

# ***A TRIBUTE TO JACKIE ROBINSON***

## ***A MAN FOR ALL TIMES***

When most African Americans think of Jackie Robinson, they think of the ultimate symbol of racial pride and progress in the sports arena. Jackie Robinson represented that symbol when he was chosen as the first African American to play in modern times for the **Major League Brooklyn Dodgers**. Robinson was chosen to fill these shoes by **Branch Rickey**, president and general manager of the Dodgers. October 23, 1945 was the date that Robinson signed a contract to play with the **Montreal Royals**, a minor league affiliate of the Dodgers. This was Robinson's official first step to the **majors**, which came on April 15, 1947 when he entered **Ebbets Field** to play baseball with the Dodgers. **This April 15, 1997 will be the 50th Anniversary of the celebrated date.**

**Jack** (Jackie) **Roosevelt Robinson** was born in Cairo, Georgia on January 31, 1919. He was the youngest of the five children of **Jerry** and **Mallie** Robinson. When Jackie's father Jerry, a sharecropper, left home seeking work, his mother, Mallie, decided to move west, seeking a better life with her children by her side. She was able to find a house in the suburbs of Pasadena, California. Life was not that easy for the Robinsons, being the only black family in this not so friendly area of California. Jackie and his older brother, Mack, took to sports early on in their school years. Mack became a world-class sprinter, and, by 1936, he was invited to compete in the 200 meter dash in the Olympics held in Berlin, Germany. He finished second to **Jesse Owens**, the African American hero of the 1936 Olympic Games.

Jackie Robinson, like most teens, joined a gang while going to school. He was headed for trouble, but, thanks to the positive influences of **Carl Anderson**, a local mechanic, and the minister, Reverend **Karl Downs**, Jackie made a change. Jackie even taught Sunday school lessons to youngsters at Sunday church each week. At **John Muir Technical High school**, Jackie Robinson learned to compete and win honors in sports. He earned high school letters in **football, basketball, baseball, and track and field**. Robinson attended **Pasadena Junior College** from September 1937 to August 1939. His athletic ability at Pasadena led to an athletic scholarship at UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) starting in September of 1939.

At UCLA, Jackie Robinson was nothing less than **spectacular**. He was the university's **first four letter athlete**. He played football, basketball, baseball, and track and field. He was the team's highest scorer for two years in basketball. He also won the national championship in the **long jump**. He became an **All-American** halfback on the university's football team.

Jackie Robinson met **Rachel Isum** in 1940 while she was a freshman studying Nursing at UCLA. By the spring semester of 1941, Jackie had left the campus of UCLA to take a job as the athletic director for the **National Youth Administration**. Within the following year, he was called to serve his country in the United States Army. Robinson applied for admission to the **U.S. Officer's Candidate School** along with other African American draftees. Each one was denied admission due to his race. The **great Joe Louis**, U.S. Heavyweight Champion, was a sergeant at **Fort Riley** (Kansas) at the same time Robinson was there. Under **Joe Louis'** influence, **Jackie Robinson** and the other African Americans were admitted to the officers' school. **Robinson** enrolled and was awarded his commission of second lieutenant in January of 1943.

Even in the army as a lieutenant, Robinson was faced with racism and discrimination. He could play on the military team, but he could **not** travel with them to play teams in **Jim Crow** areas of the **South**. Robinson was transferred to the army base at **Fort Hood**, Texas. Segregation was present and commonplace. "**For Colored Only**" signs were everywhere. Robinson was enraged

and spoke up for his rights. He left the army in 1944 and went back to Kansas where he joined the **Kansas City Monarchs** as a shortstop for the all black professional baseball team in the **Negro Leagues**. Even though Robinson earned \$400 a month, there were hard conditions in the **Negro Leagues**. Traveling by bus for long distances to play other teams often led to hotels which would not take in "colored" players.

Robinson was playing shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs for only one season in the year of 1945 when he was approached and persuaded by **Branch Rickey**, the Brooklyn Dodgers general manager, to join the **Dodger Organization**. Robinson knew how bad the rewards, recognition, and money were in the Negro League, therefore he decided to take a chance, and he signed his **first** contract to play with the **Montreal Royals** of the **Dodger's minor league** club on August 28, 1945. He played his **first game** with the **Montreal Royals on April 18, 1946**. His salary was \$600 monthly with a bonus of \$3,500. With this new salary, Jackie Robinson went back to Los Angeles and married **Rachel Isum**.

