

# Reflections on Jackie Robinson

*By Walter L. Faison, Jr.*

When I was approached about submitting an article, I immediately reflected upon my father. I grew up in the small, rural, eastern North Carolina town of Warsaw. My dad was a basketball coach but shared my love of the game of baseball. Mention a ball and a bat, and I was there, whether it was stick ball, rolling bat, or my beloved baseball.

I wasn't selected for a team at tryouts because of an unwritten rule, "not more than one Black kid per team." As a youngster, that was too much for me to accept, so I worked tirelessly on my game so that I wouldn't dare be denied again. The next year, my coach broke the cardinal rule...he had two Black players on his team. Michael played second base, and I played first. Along with that came the demeaning remarks, gestures, and bad calls from the umpires. Even though that was a lot for a 10-year-old to absorb, I was beginning to understand what had transpired just one year before.



My dad sat me down, gave me "the talk," and told me about this man that he used to "watch" on the radio. Yes, I said, "watch." You can't truly call yourself a baseball fan if you haven't listened to a game broadcasted live on the radio. Your imagination brings every detail to life and makes you feel like you are right there on the field. Jackie Robinson broke the color line, meaning that he was credited with being the first Black player to play in the major leagues when he made his debut as a Brooklyn Dodger against the Boston Braves at Ebbets Field in what was called the No-Experiment. He faced all types of prejudices, discrimination, and considerable racial abuse from teammates and opponents on a daily basis...but he kept playing. He was spat upon...but he kept playing. He was not

allowed to eat dinner with his teammates...but he kept playing. Jackie let his game do the talking. My father used the Jackie Robinson story to teach me the importance of not listening to the nay-sayers and letting my performance on the field, in the classroom, and in life do the speaking for me. My father also used Jackie's experiences to teach me the importance of "character." "How you carry yourself on and off the field is more important than your batting average." "The most important possession, the richest treasure that a man has, is his personal dignity." "I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me...All I ask is that you respect me as a human being." These were Robinson's quotes that my father would preach to me, and then he would say, "keep playing."

Jackie Robinson was born January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia. His mother soon moved the family to Pasadena, California. Jackie grew up a four-sport athlete. He played football, basketball, baseball, and ran track. He won an NCAA track broad jump title and played semi-pro football. Mr. Robinson was drafted into the Army in 1942 where he earned the rank of second lieutenant. After his military service, Jackie played Negro League baseball with the Kansas City Monarchs. He and Rachel Isum, a nursing student that he had met at UCLA, married in 1946, and they would later have three children. The very next year, 1947, Jackie was brought in to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and he rewarded them by winning Rookie of the Year honors. His career in baseball was stellar. In addition to 1947 Rookie of the Year

honors, Jackie was named National League MVP in 1949. With his lifetime batting average of .311, 137 home runs, 1518 hits, 734 RBIs, and 197 stolen bases, he led the Dodgers to six league championships and one World Series title in 1955. He was an absolute terror as a base runner; he unnerved opposing pitchers and terrorized infielders who had to prevent him from stealing bases. Jackie Robinson successfully stole home 20 times in 32 attempts. That would be a 63% success rate. He even managed to do it in a World Series.



Jackie's life after baseball is what many African Americans celebrate. We were proud that he was the first Black in the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown (1962). We saluted his inclusion in the Black Heritage series (1982). Not only was he the first Black athlete in the stamp series, but also he was the first identifiable baseball player on a U.S. postage stamp and one of the first identifiable athletes of any race on a U.S. stamp issue. Of course, we celebrated the posthumous awarding of the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1984. We are most proud that he did not rest on his laurels. He continued his life as a civil rights activist. "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

"There's not an American in this country free until every one of us is free." He joined efforts with Martin Luther King, Jr. as the honorary chairman of the Youth March for Integrated Schools in 1958 and became intimately involved in King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He fell out of sorts with other community organizers and the NAACP, but he continued to fight for equal footing as a writer, organizer, speaker, businessman, and political supporter without the natural advantages he enjoyed as an athlete.

In one of the many conversations that I enjoyed with famed Kansas City Monarch, Buck O'Neil, I learned about Jackie the man, the man with the talent and temperament to break the color barrier. Buck absolutely admired Jackie, but Buck would be quick to tell you that Jackie was far from the best. On any given Sunday afternoon, a Negro League player would do something that no one thought was humanly possible. The Negro Leagues produced the best and most colorful baseball players. Buck would go on to say that "they knew what they were doing when they chose Jackie. He was the right man at the right time."



Here's something to ponder as we celebrate what would have been Jackie Robinson's 100th birthday. He once said while writing his autobiography titled *I Never Had It Made*, "There I was, the Black grandson of a slave, the son of a Black sharecropper, part of a historic occasion, a symbolic hero to my people. The air was sparkling. The sunlight was warm. The band struck up the national anthem. The flag billowed in the wind. It should have been a glorious moment for me. But as I write these words now, I cannot stand and sing the National Anthem. In 1972, in 1947, at my birth in 1919, I know that I never made it. I have learned that I remain Black in a White world." Injustices and inequalities still manifest themselves in 2019.

Thanks to my dad, Walter Sr., and Buck O'Neil for imparting the legacy and tutelage of Number 42. Lessons Learned!