

BASEBALL'S

Noble experiment

BY WILLIAM KASHATUS *When former Negro Leaguer Jackie Robinson took his place in the Brooklyn Dodgers' starting lineup on April 15, 1947, he initiated a major change not only in sports, but in American society as a whole.*

ON AUGUST 28, 1945, Jackie Robinson, the star shortstop of the Negro Leagues' Kansas City Monarchs, arrived at the executive offices of the Brooklyn Dodgers Baseball Club. Invited on the pretense that Branch Rickey, since 1942 a part owner of the club as well as its president and general manager, was seeking top black talent in order to create a Negro League team of his own, Robinson approached the meeting with great reluctance. Deep down he wanted to break the color barrier that existed in professional baseball, not discuss the possibility of playing for yet another all-black team. Little did he realize that Rickey shared his dream.

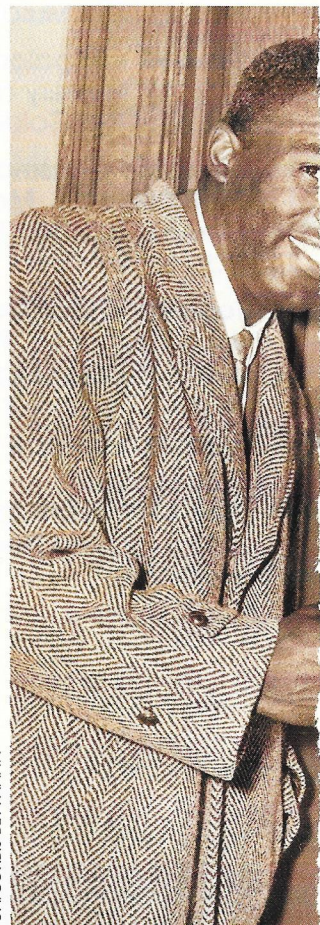
A shrewd, talkative man who had dedicated his life to baseball, the 64-year-old Rickey was secretly plotting a

sweeping revolution within the national pastime. He believed that integration of the major leagues would be good for the country as well as for the game. Financial gain was only part of his motive—it was also a matter of moral principle. Rickey, a devout Methodist, disdained the bigoted attitudes of the white baseball establishment.

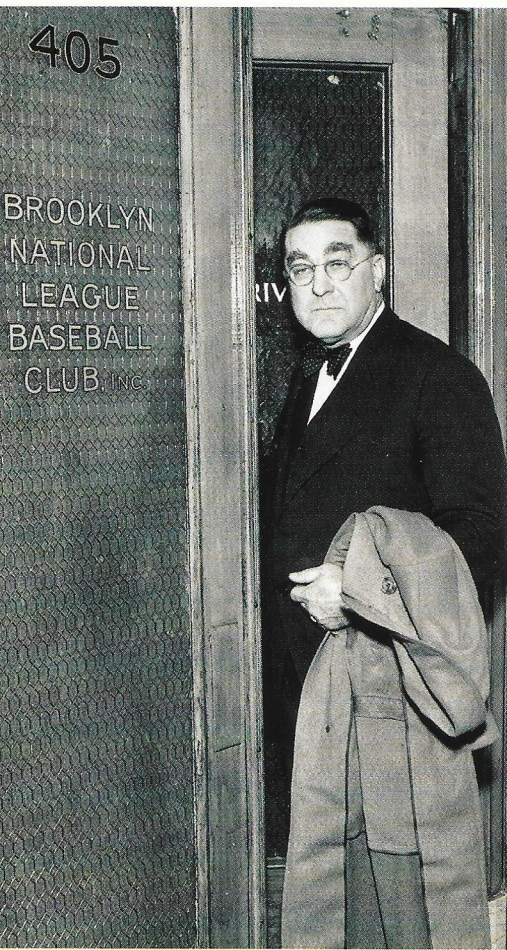
Greeting Robinson with a vigorous handshake, Rickey wasted no time in revealing his true intentions. "The truth is," he confessed, "I'm interested in you as a candidate for the Brooklyn Dodgers. I think you can play in the major leagues. How do you feel about it?"

The young ball player was speechless. He had taught himself to be cynical toward all baseball-club owners, espe-

In 1945, after a careful search for just the right man to do the job, Branch Rickey (top), president, general manager, and part owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, bucked the long segregationist history of major-league baseball by signing Jack Roosevelt (Jackie) Robinson to play in the Dodger organization. At the time he signed with the Dodgers, Jackie was a shortstop with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues (far right). During his ten seasons with the Dodgers, Robinson played under three managers—Burt Shotton, Chuck Dressen (bottom), and Walt Alston.



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LEFT: UPI/CORBIS-BETTMAN; RIGHT: AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS





BOTH PHOTOS: AP/WIDE WORLD

cially white ones, in order to prevent any personal disillusionment.

“What about it? You think you can play for Montreal?” demanded the stocky, beetle-browed executive.

Robinson, awestruck, managed to say “yes.” He knew that the Montreal Royals was the Dodgers’ top minor-league team and that if he made good there, he had an excellent chance to crack the majors. “I just want to be treated fairly,” he added. “You will *not* be treated fairly!” Rickey snapped. “‘Nigger’ will be a compliment!”

For the next three hours, Rickey interrogated the star shortstop. With great dramatic flair, he role-played every conceivable scenario that would confront the first player to break baseball’s color barrier: first he was a bigoted sportswriter who only wrote lies about Robinson’s performance; next he was a Southern hotel manager refusing room and board; then, a racist major leaguer looking for a fight; and after that a waiter throwing Robinson out of a “for whites only” diner. In every scenario, Rickey cursed Robinson and threatened him, verbally degrading him in every way imaginable. The Dodger general manager’s performance was so convincing, Robinson later said, that “I found myself chain-gripping my fingers behind my back.”

When he was through, Rickey told Robinson that he knew he was “a fine ballplayer. But what I need,” he added, “is more than a great player. I need a man that will take abuse and insults for his race. And what I don’t know is whether you have the guts!”

