



Hall of Famer Monte Irvin, the former New York Giants outfielder, is shown in 2009. CHARLES FOX / Staff Photographer

## By William C. Kashatus

In 1997, when Major League Baseball retired Jackie Robinson's No. 42 to honor his breaking the color barrier 50 years earlier, I heard Monte Irvin give a talk at Lincoln University, the historically black college where he was a three-sport athlete in the late 1930s.

Irvin captured the imagination of the audience with spellbinding tales from his days as a star shortstop for the Newark Eagles of the Negro Leagues and later as an outfielder for the New York Giants. But he was too modest to tell us that he, not Robinson, was the first choice of Brooklyn Dodgers general manager Branch Rickey to break the color line.

Monford Merrill Irvin, who died Jan. 11 at the age of 96, never received the full credit he deserved for integrating Major League Baseball. That was due in part to his desire for cooperation rather than controversy.

In the spring of 1945, when Rickey was searching the Negro Leagues for someone to integrate organized baseball, he insisted that the candidate be not only a gifted ballplayer but also a military veteran with a college education. Rickey believed that those three qualifications were essential if the first Afri-

white teammates as well as the general public.

Irvin's credentials were impeccable. In fact, Negro League owners had even recommended Irvin to Rickey. He had already been playing in the Negro Leagues for four years, two of them under the pseudonym "Jimmy Nelson" to protect his amateur status while a student at Lincoln. During that span, the talented shortstop batted .358, played in a few all-star games, and won a batting title. He had also served in the U.S. Army for three years during World War II. Unlike other star ballplayers who were purposely kept off the battlefield, Irvin saw combat, his unit deployed to the famous Battle of the Bulge. But when the Dodgers' general manager contacted him, Irvin said that he "wasn't in playing shape" and was "struggling with a bad case of war nerves." As a result, Rickey signed Robinson.

Jackie's background raised concerns, though.

While he attended UCLA, where he was an All-American football player and track star, baseball was his worst sport and he had only played one unremarkable year in the Negro Leagues. Nor did Robinson, an Army second lieutenant during World War II, see combat. But stateside, he did repeat-

# First choice to integrate baseball

The Philadelphia Inquirer

THURSDAY JANUARY 21, 2016

These actions would lead to a court martial in which he was acquitted of all charges.

Unlike Irvin, who was easygoing and had an uncanny ability to win over others with his kindness and athletic ability, Jackie saw himself as a civil rights crusader who fought back whenever he experienced racial discrimination. In fact, Rickey worried that Robinson's confrontational personality could set the process of integration back a decade or more.

It is all the more impressive, then, that Jackie was able to control his hair-trigger temper in the face of the horrific racism he experienced during his first few years in professional baseball.

But Rickey did not forget about Irvin, who returned to the Negro Leagues and led the Eagles to a World Series title in 1946 while he captured a second batting title.

Late in 1948, Rickey signed Irvin to a minor-league contract, believing he was a free agent. But when the Eagles protested that he was still under contract, Rickey renounced his rights. In January 1949, the Eagles sold Irvin's contract to the New York Giants for \$5,000, allowing him, at age 30, to enter organized baseball.

On July 8, 1949, Irvin and Hank Thompson became the first blacks to play for the Giants. Two years later, the duo formed MLB's first all-black outfield when they

helped pace the Giants to two National League pennants (1951, 1954) and a World Series title in 1954, completing a nine-year major-league career with a .293 average, 99 homers, 443 RBIs, and 366 runs scored. His greatest contribution, though, was mentoring a score of younger African American players in the early years of integration, including Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe of the Dodgers; Sam Jethroe and Hank Aaron of the Boston/Milwaukee Braves; Ernie Banks of the Chicago Cubs; and Giants teammates Thompson and Mays, who considered Irvin a "second father."

Near the end of his life, I asked Irvin if he thought he would have been successful if he had been chosen to break the color line.

"I think I could've done the job," said the former Giant, who was inducted into baseball's Hall of Fame in 1973. "I grew up in an integrated situation. I had the type of personality that could handle any situation because I wasn't hung up on race. I also had a fair amount of education and some talent. I would've done it differently than Jackie, but I would've been successful."

Irvin became MLB's first black executive in 1968, when he was hired as a special assistant to the commissioner to promote a game that had once barred him because of his race. In that capacity, he successful-