

A GENTLEMANLY TRAILBLAZER: JACKIE ROBINSON AND THE “COLOR” BARRIER

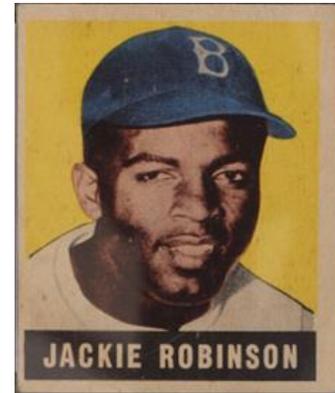
Being first is never easy. Few aspire to be trailblazers. **Jackie Robinson** may be among the most unlikely people to have done so. In the 1940's, Major League Baseball was deeply segregated, and few fans seemed to notice. World War II helped to change that, as troops fought side by side and a new generation called into question long standing practices. But baseball was a **tough egg** to crack. Enter **Branch Rickey** (1881-1965) onto the baseball diamond. He was involved with baseball as a player, coach, manager, and owner for more than **sixty** years. When he worked for the St. Louis Cardinals, it troubled him to see the policy barring blacks from grandstand seating. But one day, he would have both the position and the will to **take a chance**. Rickey was a **devout** Methodist and so was Jackie Robinson. Coincidence? Not a chance! For Rickey, whoever would be first to break the “color barrier” must be **animated** by a **strong Christian faith**, knowing the **opposition** his presence would engender in others. Except on the baseball field, of course.

It paid off on **April 15, 1947**, 75 years ago this Friday. Born in Georgia in 1919, Robinson's family moved to Pasadena, CA and the talented Jackie eventually lettered in **four sports** at UCLA: baseball, football, basketball, and track! Drafted by the Army in 1942, he served on bases in Kansas and Texas, rising to 2nd Lieutenant. After military service, he joined the famed **Kansas City Monarchs** of the Negro League. Rickey surreptitiously **scouted** many players from the Negro League, and in August 1945 held his first meeting with Robinson. Absent a brave and principled owner willing to “step up to the plate” to take a chance—and the **heat**—how much longer might the league have waited? During that meeting, Rickey “play acted” scenarios, taking the role of a **nasty hotel clerk** who tells him that he cannot stay with his teammates, or a waiter at a restaurant. He pounded his fist on the table—how would Robinson respond? “If a fight breaks out, you can win it. But here's the question—are you strong enough **not** to **fight back**?” Talk about an unusual job interview!

After a season in the minors, Robinson was ready for the big time. But during spring training in 1947, the league **suspended** the Dodgers manager for “associating with gamblers.” Suddenly, Robinson's staunch defender in the minors would be barred from the dugout. Might it appear that Rickey had “forced” his manager to call up a player against his better judgment? Instead, Rickey doubled down, calling up Robinson from the minors with a terse press release: “The Brooklyn Dodgers today purchased the contract of Jack Roosevelt Robinson from the Montreal Royals. He will report immediately.” Robinson was 28 years old when he made his MLB debut at the legendary **Ebbets Field** in Brooklyn. Razed in 1960, a rather bland apartment complex now occupies the space today. All that remains of Ebbets Field is a **non-descript plaque** placed in what was centerfield, **not unlike** the Metropolitan Stadium **home plate** plaque that shoppers unwittingly step on at the Mall of America.

But memories remain, including those of **Donald Graf**. He was 15 years old when his dad pulled him out of school on a Tuesday, telling him, “You're going to witness history being made.” Instead, he witnessed six drunk men **hurling obscenities** at Robinson. They had fashioned megaphones from their cardboard beer cups and were sitting right near the teenager. Ebbets Field was small and tight— he surely heard the taunts. “They rode him the whole game. It was the first time I heard the ‘N-word’ and a lot of other stuff.” Robinson **never** even once **turned** his head towards those taunting him, robbing them of the satisfaction of knowing that he heard them. Incidentally, an **intact** ticket stub (\$1.75 original price) from that game— which was not even a sellout— recently sold for **\$480,000!**

In ten seasons, Robinson was NL Rookie of the Year in 1947, MVP in 1949, and a six-time All-Star, sporting a career .311 batting average. Robinson was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1962. In retirement, Robinson volunteered as a Sunday school teacher. Diabetes and heart disease cut short his life and he died in 1972, at just the age of 53. In a show of **universal** acclaim, his **#42 jersey is retired** on every major league roster, never to be worn again. Until a year ago, I was the proud owner of a 1948 Jackie Robinson “**rookie**” card. I auctioned it off and donated the proceeds to the **Aim Higher Foundation (AHF)**. To think that those funds are now **helping children** attend a Catholic grade school gives me immeasurably more joy than I could possibly have had from gazing upon his card, as special as it was to me.



1948 Leaf Jackie Robinson RC

While we have come a long way in race relations, the journey is **far from over**. At the core of our Catholic faith is the belief in the **dignity** of every human being, regardless of race, creed or class. All persons are a reflection of God’s glory. May we strive to see the **face of Jesus** in all whom we encounter. In this most holy of weeks, allow the centrality of our faith to speak to you in the depths of your heart. As we walk the road to Calvary with Christ, we have “**box seats**” to a divine drama unfolding before us. We bring our hopes, dreams, and even weaknesses, laying them all at the foot of the Cross. Let us enter into Holy Week with **vigor and resolve**.

- Holy Week passes quickly. Whatever you can do to free yourself from the **daily grind** to attend any or all of the special Holy Week liturgies will be worth the effort. Extra confessors are available on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, in addition to the times during the Triduum. If the **lines are long**, being mindful of others, please be appropriately brief. We want to assist as many people as possible.
- “It’s not the honor that you take with you, but the heritage you leave behind.” (Branch Rickey, Brooklyn Dodgers owner.)
- While a high school chaplain in the late 1990’s, I was privileged to assist parishes during five Holy Weeks in **northern Canada**, ministering to the **Métis** population near or even above the Arctic Circle. Pope Francis recently met with indigenous elders to **facilitate reconciliation** for the injustices that occurred in residential schools. A possible papal visit to Canada is in the works.
- The **Twins** made some exciting acquisitions during the off-season. Spring Training was delayed due to the lockout—the players **will be rusty**. The Twins will **improve**, but the questions marks in pitching lead me to predict a .500 season or slightly above. I predict **85 wins**, 12 more than last year! With an extra team in each league making the playoffs, they **might** even squeeze out the last wild-card spot!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector