# Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball

Have you ever seen a bully pick on a classmate because they are different? Maybe they have different skin, hair, or eye color. Maybe they sound different and speak with an accent, a lisp, or perhaps a stutter. Maybe they celebrate different religious holidays and family traditions.

Being different from one another doesn't make one person better than the other. It's what makes each of us unique! After all, school would be pretty boring if we all looked the same way, talked the same way, and did the same things. This probably seems obvious to you now, but this wasn't always the case for many people living in America a long time ago.

As we discussed in the last lesson, the Union's victory in the Civil War and the passage of the 13th Amendment freed blacks in America from the bondage of slavery. However, throughout the Reconstruction-era, which was the period after the Civil War had ended, Americans were divided over how to integrate free blacks into American society.

Despite what the Constitution said, tragically, many white Americans, particularly those who supported the Confederacy in the southern United States, still thought that blacks were second-class citizens – all because of the color of their skin.

This holdover view gave rise to the Ku Klux Klan, a violent secret society that terrorized black communities and disrupted political efforts to further their equality, and toward the end of the 19th century, the enforcement of Jim Crow laws. *[Editor's note: black codes predated the Jim Crow laws, which also restricted the freedom of blacks and ensured they could still be exploited for cheap labor.]*[1] These oppressive state and local laws segregated, or separated, Americans based on their skin color.

Known collectively as the Jim Crow laws, these laws were designed to limit opportunities for blacks and to keep them separate from white Americans. Beginning in the 1890s, and with the 1896 "separate but equal" ruling in the Plessy v. Ferguson case, these laws came to dominate daily life in the South.[2]

Blacks were forced to ride in separate sections of buses and trains, use different water fountains and restrooms, reside in different neighborhoods, and attend different schools. Public places, from pools and libraries to theaters and restaurants, to hospitals and elderly homes, were segregated. Marriage was also segregated as blacks and whites weren't allowed to marry

each other or live together in many states in the South.[3] Signs on walls, windows, and doors read "Whites Only" and "Colored" and constantly reminded people of these inhumane laws.[4]

As blacks in the South faced daily discrimination, life was not easy under the Jim Crow laws. Even for blacks who did not live in the southern states, where the Jim Crow laws were most brutal, life was still challenging. Imagine what it would have been like dealing with prejudice from your neighbors and peers, or seeing friends, family, or people like you suffering because of what they look like.

Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in Major League Baseball in the modern era, was born during this dangerous time on January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia. Shortly after Jackie was born, his father abandoned the family and his mother moved Jackie and his four older siblings to Pasadena, California, where she raised them on her own as a single mother.[5]

Jackie and his family were poor, and as the only black family living on their block, faced prejudice and exclusion because of the color of their skin.[6] Yet despite resistance, Jackie worked hard and became an exceptional athlete, playing on his high school's varsity baseball, basketball, football, and track teams.[7] If you play sports, whether on a team or on the field at recess, you know that being an athlete requires dedication, courage, discipline, selflessness, and physical and mental toughness. Jackie developed all of these qualities throughout his life.

He later went to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he continued to run track and play baseball, basketball, and football. Jackie was so amazingly gifted as an athlete that he became the first Bruin to earn varsity letters in four sports at the university. He even won the NCAA long jump championship in 1940 and was awarded a spot on the All-American football team in 1941.[8]

After leaving college because of financial challenges, Jackie spent two years playing semi-professional football for integrated teams, and then served in the U.S. Army, where he was promoted to second lieutenant.[9] As we've learned from our earlier lessons about our American heroes, being a soldier also requires a lot of determination, bravery, strength, and sacrifice, qualities that Jackie exemplified.

During his time in the Army, Jackie continued to experience discrimination, as he was assigned to segregated units in Kansas and then Texas. In 1944, Jackie was honorably discharged from the Army after taking a stand against the Jim Crow laws of the South and refusing to sit in the back of a segregated bus at Fort Hood in Texas.[10]

But for Jackie, this was just the beginning of his fight for equality.

While Jackie was playing baseball for the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro League in 1945, Brooklyn Dodgers executive Branch Rickey was searching for a black player with both talent and guts to join Major League Baseball, which at the time, unofficially banned black players.[11] There had not been a black player in the major leagues since 1889.[12]

Rickey was looking for a player to integrate MLB who would "turn the other cheek" when facing taunts, abuse, and threats. While Rickey was interviewing Jackie for the job in August 1945, Robinson reportedly asked, "Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" Rickey is said to have replied that he was looking for someone "with guts enough not to fight back."[13]

Jackie got the job and played for the Dodgers' farm team, the Montreal Royals, in 1946. He did so well that he was called up to the Dodgers the next season.

On April 15, 1947, Jackie made his National League debut as a first baseman for the Brooklyn Dodgers and broke the color barrier in Major League Baseball.[14] Jackie was on the receiving end of taunts, slurs, death threats, and hate mail, and while traveling with the team, had to navigate segregation laws. But Jackie endured and earned the respect of supporters, friends, and teammates, such as Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese. *[Editor's note: The story about Reese putting his arm around Robinson has a lot of historical and factual discrepancies and for that reason was omitted.]*

And Jackie's talent spoke for itself. In his rookie season, Jackie hit 12 home runs, had a .297 batting average, led the league with 29 steals, and was named the inaugural Rookie of the Year.[15] In 1949, he became the first black player to win the National League Most Valuable Player Award, was an All-Star every year from 1949-1954, and led the Brooklyn Dodgers to victory in the 1955 World Series against the New York Yankees.[16]

After winning the World Series, Jackie retired and was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962. As Roger Craig, Jackie's former Dodger teammate said, "I think a lot of people think he got in the Hall of Fame because he was the first."

However, Jackie's induction was not a recognition of his skin color, but of his talent. As Craig confirmed, "He was a great, great ballplayer. He could've done anything he wanted to."[17]

After Jackie retired, he worked as a sportscaster and the Vice President of Personnel for the Chock full O'Nuts coffee company, established the Jackie Robinson Construction Company to build low-income housing for families, and remained active in advancing equality for blacks in America.[18]

"Jackie Robinson made my success possible," said Civil Rights leader Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

"Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did." [19]

In 1972, at the age of 53, Jackie died from a heart attack and was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Reagan in 1984 and the Congressional Gold Medal in 2005.

To honor the barriers that Jackie broke down, in 1997, his number was retired by all big-league teams. Every April 15, the anniversary of Jackie's first game in the Major Leagues, is now known as Jackie Robinson Day, and all players and personnel wear his number 42 on their jerseys.[20]

Jackie Robinson's courage changed the course of history and today, his legacy still lives on. Just like Jackie Robinson, with courage, determination, and hard work, you too can make positive change happen in your school, your neighborhood, and even throughout America.

# Footnotes


1. https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/black-codes
2. https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedom-riders-jim-crow-laws/
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