Jackie and Rachel were together when he undertook what was called the "baseball great experiment." This experiment was a test to see if a black player could play well enough to integrate the all white baseball leagues. That test would include his playing skills, psychological makeup, and social adjustment. This was 1940's America, and, on most fronts, **segregation of the races** was the way things were. **Branch Rickey** of the Dodger organization wanted this to happen in a positive way. The **Negro League** had many great players, and they were **not** chosen to make the crossover to the all white **Major League**. Jackie Robinson was watched and chosen to do this transition. How would the manager and other players make him part of the team? Well, after his April 18, 1946 debut, Jackie Robinson was on his way! He played against the **Jersey City Giants** in a stadium packed with 30,000 fans, and they wanted to see Robinson play. Robinson hit a three-run home run, stole bases, scored four runs, drove in three, and sent the crowd wild! He had helped the team win every game, and they became the champions of the International League. This win brought them to the playoffs with the **Louisville Colonels** in the **South** in Louisville, Kentucky. Robinson was booed with hatred remarks and racial taunts. He was upset and played his worst. On the return to **Montreal**, the Canadian fans were outraged, and they returned that behavior back to the Louisville players. Robinson was a gentleman and said he "didn't approve of this kind of retaliation but ... felt a jubilant sense of gratitude for the way the **Canadians** expressed their feelings."

The story about **Jackie Robinson** in baseball surrounds the very important efforts of **Branch Rickey** to break the color barrier in the league. **Branch Rickey** was the untiring force and strategist behind this move in American history. Rickey knew how hard it was to get change in this area of racially divided sports. Rickey knew he would meet with opposition. He therefore planned Robinson's team entry by having both the **Montreal Royals** and the **Brooklyn Dodgers** train together in **Havana, Cuba**. He also invited three other African American players to their spring training. They were **Roy Campanella**, **Don Newcombe**, and **Roy Partlow**. When **Rickey** told the **team** his plans, they signed a petition of **non-acceptance** of **Robinson** to their **team**. Rickey went ahead, and the **big announcement came on April 10, 1947**. **Jackie Robinson** was promoted to the **National League Brooklyn Dodgers**. His position was **first baseman**.

**Jackie Robinson, no. 42**, on **April 15, 1947**, played his first game as a **Dodger** in the **majors** against the **Boston Braves** at **Ebbets Field**. The Dodgers won that game 5 to 3, but Robinson did not have a spectacular showing on that day's event. Two months into the season in June, Robinson had created a 21-game hitting streak. Despite the racial insults, Robinson persevered, and his fellow teammates began to support, appreciate, and accept Robinson as a fellow **Dodger**. Robinson's plays helped the **Dodgers** to win the National League Pennant, and he finished the league with the **most stolen bases** and tied for the team lead in **home runs**. He was honored as the **National League Rookie of the Year**, and the **Dodgers** won the right to play the **New York Yankees** in the **World Series** of 1947. Robinson later said, "If I could choose one of the most important moments in my life, it would be the opening day of the 1947 World Series

when I played as a Dodger against the New York Yankees." Although the Dodgers lost the **series** in four games to three, Robinson was able to play against **DiMaggio**, **Berra**, and **Rizzuto**. He had finally crossed over to the majors!

Within the next ten years, Jackie Robinson's name became the example of a special role model for other African Americans making the crossover to the **majors**. By 1949, the Dodgers had added **Roy Campanella** and **Don Newcombe** to their roster of players. Robinson won the **National League Most Valuable Player Award** in 1949, and he demonstrated his ability in speaking out about race and being an American before the **House Un-American Activities Committee** in Washington, DC. Robinson's life was on constant "view." He was a celebrity, but he still had to encounter racial prejudice and bigoted remarks as he played against other teams who had no African American players in 1949. Robinson's mentor and long time friend, **Branch Rickey**, resigned as the president of the **Dodgers** in 1950, and **Walter O'Malley** took the reigns of the **Dodger Club**. **O'Malley** and **Robinson's** relationship was not the best. By May 1956, the famed **Ebbets Field was sold**, and the **Dodgers** moved to **Los Angeles** at the end of 1957. Jackie Robinson was traded to the **New York Giants**, but he refused to play, and, therefore, he announced his **retirement from baseball on January 5, 1957**.

**Jackie Robinson** went on to become an executive and Vice President for Community Relations with the **Chock-Full-o'-Nuts** restaurant and food distributor in New York City. Jackie was inducted into the **Baseball Hall Of Fame on January 23, 1962**. Jackie and Rachel Robinson had three children: Jackie Jr. (born in November 1946), Sharon (born in January 1950), and David (born in May 1952). Jackie Jr., a Vietnam Veteran, took to hard drugs, which took a hard toll on Jackie Sr. He was rehabilitated, but, unfortunately, he was killed in an automobile accident on June 17, 1971. Within sixteen months, **Jackie Robinson SR.** had died on October 24, 1972 of the crippling effects of diabetes and heart disease. Robinson once said that "**A life is not important except in the impact it has on others.**" His Legacy has provided a way for all of us to understand what the **sports arena** of that **era** was truly about.

A Commemoration, Celebration, and Educational Conference at **Long Island University's Brooklyn Campus** on April 3-5, 1997 will encompass the life and times of **Jackie Robinson's** entry into Major League Baseball. For information call: (718) 488 - 1010.

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