

Robinson created a whole new ballgame



SINCE Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in 1947, Major League Baseball has honored him by enshrining

him in the Hall of Fame, naming the "Rookie of the Year" award after him, and retiring his uniform, No. 42.

Now it can do more to honor his example by demanding that many of today's star players clean up their boorish behavior.

Sixty years ago, on April 15, 1947, the 28-year-old African-American rookie scored the winning run as he helped the Brooklyn Dodgers to a 5-3 victory over the Boston Braves. He also embarked on a painful odyssey that pioneered the modern civil-rights movement and gave Major League Baseball a new standard of heroism.

Robinson's contribution went far beyond baseball. In 1947, segregation was the most distinguishing characteristic of American race relations.

Determined to achieve political and social equality, many blacks migrated to northern cities where they found better jobs and schooling. These northern blacks laid the foundations of the civil-rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. Jackie Robinson was their hero.

He challenged the "gentlemen's agreement" of the owners that had long prevented the entry of blacks into the game.

Robinson understood that he would be forced to endure verbal and physical abuse because of his race. He also knew that if he retaliated even once, he would jeopardize the process of integration.

He was, by nature, a combative individual, so he had to struggle to restrain himself in the face of unrelenting provocation. Opposing pitchers threw at his head, infielders spit in his face on the base paths, he re-

COMMENTARY

WILLIAM C.
KASHATUS

ceived death threats and endured racial slurs, and in one of the lowest moments in baseball history, the Philadelphia Phillies humiliated Robinson by pointing their bats at him and making gunshot sounds.

"What a glorious cleansing thing it would be to grab one of those white (bigots) and smash his teeth in with my despised black fist," Robinson once meditated. "Then I could walk away from baseball and never become a star. But my son could tell his son what his daddy could have been if he hadn't been too much of a man."

But Robinson did respond like a "man." He let his hitting, fielding and base stealing prove his point. At the end of the 1947 season, his .297 batting average, 12 home runs and 29 stolen bases earned him the first Rookie of the Year Award.

He played with great success for nine more years, leading the Dodgers to several National League pennants and a World Series championship in 1955.

Robinson's career was honored by baseball with his Hall of Fame induction in 1962.

Today, baseball suffers an image problem because of the boorish behavior of its multimillionaire stars. They could use a lesson from Robinson. Some of today's players have serious anger-management problems.

Among the most recent cases are Cincinnati Reds relief pitcher Danny Graves, who in May 2005 flipped the hometown fans an obscene gesture for booing him after giving up five runs in the ninth inning to the Cleveland Indians; Phillies' pitcher Brett Myers and Orioles hurler Scott Erickson, who were accused of assaulting their wives,

and Ugueth Urbina, a former relief pitcher with the Marlins, Tigers and Phillies, who was recently sentenced to 14 years in jail after he attacked five workers on his Venezuelan estate with a machete.

If today's players don't respect themselves, they can at least respect the game.

Robinson, at age 38, retired from baseball rather than accept a trade to the Dodgers' archrival New York Giants.

Today, baseball has Roger Clemens, Greg Maddux and Sammy Sosa, who shamelessly float from team to team, hanging on for one more paycheck or to pad their statistical totals. Or worse, there is Barry Bonds, 41, who faces numerous allegations of steroid use. He is closing in on achieving the record 755 home runs set by Hank Aaron but fans will never regard Bonds' achievement as legitimate.

Why do today's so-called superstars act like overgrown teenagers? Probably because they define their existence by the success with which they play a child's game. They have nothing else, except baseball.

Had Jackie Robinson done nothing else with his life after 1947, he still would have been a successful man.

Instead, he continued to help define the civil-rights movement. An outspoken advocate of self help, he urged blacks to become producers, manufacturers, creators of businesses and providers of jobs. He also founded black-run enterprises.

Baseball was only a vehicle for Robinson. Civil rights was the goal. In the process, he taught our society to respect others regardless of skin color.

I only wish there were more players with that same kind of integrity today.

William C. Kashatus is a writer for the History News Service. His most recent book is "Money Pitcher: The Tragedy of Indian Assimilation."