Robinson struggled to keep his temper. He was insulted by the implication that he was a coward. “Mr. Rickey,” he retorted, “do you want a Negro who’s afraid to fight back?”

“No!” Rickey barked, “I want a ballplayer with guts enough *not* to fight back. We can’t *fight* our way through this. There’s virtually nobody on our side. No owners, no umpires, virtually no newspapermen. And I’m afraid that many fans will be hostile too. They’ll taunt you and goad you. They’ll do anything to make you react. They’ll try to provoke a race riot in the ball park.”

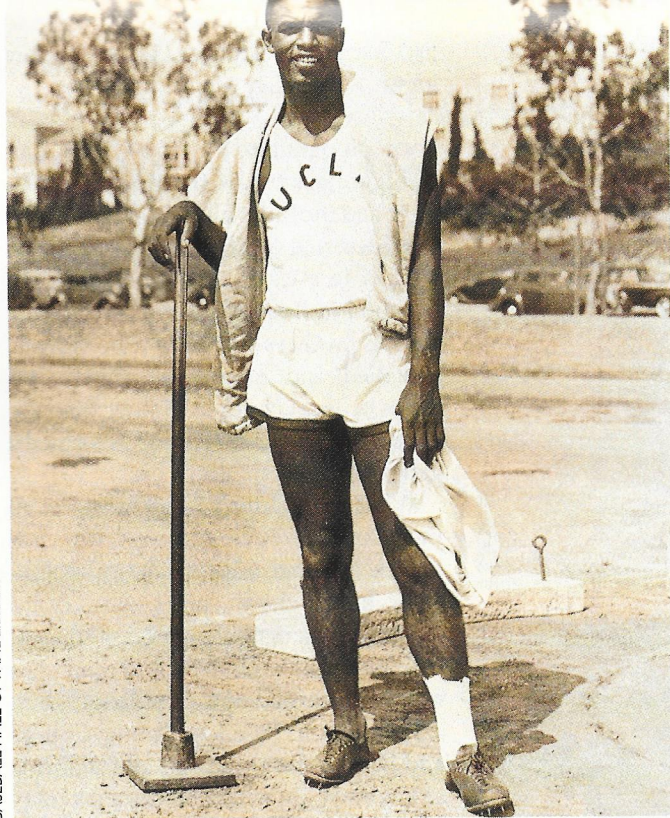
As he listened, Robinson became transfixed by the Dodger president. He felt his sincerity, his deep, quiet strength, and his sense of moral justice. “We can only win,” concluded Rickey, “if we can convince the world that I’m doing this because you’re a great ballplayer and a fine gentleman. You will symbolize a crucial cause. One incident, just one incident, can set it back twenty years.”

Baseball’s first commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis (above, left), thwarted all attempts to desegregate the sport. Not until his 1944 death and the appointment of Albert “Happy” Chandler (above, right), a supporter of baseball’s integration, as his successor did the signing of black athletes by major-league teams become a possibility.

“Mr. Rickey,” Robinson finally said, “I think I can play ball in Montreal. I think I can play ball in Brooklyn. . . . If you want to take this gamble, I will promise you there will be no incident.”

The agreement was sealed by a handshake. Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey had launched a noble experiment to integrate major-league baseball. Two years later, in 1947, when Robinson actually broke the color barrier, winning rookie-of-the-year honors with the Dodgers, he raised the hopes and expectations of millions of black Americans who believed that deeply rooted patterns of discrimination could be changed.

In 1945, segregation was the most distinguishing characteristic of American race relations. More than half of the nation’s 15 million African Americans still lived in the South, amidst a society that sanctioned the principle of “equal but sepa-



A versatile athlete, Robinson earned varsity letters in four sports, including track (above, left), while a student at the University of California at Los Angeles. As a lieutenant in the U.S. Army during World War II (above, right), Robinson faced a court-martial for refusing to move to the back of a military bus; he was acquitted and honorably discharged.

rate." A rigid system of state and local ordinances enforced strict separation of the races in schools, restaurants, movie theaters, and even restrooms. For blacks, these so-called "Jim Crow laws"* meant inferior public schools, health care, and public lodging, as well as discriminatory voter registration procedures that kept many of them disenfranchised.

For the nearly one million African Americans who had served in the armed forces during World War II, the contradiction inherent in their fight against totalitarianism abroad while enduring segregation at home was insufferable. No longer willing to knuckle under to Jim Crow, this young generation of black Americans was determined to secure full political and social equality. Many migrated to Northern

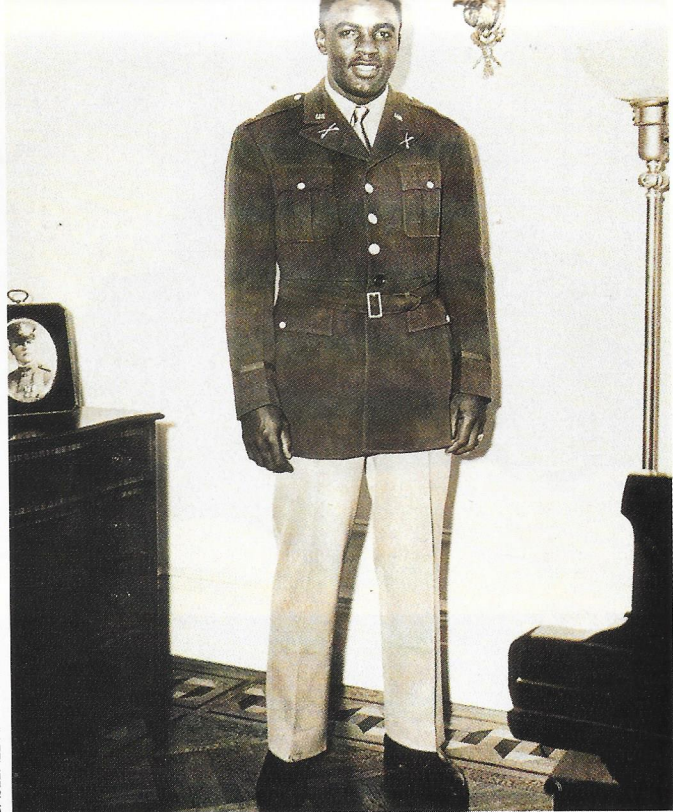
* Originally used in connection with legislation enacted in Southern states during the nineteenth century to separate the races on public transportation, the term "Jim Crow law" eventually applied to all statutes that enforced segregation.

cities, where they found better jobs, better schooling, and freedom from landlord control. Together with their white allies, these Northern blacks would lay the foundations of the momentous civil rights campaign of the 1950s and '60s. And Jackie Robinson became their hero.

To be sure, Robinson's challenge to baseball's whites-only policy was a formidable one. Blacks had been expelled from the major leagues when segregation was established by the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.^{*} Racist attitudes were reinforced by the significant numbers of white Southerners who played in the majors, as well as by the extensive minor-league system that existed in the South. When blacks established their own Negro Leagues, white journalists, as well as historians, ignored them.

Despite the periodic efforts of some white club owners to circumvent the racist policies and sign exceptional Negro Leaguers, the majors continued to bar blacks through the end of World War

^{*}The 1896 decision of the Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld a Louisiana law that required railroads in that state to provide "equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races." It was this "equal but separate" doctrine that made the discriminatory practices of this century legal in the United States. The Court essentially reversed itself in its 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decision, effectively ending legal segregation.



II. Baseball Commissioner Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis ensured the sport's segregationist policies by thwarting all efforts to sign blacks, while publicly stating that "There is no rule, formal or informal, or any understanding—unwritten, subterranean, or sub-anything—against the hiring of Negro players by the teams of organized baseball." Not until Landis died in 1944, however, did baseball open the door for integration.

The new commissioner, Albert "Happy" Chandler, was adamant in defending the "freedom of blacks," especially those who served in the war, to "make it in major league baseball." Chandler's support for integration earned for him the open hostility of the owners of 15 of the 16 major-league clubs, the exception being the Dodgers and Branch Rickey.

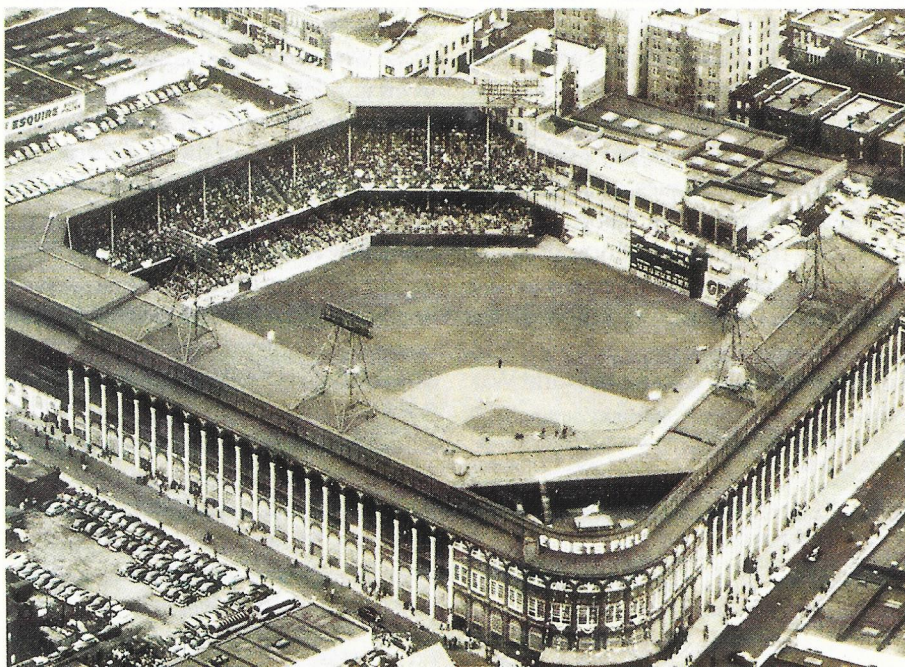
Publicly, Rickey never revealed his intentions of breaking the color barrier. Instead, he announced to the baseball world that he was going to organize a team to be known as the "Brown Dodgers" or the "Brown Bombers" as part of a new, all-black "United States League." His scouts combed baseball leagues across the country, as well as in Cuba, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela, for black prospects. What Rickey really wanted to find was a talented, college-educated ballplayer who would be



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black ignorance. His search narrowed to Jack Roosevelt Robinson, then an infielder for the Kansas City Monarchs.

Born on January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia, Jackie was the grandson of a slave and the fifth child of a sharecropper who deserted his family. Raised by his mother in a white, middle-class neighborhood in Pasadena, California, Jackie and his brothers and sister were verbally ridiculed and frequently pelted with rocks by local children. Rather than endure the humiliation, the boys formed a gang and began to return fire.

What saved the young Jackie from more serious trouble and even crime was his exceptional athletic ability. Robinson's high school career was distinguished by remarkable success in football, baseball, basketball, and track. His versatility earned him an athletic scholarship, first to Pasadena Junior College and later to the University of California at Los Angeles, where he earned varsity letters in four different sports and All-American honors in football.

Drafted into the Army in the spring of 1942, Robinson applied to be admitted to Officers' Candidate School, but was denied admission because of his race. His application was eventually approved, however, thanks to the help of boxing champion Joe Louis, who was stationed with Jackie at Fort Riley, Kansas. Commissioned a second lieutenant, Robinson continued during the next few years to defy discriminatory practices within the military. When, in July 1944, he refused to move to the rear of a military bus at Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson was charged with

During the historic meeting between Robinson and Rickey in 1945 (top), the Dodger executive brutally described what the first player to cross baseball's color line would endure. The joviality of the congratulations offered Robinson by former Senator James Mead and Brooklyn Borough President John Cashmore prior to Jackie's first game at Ebbets Field in April 1947 (center) belied the prejudice that he would have to face as the team traveled from city to city. Ebbets Field (bottom)—the Dodgers' small, intimate home stadium in Brooklyn's Flatbush section—offered fans a chance to feel close to their beloved players, including Robinson.

insubordination and court-martialed. But the case against him was weak—the Army had recently issued orders against such segregation—and a good lawyer won his acquittal. Although he received an honorable discharge in November 1944, Robinson's time in the military had left him feeling vulnerable and uncertain about the future.

