleveland Indians, Bill Veeck signed Larry Doby, the star first baseman for the Negro League's Newark Eagles, as the first black American Leaguer. The next summer, the Indians acquired the legendary Leroy "Satchel" Paige. Doby and Paige, the latter a forty-two-year-old "rookie," helped lead the Indians to the American League championship in 1948 and a six-game World Series victory over the Boston Braves. Meanwhile, Brooklyn added catcher Roy Campanella in 1948 and pitcher Don Newcombe in 1949. In that year and the next, the New York Giants signed longtime Negro League star Monte Irvin and nineteen-year-old Willie Mays to Major League contracts. Without Robinson's consistently excellent play, which peaked in 1949 when he won the National League's Most Valuable Player Award, other black athletes may not have been able to join the Major Leagues. In 1949, Robinson won the batting championship as a second baseman with a .342 average, 16 home runs, and 124 runs batted in. He also led the Dodgers to another National League pennant and the World Series, which they again lost to the Yankees.

Robinson off the Field

Robinson's baseball career continued at the level of excellence he established in 1949. His inspired play led the Dodgers to National League pennants in 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, and 1956. In 1951, Robinson made an almost impossible infield catch and went on to hit a fourteenth-inning home run that propelled the Dodgers into a three-game playoff with the New York Giants for the National League championship. Such aggressive base running and fielding transformed baseball. Yet he remained much more than a baseball star. In 1949, Branch Rickey released Robinson from his pledge to "turn the other cheek" to racial abuse. From that time on, Robinson would protest racism on and off the field and respond to questions posed by civic organizations and the media concerning racism against African Americans. In 1949, Robinson testified before Congress on the loyalty of African Americans to the United States in light of its Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. His testimony came at the heels of singer, actor, social activist, and Communist sympathizer Paul Robeson's comments questioning black America's support for the United States over the Soviet Union. Robinson reassured his congressional inquisitors that Robeson spoke only for himself and not the vast

majority of African Americans. Later on, as he became more disillusioned about America, Robinson expressed regret about his testimony against Paul Robeson, whom he had come to respect greatly. Robinson's testimony marked an increase in his involvement in issues concerning African Americans.

Robinson on Tour

Jackie Robinson's Major League Baseball career began relatively later in life and wound down more quickly than others. Consequently, he became more involved in his off-field activities, which included fundraising for the NAACP and other black advancement organizations, serving as a newspaper columnist on black issues, and entering the world of business. In 1953, for example, he edited and wrote for *Our Sports*, a short-lived magazine covering sports for African Americans. In 1954, he became the chairman of the commission on community organizations for the National Councils of Christians and Jews, an organization that promoted interfaith and interracial harmony and understanding. In his position as chairman, Robinson gave off-season lecture tours on baseball to promote interracial tolerance and respect. In 1956, he received the Spingarn Medal, awarded annually by the NAACP to the individual who most advanced the cause of African Americans, for his pioneering work to integrate Major League Baseball and his outspoken support for racial equality and integration in all areas of American life. Later that year, Robinson agreed to chair the NAACP's annual *Fight for Freedom* campaign, during which he toured the United States in the winter of 1956 and 1957 to raise funds for the organization.

Retirement From Baseball

Robinson's baseball career ended abruptly in 1957. Although his skills had diminished drastically, he did lead the Dodgers to their first World Series win in 1955 and a National League championship in 1956. In the winter of 1956, Robinson made serious retirement plans, accepting a full-time job with the racially liberal Chock Full O'Nuts restaurant chain as their director of personnel. Unaware of Robinson's plan to retire, the Dodgers traded him to their cross-town — and hated — rival, the New York Giants. Robinson briefly toyed with the idea of playing for the Giants, especially since they would pay him the huge sum of \$65,000, far more than what he had made with the Dodgers, and twice what Chock Full O'Nuts would pay him. Because of his age, Robinson decided to retire, a decision that unsettled the Dodger management and estranged Robinson from their organization for many years.

Robinson and Politics

With his baseball career behind him, Robinson intensified his civil rights activities. He continued to chair the NAACP *Fight for Freedom* fundraising campaign, for which he traveled throughout the country, speaking at banquets, giving lectures, and soliciting membership. His travels to promote the organization in the South proved unpleasant, since many southern states attacked the NAACP. Yet Robinson remained undeterred. His activities on behalf of civil rights soon drew him into politics. He was attracted to the Republican Party, which in the 1950s was still significant in the black community. He admired President Dwight D. Eisenhower and Vice President Richard M. Nixon, both of whom showed reciprocal admiration through word and deed. Although Robinson at the time maintained a generally conservative position on issues other than civil rights, President Eisenhower's relative silence on civil rights issues upset him, and he wrote to the president to express his concern in 1958. He also frequently corresponded with local, state and federal officials about their negligence in the area of black advancement.

