

Creating a better baseball legacy

By William C. Kashatus

Delivering the eulogy at Jackie Robinson's funeral on Oct. 27, 1972, Jesse Jackson reminded the gathering that "a life is marked by two dates with a dash in between."

"It is that dash," he contended, "between those two dates, where we live."

"For each one of us," he continued in a preacher's cadence, "it is a dash of possibility, to make things better or to make things worse. On that dash, Jackie Robinson snapped the barbed wire of prejudice. In that dash, he carried with him the gift of new hopes and expectations."

Not only was it a moving tribute, but a most fitting one to a man who believed that "a life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

On this, the 50th anniversary of Robinson's breaking the color barrier, the Philadelphia Phillies, along with the rest of Major League Baseball, have chosen to honor the former Dodger by wearing a commemorative patch on their uniforms and permanently retiring his number 42.

While these are noble gestures, I doubt they will register the kind of substantive legacy Robinson himself would have wanted to leave.

Although Philadelphians live in a sports culture where history seems to be measured in minutes — not years — and forgetfulness is common, the Phillies still haven't been forgiven for 1947.

The team treated Robinson the worst of any in the National League. Pitchers threw at his head; infielders purposely spiked him in the base paths, and — in one of the lowest moments in baseball history — the Phillies humiliated Robinson by standing on the steps of their dugout, pointing their bats at him and making gunshot sounds.

It was, as Robinson would admit years later, enough to make him consider quitting.

Retiring Jackie Robinson's number and wearing a commemorative patch are nice gestures. How about helping young people?

Those ugly memories still seem to linger, along with the feelings of many African American baseball fans that the Phillies are a racist organization, even though the club has changed ownership twice since 1947.

To be sure, the Phillies have made an earnest attempt to make amends for their history. At the urging of City Councilman Michael Nutter, club president Bill Giles apologized earlier this year for the ugly way Robinson was treated by the organization.

Just as meaningful has been the Phillies' attempt at outreach to disadvantaged youngsters, a cause Robinson valued tremendously. Their Rookie League and RBI (Reviving

Baseball in the Inner City) programs involve about 7,500 youngsters, ages 6 to 18. But more can be done.

The Phillies might follow the lead of the Minnesota Twins, which recently created a partnership with the Jackie Robinson Foundation. Established in 1973 by Jackie's widow, Rachel, JRF is committed to promoting the great Dodger's belief that education is a critical factor in ensuring the success of young people. The JRF grants college scholarships to promising students of color with a demonstrated financial need, so they can attend the college of their choice.

This year 24 Jackie Robinson scholars will graduate from 19 col-

leges and universities across the nation, joining 425 alumni of the program. With a 92 percent graduation rate, the JRF's Educational and Leadership Development Program cultivates more college graduates than most other comparable programs in the country.

The Twins recent contribution of \$50,000 to the JRF will fund two scholarships to the University of Minnesota for minority students residing in Minnesota, the Dakotas, northern Iowa or western Wisconsin. Additionally, each scholarship recipient will be invited to serve an internship with the Twins' organization throughout the summer.

In that same spirit, the Phillies should join local colleges and universities to establish a Philadelphia-area JRF Scholarship Selection Committee, much like the ones that already exist in Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, New York and Stamford, Conn.

Together with JRF, this committee would identify outstanding young people of color with financial need and provide scholarship awards, as well as support throughout their college years.

A similar program also might be established among Philadelphia's Quaker high schools, where I teach, for promising adolescents of color with a demonstrated need. This is something I would actively promote among local Friends' schools and colleges, which have long been recognized for their commitment to diversity.

Jackie Robinson's example stands as a testimony to our nation's greatest civil rights leaders — those who sought to redefine the moral conventions of an imperfect society by challenging its stereotypes in the hope of making the American Dream more accessible to all.

Sadly, Philadelphia did not always appreciate that example during his lifetime. That is why we, as a city, must do more than retire a uniform number or wear a commemorative patch and give Jackie Robinson the kind of tribute he so richly deserves.

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