Shortly after his discharge, the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the most talented of baseball's Negro League teams, offered Robinson a contract for four hundred dollars a month. While with the Monarchs, Robinson established himself as a fine defensive shortstop with impressive base stealing and hitting abilities. But he hated barnstorming through the South, with its Jim Crow restaurants and hotels, and frequently allowed his temper to get the better of him.

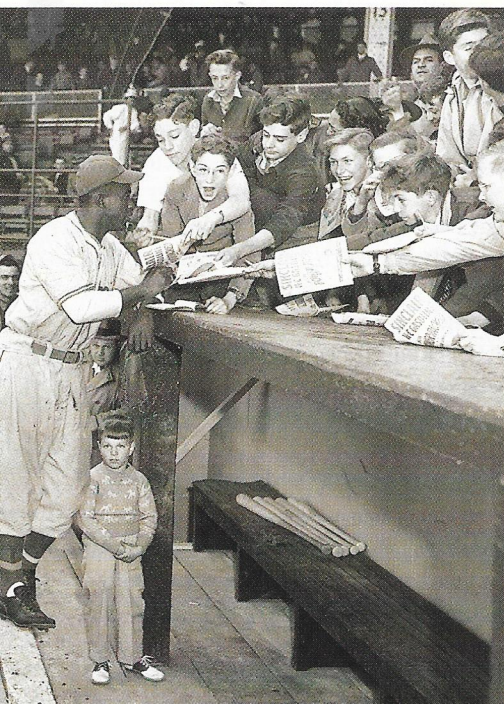
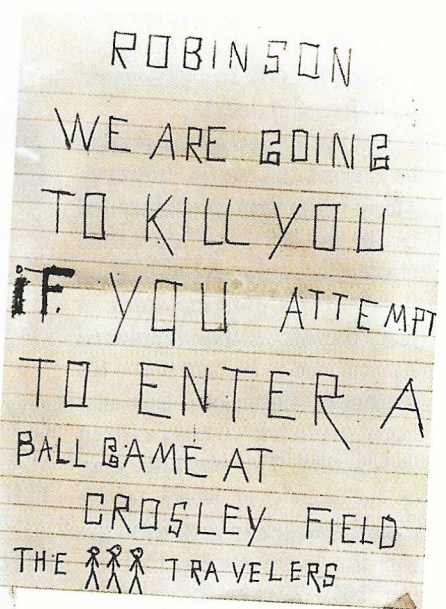
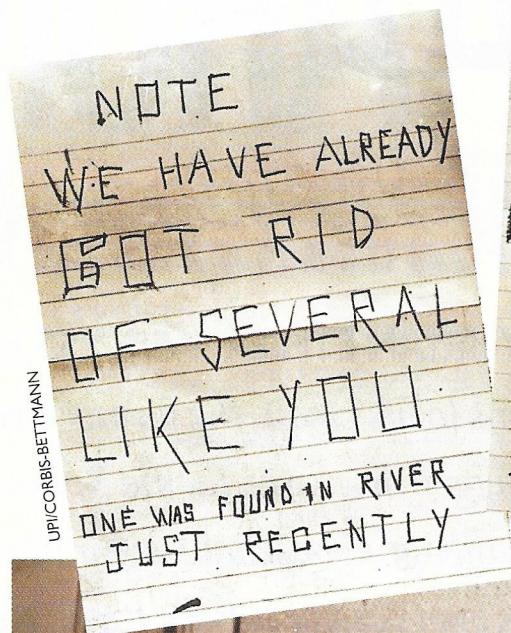
Some teammates thought Jackie too impatient with the segregationist treatment of blacks. Others admired him for his determination to take a stand against racism. Yet Robinson never saw himself as a crusader for civil rights as much as an athlete who had grown disillusioned with his chosen career. "When I look back at what I had to go through," he recalled years later, "I can only marvel at the many black players who stuck it out for years in the Jim Crow leagues because they had nowhere to go. The black press, some liberal sportswriters and even a few politicians were banging away at those Jim

Crow barriers in baseball, but I never expected the walls to come tumbling down in my lifetime. I began to wonder why I should dedicate my life to a career where the boundaries of progress were set by racial discrimination."

There were indications, however, that the tide was turning in favor of integration. On April 16, 1945, Robinson was invited along with two other Negro League stars—Marvin Williams of the Philadelphia Stars and the Cleveland Buckeyes' Sam Jethroe—to try out for the Boston Red Sox. Manager Joe Cronin was especially impressed with the Monarchs' shortstop, but still passed on the opportunity to sign him. Nevertheless, the try-

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Although many white fans eagerly sought Robinson's autograph (bottom, left), others did their best to make his life miserable by heckling, shouting insults, and making threats. Among the many pieces of hate mail Jackie received was a letter threatening his life if he played in Cincinnati's Crosley Field in May 1947 (top); Robinson not only played, he hit a home run. At the end of the '47 season, J. G. Taylor Spink, publisher of Sporting News, presented Robinson with the magazine's award as "Rookie of the Year" in the National League (bottom, right).

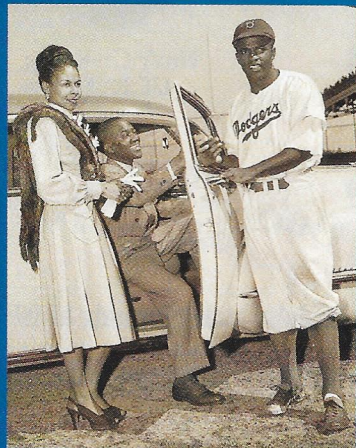


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WITH RACHEL'S SUPPORT

When Jackie Robinson met with Branch Rickey in August 1945, the Dodgers' general manager asked him if he had a girlfriend, and was pleased when Jackie told him that he was engaged to be married. As he had made abundantly clear to Robinson that day, Rickey was aware that the first black player in the major leagues would face a terrible ordeal, and he clearly believed that he should not face it alone.

In her recent book, *Jackie Robinson: An Intimate Portrait* [see page 69], Rachel Robinson—shown below with the car presented by the Dodgers to Jackie at the end of his successful rookie year—writes that it was at the start of the '47 season



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that she and Jackie first realized "how important we were to black America and how much we symbolized its hunger for opportunity and its determination to make dreams long deferred possible." If Jackie failed to make the grade as a player, or if the pressures became so great that he decided to pull out of Rickey's "noble experiment," the hopes of all the nation's blacks would be done enormous, if not irreparable harm. It was a tremendous burden to have to bear, and it belonged not only to Jackie, but also to his family.

Rachel Isum had met her future husband in 1940 while they were both students at UCLA, where she earned a degree in nursing. Engaged in 1941, they endured long separations during World War II, and in 1945, as Jackie traveled with the Kansas City Monarchs. Finally, in February 1946—just before Jackie was due to report to Daytona Beach, Florida, to try to earn a place with the Montreal Royals—they were married.

Both Jackie and Rachel had known racial bigotry and discrimination in Southern California, where they grew up, but they realized that they would face something much more difficult in the institutionalized segregation of the 1940s South. During that first trip to Florida, they experienced repeated humiliations that were, according to Rachel, "merely a foreshadowing of trials to come." As the Royals played exhibition games in other Florida cities, Jackie got a taste of how many Americans viewed his presence in professional baseball.

Following spring training, Jackie joined the Royals in Montreal, where the couple found a much more receptive environment. Although Jackie still faced racism during road trips, the Robinsons' year in Canada was fondly remembered as a respite that helped them prepare for the real test that came when he moved on to the Dodgers in 1947.

As players and fans in cities around the National League tormented Jackie, Rachel was forced to sit "through name calling, jeers, and vicious baiting in a furious silence." For his part, the Dodgers' rookie infielder, who had promised Rickey that he would turn the other cheek, "found that the most powerful form of retaliation against prejudice was his excellent play." But after the '48 season, Robinson called off his deal with Rickey. He would no longer submit quietly to insults, discrimination, and abuses. Able at last to release some of the pent-up pressure and emotion, Robinson became a more confident player; in 1949, he won the National League batting championship with a .349 average and received a trophy ironically named for Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the man who tried to keep blacks out of baseball. ★

BASEBALL'S NOBLE EXPERIMENT

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out brought Robinson to the attention of Clyde Sukeforth, the chief scout of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Convinced of Robinson's exceptional playing ability and personal determination, Sukeforth set the stage for the memorable August meeting between Robinson and Rickey.

Robinson had no illusions about the purpose of his agreement with the Dodgers. He realized that Rickey's altruism was tempered by a profit motive, and yet he admired the moral courage of the Dodger president. "Mr. Rickey knew that achieving racial equality in baseball would be terribly difficult," Robinson remembered. "There would be deep resentment, determined opposition and perhaps even racial violence. But he was convinced that he was morally right and he shrewdly sensed that making the game a truly national one would have healthy financial results." Rickey was absolutely correct on both counts.

The Dodgers' October 23, 1945, announcement that Robinson had signed a contract for six hundred dollars a month* to play for their top minor-league club at Montreal was greeted with great hostility by baseball's white establishment. Rickey was accused of being "a carpetbagger who, under the guise of helping, is in truth using the Negro for his own self-interest." Criticism even came from the Negro League owners who feared, not without reason, that Robinson's signing would lead to declining fan interest in their clubs. The Monarchs were especially angered by the signing and went so far as to threaten a lawsuit against the Dodgers for tampering with a player who was already under contract.

By mid-November the criticism became so hostile that Rickey's own family pleaded with him to abandon his crusade for fear that it would destroy his health. The Dodger president refused, speaking only of the excitement and competitive advantage that black players would bring to Brooklyn baseball, while downplaying the moral significance he attached to integration. "The greatest untapped reservoir of raw material in the history of the game is the black race," he contended. "The Negroes will make us winners for years to

*Robinson also received a bonus of \$3,500.

come and for that I will happily bear being called a 'bleeding heart' and a 'do-gooder' and all that humanitarian rot."

Robinson's first test came during the 1946 preseason, even before he debuted with the Montreal Royals. Rickey named Mississippian Clay Hopper, who had worked for him since 1929, to manage the Royals. There were reports, probably true, that Hopper begged Rickey to reconsider giving him this assignment. But Rickey's careful handling of Robinson's jump to the big leagues would seem to suggest that he believed that having a Southerner at the helm of the Montreal club would head off some dissension among the players and that he trusted Hopper to handle any situations that might arise.

Throughout the '46 season, Robinson endured racist remarks from fans and opposing players and humiliating treatment in the South. By season's end, the constant pressure and abuse had taken its toll—his hair began to gray, he suffered with chronic stomach trouble, and some thought he was on the brink of a nervous breakdown. Finding himself unable to eat or sleep, he went to a doctor, who concluded that he was suffering from stress. "You're not having a nervous breakdown," the physician told him. "You're under a lot of stress. Stay home and don't read any newspapers, and don't go to the ballpark for a week." Jackie, his wife Rachel remembered, stayed home for one day. The problem, she said, "came from his not being able to fight back." It was, as Rickey had warned him, "the cross that you must bear."

Despite the tension and distractions, Robinson managed to hit for an impressive .349 average and led the Montreal Royals to victory over the Louisville Colonels in the Little World Series. After the final game in that championship series, grateful Royals fans hoisted Robinson onto their shoulders and carried him to the locker room. Hopper shook his shortstop's hand and said: "You're a real ballplayer and a gentleman. It's been wonderful having you on the team." Robinson had made his first convert.