Robinson and the NAACP

In 1958, Robinson was elected to the NAACP board of directors, although the organization generally found Robinson too militant, since he openly criticized the NAACP for not taking more direct action against racial segregation and exclusion in the South. Branching out from the NAACP, Robinson served as the grand marshal for the *Youth March for Integrated Schools*, which was sponsored by A. Phillip Randolph, the well-known black labor leader and civil rights advocate. The NAACP only tepidly supported his efforts, although Robinson remained an NAACP board member and an active officer for many years to come.

The 1960 Presidential Election

During the 1960 presidential election, Jackie Robinson's Republican leanings came to the forefront as he campaigned for Vice President Richard M. Nixon's candidacy for the presidency. At that time, both Republicans and Democrats had established similar platforms in the area of civil rights, yet Robinson's support of the Republican Party earned him considerable criticism among the black community. Many African Americans believed that the Democratic candidate, the U.S. Senator from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy, would prove more sensitive to their concerns, especially since he had interceded on behalf of Martin Luther King after the latter's arrest on trumped-up traffic charges in Georgia. Nixon foolishly failed to respond, which cost him the black vote and ultimately the election. Robinson

remained loyal to Nixon, who regarded him as a close friend, and stuck with him to the bitter end. Robinson's support for Nixon and the Republican Party began to alienate him from the more militant elements in the black community, although his commitment to civil rights grew even stronger during the sixties.

Robinson and the Republican Party

After the 1960 election, Robinson continued to correspond with the White House, communicating now with President Kennedy on African American issues. In 1963, Robinson participated with his son David in the March on Washington, although his continued support of the Republican Party caused consternation among many in the black community. In 1964, however, he vigorously opposed the party's selection of Barry Goldwater as their presidential candidate. Goldwater's anti-civil rights record disgusted Robinson and other black and liberal Republicans, and many of them switched their support to the Democrat candidate, Lyndon Johnson. In the late sixties, Jackie Robinson allied himself with liberal Republican Nelson Rockefeller, the Governor of New York, campaigning for his reelection in 1966 and serving later on as his special assistant for community affairs.

Black Movements in the 1960s

Jackie Robinson found the sixties confusing compared to earlier times. As outspoken against racism as ever, Robinson found himself caught between radical black leaders on one side and both whites and African Americans who found him too outspoken on the other. Robinson did not support the black community's turn, by the middle of the decade, towards black power and separatism. Militants such as Malcolm X alienated him, and vice versa. Younger African Americans saw him as an anachronistic figure from the past. His conservative social attitudes distanced him even from his own children, especially his oldest son, Jackie Jr. Blasted from all sides, the stress of his position aggravated his diabetes and his health began to fail. Yet Robinson continued to campaign for the NAACP, correspond with the White House, write for the *New York Post*, and try his hand at business. He established an insurance company, a construction company, and a bank, called the Freedom National Bank, although his businesses lacked the capital and the patronage to survive for very long. Ever critical of Black Nationalism, his attempts through his business activities to construct an independent black economic base in New York City in fact exemplified the best in Black Nationalist thought.

Recognition

Over time, Robinson received recognition for his contributions to the advancement of African Americans. In 1962, he was inducted on his first try into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Later on, he received numerous prizes and awards from local and national civic organizations. The honors comforted him in his declining years, as he found his political and public influence waning. Robinson's diabetes caused horrific damage to his health. He suffered from heart disease and growing blindness, and faced the potential amputation of both legs. Adding to his sorrow were the problems of his oldest child Jackie Jr., who returned from the Vietnam War a drug addict. After three years of intense drug rehabilitation, Jackie Jr. had become clean and sober when he was killed in an automobile accident. His father bore the tragedy with dignity and refused to give in to self pity or despair.

Conclusion

Jackie Robinson fought racism to the very end. He tirelessly petitioned Major League Baseball to hire black managers. Honored at the 1972 World Series, Robinson, by now nearly blind, reminded professional baseball that it still had no black managers. Three years later, the Cleveland Indians hired Frank Robinson (no relation) as its first black manager. But by then, Jackie Robinson was already gone; on October 23, 1972, he had died from a heart attack at the age of 53.