Robinson to King: Role model for a role model

By William C. Kashatus

On Monday, we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for his nonviolent approach to integration. We celebrate his yearning for justice in the world, the depth of his spiritual commitment to civil rights, and his extraordinary patience in the face of overwhelming hostility — qualities that made him the most remarkable civil rights leader in the history of our nation.

Even the greatest leaders have role models. So, too, did Dr. King.

Shortly before his death in 1968, Dr. King said, "Jackie Robinson made my success possible. Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did."

Nearly a decade before the Montgomery bus boycott that catapulted Dr. King into the national spotlight, Jackie Robinson embarked on a noble experiment to break baseball's color barrier. By so doing, he became the most widely admired figure among African Americans.

Signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 as the first black to play in the major leagues, Robinson understood that he would be forced to endure verbal as well as physical abuse for his race and that if he retaliated even once, he would jeopardize the process of integration. Unlike King, whose calm, pacifist nature allowed him to turn the other cheek, Robinson often struggled with the human instinct to fight back in the face of unrelenting bigotry.

Opposing pitchers threw at his head, infielders would spit in his face on 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.

Of course, Robinson never did retaliate with his fists. He let his hitting, fielding and base-stealing prove his point. By the end of the '47 season, his .297 average, 12 home runs and 29 stolen bases earned him the Rookie of the Year award. A 10-year, Hall-of-Fame career followed.

Just as important to the success of that noble experiment was the support of whites, including: Dodger president Branch Rickey, who was fiercely committed to integration; teammates like Pee Wee Reese and Ralph Branca, who rallied behind Robinson despite threats against their own lives, and white fans from across the nation who launched a full-scale protest with the commissioner's office when they learned of his treatment by the Phillies. Thus, Robinson's success made him the living symbol of racial integration for an entire generation of Americans, *both* black and white.

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"Jackie Robinson made my success possible. Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did," Dr. King said in 1968.

Had he done nothing else with his life after 1947, Jackie Robinson could have easily rested on his laurels as an American legend. But he didn't. Instead he continued to help define the civil rights movement, in sometimes controversial ways. An outspoken advocate of self-help, he urged blacks to "become producers, manufacturers, creators of businesses and providers of jobs," helping to found black-run enterprises that would allow African Americans to establish an economic base within mainstream America.

Once again, he assumed the role of trailblazer by becoming a ranking executive in Chock Full 'o Nuts, a white-owned fast-food chain, with a workforce that was 80 percent black.

At the same time, Robinson was severely criticized by blacks for supporting Richard M. Nixon for president. He felt that it was urgent to have a civil rights presence in both political parties and that Dr. King, as a matter of necessity, had to keep himself above the political fray.

No less controversial were his open criticism of the Black Panthers' militancy and his public disagreement with King's attempt to link the war in Vietnam with the struggle against racism at home.

Although these views were extremely unpopular among African Americans, they reflected Robinson's fundamental belief that segregation was destructive for *both* whites and blacks.

During his last years of life, Jackie Robinson, nearly blind from diabetes, was often alienated from civil rights leaders and suffered the tragic death of his eldest son.

Yet he continued to give, believing that "a life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives. . . . That is why I have devoted my life to service.

"I don't like to be in debt. And I owe — till every man can rent and lease and buy according to his money and desires; until every child can have an equal opportunity in youth and manhood; until hunger is not only immoral but illegal; until hatred is recognized as a disease, a scourge, an epidemic, and treated as such; until racism and sexism and narcotics are conquered, and until every man can vote and any man can be elected if he qualifies."

Fifty years after Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier, I can't help but wonder just how much we have learned from his example. While he tried to teach us that racial interdependence can be one of America's greatest virtues, we continue to view it as an obstacle to be overcome.

Too often, we confine our discussions about race relations in America to the "problems" blacks and whites pose for each other, rather than considering what such a stifling perspective tells us about ourselves.

Like Dr. King, Jackie Robinson died clinging to a dream of integration and peace and nonviolence.

Either we learn the empathy and compassion for each other that they tried to teach us, or we will surely suffer a fate worse than any humankind has ever known.

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