Because Robinson's success with Montreal had been so impressive, Rickey assumed that all the Dodgers would demand his promotion to the majors for the 1947 season. "After all," he reasoned, "Robinson could mean a pennant, and

ball players are not averse to cashing World Series checks."

To promote and protect his young black star, Rickey made some additional moves. First, in order to avoid Jim Crow restrictions, he held spring training in Havana, Cuba, instead of Florida. Next, he moved Robinson, an experienced shortstop and second baseman, to first base, where he would be spared physical contact with opposing players who might try to injure him deliberately.

Finally, Rickey scheduled a seven-game series between the Dodgers and the Royals in order to showcase Robinson's talent. "I want you to be a whirling demon against the Dodgers in this series," Rickey told Robinson. "You have to be so good that the Dodger players themselves are going to want you on their club. . . . I want you to hit that ball. I want you to get on base and run wild. Steal their pants off. Be the most conspicuous player on the field. The newspapermen from New York will send good stories back about you and help mold favorable public opinion."

Robinson more than obliged, batting .625 and stealing seven bases in the series. But instead of helping him, the performance served only to alienate him from his future teammates, many of whom were Southerners. Alabamian Dixie Walker drafted a petition stating that the players who signed would prefer to be traded than to play with a black teammate. While the team was playing exhibition games in Panama, Walker proceeded to gather signatures from Dodger teammates. Harold "Pee Wee" Reese, although a Kentuckian, refused to sign. It was a tremendously courageous act on his part because, as the team's shortstop, Reese had more to lose than any other Dodger. "If he can take my job," Reese insisted, "he's entitled to it."

When Dodger manager Leo Durocher learned of the petition, he was furious. He had asked Rickey to bring Robinson up to Brooklyn during the previous year's pennant drive. At a late-night team meeting, according to Harold Parrott, the Dodger road secretary, Durocher told Walker and the other petitioners that "I don't care if the guy is yellow or black, or if he has stripes like a zebra. I'm the manager of this team and I say he plays. What's more, I say he can make us all rich. . . . An' if any of you can't use the

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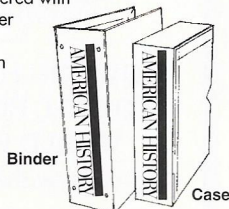
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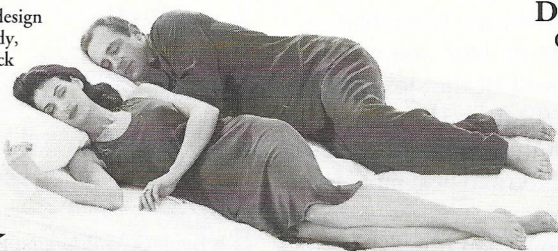
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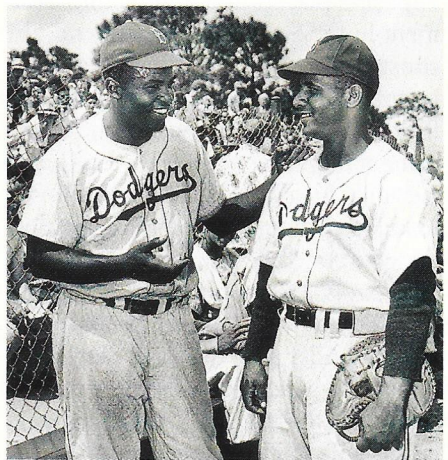


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money. I'll see that you're traded."

The rebellion squelched, Rickey announced on April 10, 1947, that Jackie Robinson had officially been signed to play first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers. The noble experiment was in full swing.

Of all the major-league cities, Brooklyn, with its ethnically diverse and racially mixed neighborhoods, was just the place to break the color barrier. Despite their reputation as "perennial losers"—since the franchise's establishment in 1883, no Brooklyn team had won a World Series—the Dodgers enjoyed an enduring love affair with their fans. This warm affinity was fostered, in part, by their cramped but colorful ballpark, Ebbets Field, located in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. The double-decked grandstand stood only along the foul lines, allowing the



BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY

By the 1948 season, Robinson was no longer the only black player in the majors. African Americans brought up by Rickey that year included catcher Roy Campanella, (above) who would be voted the National League's Most Valuable Player three times.

fans a special intimacy with the players. "If you were in a box seat," said broadcaster Red Barber, "you were so close you were practically an infielder." Aside from the patchwork collection of local advertisements in left field; the large, black scoreboard in right; and the tone-deaf "Dodger Symphony Band" that roamed the grandstand, nothing came between the Dodgers and their die-hard fans.

When Robinson made his first appearance as a Dodger on April 15, 1947,

*Walker, one of a handful of players who asked to be traded, eventually went to the Pittsburgh Pirates, but not until after the '47 season. Durocher, himself, was suspended from baseball before the '47 season and never had the opportunity to manage Robinson.

more than 26,000 fans packed Ebbets Field; reportedly some 14,000 of those were African Americans. The afternoon was cold and rainy, and Robinson went hitless. Nonetheless, the sight of a black man on a major-league diamond during a regular season game moved the crowd so deeply that they cheered the Dodgers on to a 5-3 victory over the Boston Braves. Every move the 28-year-old rookie made seemed to be greeted with the chant: "Jackie! Jackie! Jackie!" It seemed as if baseball had finally shed its three-quarters of a century of hypocrisy to become truly deserving of the title "national pastime."

When the Philadelphia Phillies arrived in Brooklyn a week later, however, all hopes that integration would come peacefully were shattered. In one of the lowest moments ever in baseball history, the Phillies, led by their Southern manager, Ben Chapman, launched a tirade of racial epithets during the pregame batting practice. And the jeering did not let up throughout the entire three-game series.

Two weeks later, when the Dodgers traveled to the so-called "City of Brotherly Love," Chapman and his Phillies picked up where they had left off, warning the Dodger players that they would contract diseases if they touched Robinson and indulging in even more personal racial slurs. Robinson's less-than-stellar hitting in the series only added to the Phillies' contention that he did not belong in the majors and was a ploy to attract blacks to Dodger games and make more money for Rickey.

