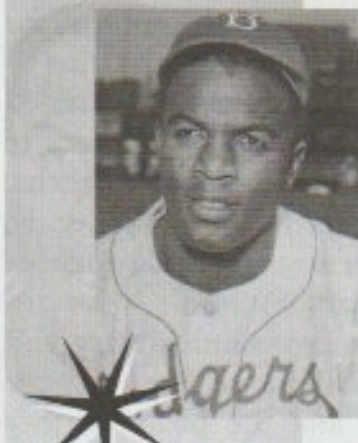


## He Broke the Color Barrier!

### Jackie Robinson



**Imagine this:** You are a young black man who wants to play professional baseball, but it's 1944 and there are no African Americans playing on any of the major league teams. So what do you do?

Your name is Jackie Robinson, and you join the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League team, and refuse to give up your dream to play professional baseball. In 1945 Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, invites you to join the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers top minor league team because he believes it's time to end segregation in baseball and he thinks you're just the man to do it. On April 15, 1947, when the major league season opens,

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"The first freedom for all people is freedom of choice."

—Jackie Robinson  
(1919–1972)



## They Stood Alone!

you are there in the Dodger lineup, the first African American to play baseball for a major league team.

Jackie was born January 31, 1919, in a small farmhouse in Cairo, Georgia, the youngest of five children, the grandson of a slave, and the son of a sharecropper.

When Jackie was only six months old, his father took off for Florida and was never heard from again. Without his father to work the farm, Jackie and his family had to leave the farm.

In 1920 in an effort to escape the discrimination problems of the Deep South, Jackie's mother moved her family to Pasadena, California, where they shared a small apartment with his uncle. His mother took in washing to pay her way, and Jackie often ate day-old-bread dipped in milk and sugar for supper.

Somehow his mother managed to save a little money, and a welfare agency helped her buy a small house. They were the only black family on their street, and the prejudice they encountered only strengthened their family bond.

Some of their white neighbors called the children names and even started a petition to get the family thrown out of the neighborhood, but Jackie's mother stood her ground and refused to let their racial taunts drive her and her family away.

His mother was up before dawn six days a week, spent a full day cleaning other people's houses, and then came home exhausted, but she was always there to try to keep her children on track. She expected them to do well in school, and although Jackie was a good student, his heart was always more into sports and games than in his schoolwork.

After school, he hauled junk, shined shoes, and sold newspapers to make money. He also hung out with a local gang, the Pepper Street gang, and was headed for trouble until two men changed his life.

The first was Carl Anderson, a local mechanic who took an

interest in him and convinced him that if he continued with the gang, he would end up hurting his mother as well as himself.

The other man was the pastor of his church, Reverend Carl Downs, who became his friend and counselor and helped channel his energy into sports.

Jackie played all sports and he played them well. He won the city championship the first time he took up table tennis, and he became a four-sport star at his high school—earning letters in football, track, baseball, and basketball.

At Pasadena Junior College in 1938 he set a new broad jump record in the morning, and then in the afternoon he changed into his baseball uniform. Playing shortstop, he helped his team win the league championship.

His football and basketball teams also won league titles, and college coaches rushed to offer him athletic scholarships.

Jackie chose the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), which was close to his home. Football was his first love in those days, and he played halfback and safety on UCLA's unbeaten 1939 team.

After the season ended, he moved on to basketball, track, and baseball and became the university's first student to earn varsity letters in four sports.

In the spring of 1941 he quit school because he wanted to begin earning money to help his mother, and he wasn't sure if a college degree would really help a black man get a good job.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and six months later Jackie received his draft notice to serve his country.

The army sent him to Fort Riley, Kansas, where he completed his basic training, organized a baseball team, and applied for Officer Candidate School (OCS). But the army was not accepting black officer candidates.

## *They Stood Alone!*

Jackie complained to Joe Louis, the world heavyweight boxing champion, who also happened to be at Fort Riley at the time. Soon after that, Jackie's orders for OCS came through, and he graduated in 1943 as a second lieutenant.

After his discharge from the army in 1944, he wanted to play baseball, but at that time, there were no African Americans playing on any of the major league teams.

He joined the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro League team where he continued to encounter as much racial discrimination as in the army. Many hotels and restaurants refused to serve black people, so he and his teammates often slept and ate on the bus.

But in New York, one man was planning to break baseball's color barrier. Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, had decided it was time to end segregation in baseball.

Rickey knew that the first black Dodger would be abused by fans and players alike, so the man would have to be more than just a great baseball player. He would have to be an exceptional human being.

In 1945 Rickey decided that Jackie was that man! Rickey gave Jackie examples of insults he might hear and then told him he needed a player "with the guts not to fight back."

Jackie knew it would be hard, but he accepted the challenge because he hoped he could help open doors for all black men everywhere.

Jackie joined the all-white Montreal Royals, the Dodgers' top minor league team and, though taunted by fans, he never lost his cool. Rickey decided it was time to move Jackie up to the major leagues.

April 15, 1947, was a historic day for major league baseball and for the entire nation. When the major league season opened that day, Jackie was there in the Dodger lineup, the first African American to play baseball for a major league team.

In the beginning, his white teammates tried to ignore him, but as the fans and opposing players abused Jackie with cat-calls and racial taunts, his teammates united behind him.

In one incident, while fans harassed Robinson from the stands, Dodgers shortstop and team captain Pee Wee Reese walked over and put his arm around Robinson, a gesture that has become legendary in baseball history.<sup>44</sup>

And in 1950 when the Dodgers were in Cincinnati to play the Reds, there was even a death threat addressed to Jackie and two other players, warning them not to show up for that day's game. Two secret service men were assigned to each of the three athletes, and everyone played.<sup>45</sup>

Jackie rose above the harassment and answered the abuse with his bat and his feet. His .297 batting average helped the Dodgers win the National League pennant. He led the National League in stolen bases and was named Rookie of the Year. Then in 1949 he was named the league's Most Valuable Player (MVP) and also starred in a movie about his life.

In his ten seasons with the Dodgers, they won six National League pennants.

In 1957 he retired from baseball with an impressive career batting average of .311, and in 1962 he was voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame, the first black man to receive baseball's highest honor. In 1972 the Dodgers retired his uniform number 42.

His courageous example paved the way for the full integration of major league baseball in the years that followed. Over the course of the 1960s, twelve of the sixteen baseball teams had black players, with blacks gaining acceptance into basketball and football as well.

Jackie Robinson's life and legacy will be remembered as one of the most important in American history, and in 1997,

## **They Stood Alone!**

the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of his breaking the Major League Baseball's color barrier.

Jackie died in 1972 at age fifty-three from heart problems and complications from diabetes. At his funeral, Reverend Jesse Jackson said, "No grave can hold that body down because it belongs to the ages!"<sup>46</sup>

Branch Rickey had chosen well. Jackie Robinson was not only a great ballplayer, but he was also a great human being!