After the second game of the series, angry Dodger fans launched a full-scale protest with the National League's president, Ford Frick, who responded by ordering Chapman and the Phillies to stop their verbal assault immediately. In fact, Chapman probably would have lost his job over the incident, if Robinson had not agreed to pose with him for a conciliatory newspaper photograph. Under duress, the Phillies' manager agreed to stand next to the Dodger rookie. "Ben extended his hand," Harold Parrott recalled, "smiling broadly as if they had been buddy-buddy for a lifetime. Robinson reached out and grasped it. The flicker of a smile crept across his face as the photographer snapped away, getting several shots."

Years later Robinson admitted that the incessant abuse during those games with

ing point. As he described it: "For one wild and rage-crazed minute I thought, 'To hell with Mr. Rickey's noble experiment. It's clear that it won't succeed. . . . What a glorious, cleansing thing it would be to let go.' To hell with the image of the patient black freak I was supposed to create. I could throw down my bat, stride over to the Phillies dugout, grab one of those white sons of bitches and smash his teeth in with my despised black fist. Then I could walk away from it and I'd never become a sports star. But my son could tell his son some day what his daddy could have been if he hadn't been too much of a man."

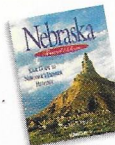
The experience with the Phillies revealed the shocking severity of the racism that existed in baseball. At the same time, however, Robinson's tremendous restraint in the face of such ugly prejudice served to rally his teammates around him and the cause of integration. Eddie Stanky, one of those who had signed the petition against Robinson joining the team, became so angered by the Phillies' relentless abuse that he challenged them to "yell at somebody who can answer back." Soon after, before a game in Cincinnati, the Reds' players taunted Pee Wee Reese about playing with a black teammate. The Dodger shortstop walked over to Robinson and, in a firm show of support, placed his arm around the first baseman's shoulders.

As the season unfolded, Dodger support for Robinson strengthened in response to the admirable way he handled all the adversity. Opposing pitchers threw at his head and ribs, while infielders would spit in his face if he was involved in a close play on the base paths. And the hate mail was unending. But through it all, Robinson persevered. He even managed to keep a sense of humor. Before one game in Cincinnati, when the Dodgers learned that their first baseman's life had been threatened, one teammate suggested that all the players wear Robinson's uniform number "42" on their backs to confuse the assailant. "Okay with me," responded the rookie. "Paint your faces black and run pigeon-toed too!"

Even the white baseball establishment began to embrace the Dodger infielder. In May of 1947, when Ford Frick learned of the St. Louis Cardinals' intention to instigate a league-wide strike by walking off



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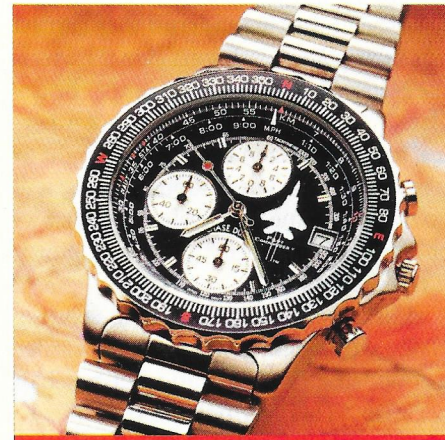
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After his baseball career ended, Robinson became even more deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, supporting the work of leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (above). Jackie and his family took part in the 1963 March on Washington that featured King's stirring "I Have a Dream" speech.

the ball diamond in a scheduled game against the integrated Dodgers, he vowed to suspend the ringleaders if they carried out their plan. "... I don't care if I wreck the National League for five years," he declared. "This is the United States of America, and one citizen has as much right to play as another. The National League will go down the line with Robinson whatever the consequence." The conspiracy died on the spot.

When the season ended, the *Sporting News*, which had gone on record earlier as opposing the integration of baseball because "There is not a single Negro player with major league possibilities," named Robinson the National League's "Rookie of the Year" for his impressive performance that season—29 stolen bases, 12 home runs, 42 successful bunt hits, and a .297 batting average.

Those efforts helped the Dodgers to capture a pennant, and on September 23, jubilant Brooklyn fans cheered their first baseman with a "Jackie Robinson Day" at Ebbets Field. In addition to a new car and other gifts, Robinson received tributes for his contribution to racial equality. Song-and-dance man Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, one of the guest speakers, told the crowd: "I'm 69 years old but never thought I'd live

to see the day when I'd stand face-to-face with Ty Cobb in Technicolor."

The Dodgers forced the New York Yankees to a seventh and deciding game in the World Series. And when all was said and done, no amount of hate mail or verbal and psychological abuse could tarnish the indisputable fact that Jackie Robinson was an exceptional baseball player. He belonged in the major leagues.

Robinson's greatest accomplishment, however, was the inspiration that he provided for other African Americans, both in and out of baseball. Thousands of blacks came to watch him play, setting new attendance records in such cities as Chicago and Pittsburgh. Even in St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia, where the opposing teams were the most hostile toward the Dodger rookie, black fans would arrive on chartered buses called "Jackie Robinson Specials," having traveled hundreds of miles just to see him play.

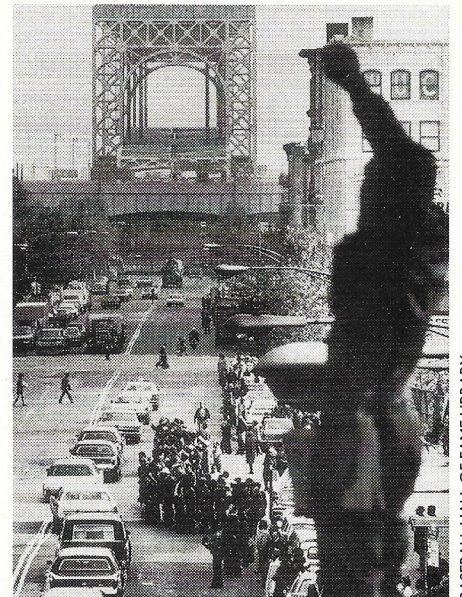
Ed Charles, a black youngster from the Deep South who went on to play in the major leagues himself, remembered the thrill of seeing his childhood hero for the first time. "I sat in the segregated section of the ball park and watched Jackie," he said. "And I finally believed what I read in the papers—that one of us had made it. When the game was over we kids followed Jackie to the train station. When the train pulled out, we ran down the tracks listening for the sounds as far as we could. And when we couldn't hear it any longer, we stopped and put our ears to the track so we could feel the vibrations of that train carrying

Jackie Robinson. We wanted to be part of him as long as we could."

Indeed, Robinson had jolted the national consciousness in a profound way. Until 1947 all of baseball's heroes had been white men. Suddenly, there was a black baseball star who could hit, bunt, steal, and field with the best of them. His style of play was nothing new in the Negro Leagues, but in the white majors, it was innovative and exciting. Robinson made things happen on the base paths. If he got on first, he stole second. If he could not steal third, he would distract the pitcher by dancing off second in order to advance. And then he would steal home. The name of the game was to score runs without a hit, something quite different from the "power hitting" strategy that had characterized major-league baseball. During the next decade, this new style of play would become known as "Dodger Baseball."

Before the '47 season was over, Branch Rickey had signed 16 additional Negro Leaguers, including catcher and future three-time "Most Valuable Player" Roy Campanella; pitcher Don Newcombe, who in 1956 would win 27 games; and second baseman Jim Gilliam, like Robinson always a threat to steal a base. Togeth-

Jackie Robinson's death in October 1972 deeply affected African Americans and baseball fans across the country. As his funeral cortege made its way to his final resting place in Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, the camera captured one mourner, shown in the foreground, offering Robinson a black-power salute.



BASEBALL HALL OF FAME LIBRARY

er with Robinson and such white stars as Pee Wee Reese, Edwin "Duke" Snider, Gil Hodges, and Carl Erskine, these men would form the nucleus of a team that would capture six pennants and, at long last, in 1955, a world championship, before the Dodgers left Brooklyn for the West Coast at the end of the 1957 season. By 1959, every team in major-league baseball was integrated, one of every five players being of African-American descent.

When Rickey talked of trading Robinson to the New York Giants after the '56 season, the pioneering ballplayer chose to retire at the age of 38. His career totals, which included 1,518 hits, more than 200 stolen bases, and a lifetime batting average of .311, earned him a place in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962, the first African American so honored. He continued to fight actively for civil rights long after his baseball career had ended, supporting Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his call for the peaceful integration of American society.

Despite his tremendous accomplishments on and off the baseball field, Jackie Robinson, with characteristic humility, never gave himself much credit. A year before his untimely death in 1972, he reflected on his struggle to break baseball's color barrier. "I was proud," Robinson admitted, "yet I was uneasy. Proud to be in the hurricane eye of a significant breakthrough and to be used to prove that a sport can't be called 'national' if blacks are barred from it. But uneasy because I knew that I was still a black man in a white world. And so I continue to ask myself, 'what have I really done for my people?'"

The answer was evident to everyone but him; for by appealing to the moral conscience of the nation, Jackie Robinson had given a young generation of blacks a chance at the "American Dream" and in the process taught many white Americans to respect others regardless of the color of their skin. ★

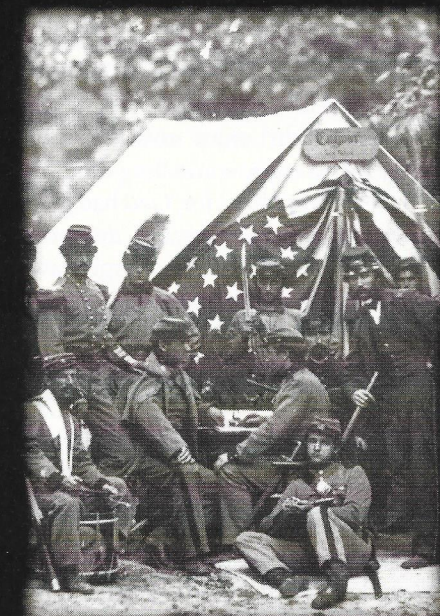
William Kashatus is a school teacher and free lance writer who lives in Philadelphia.



For an article about the stars of the Negro Leagues see "Just How Good Were They?" by John B. Holway at <http://www.thehistorynet.com>

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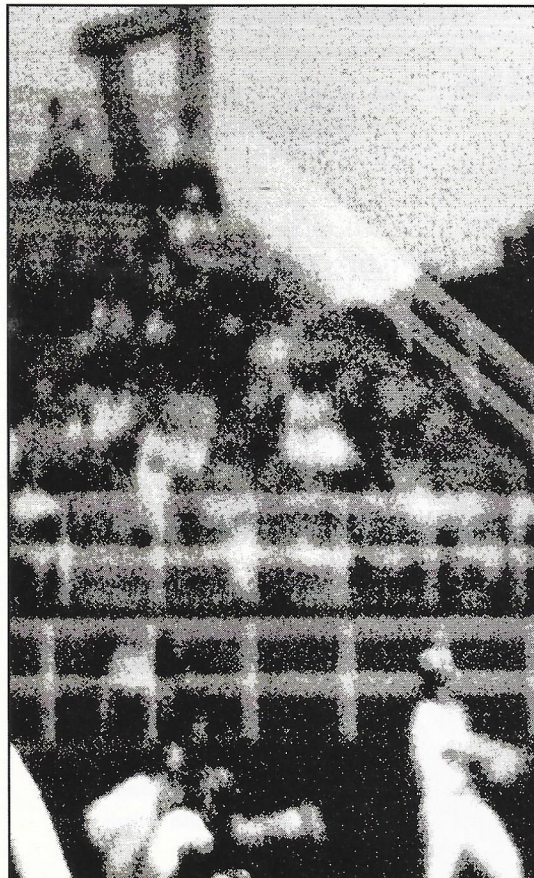


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