

Name: _____ Class: _____

How Jackie Robinson Changed Baseball

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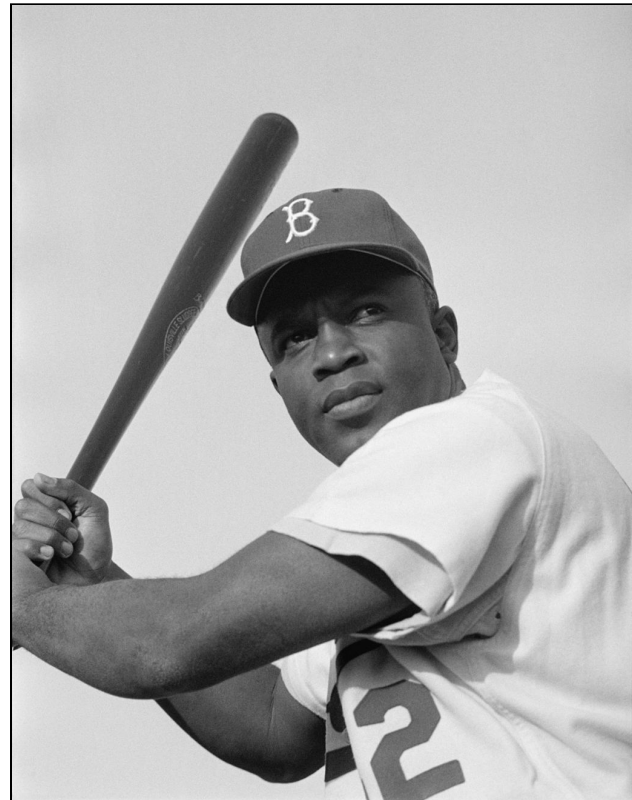
Jackie Robinson (1919-1972) was a professional baseball player and the first African American to play in the Major Leagues. This informational text discusses Robinson's life and accomplishments, and the impact his role in baseball had on the Civil Rights Movement. As you read, take note of the different ways that Jackie Robinson fought back against racial discrimination and segregation throughout this life.

- [1] Today you may not be surprised to see an African-American or Latino player when you turn the TV to Major League Baseball. Maybe your favorite player is a person of color. But baseball has not always been as welcoming to diversity¹ as it is now. In 1947 the famous Jackie Roosevelt Robinson became the first African American to play on a Major League Baseball team. The road he paved was an important, but difficult one.

Early Athletic Success

Robinson was born in Georgia on January 31, 1919, the youngest of five children. His father left the family just a year later, and his mother moved herself and her children to Pasadena, California. She worked odd jobs to support her family, but Robinson still grew up in relative poverty.

When Jackie enrolled in high school, his siblings encouraged him to get involved in school sports teams. He excelled in football, basketball, track, and baseball, and he broke many school records.



"Jackie Robinson, Brooklyn Dodgers, 1954" by Bob Sandberg is in the public domain.

Robinson continued to play all of these sports in junior college. Ironically, he viewed baseball as his weakest sport. He transferred to UCLA to complete his degree, where he became the first athlete to letter² in all four of those sports. UCLA had some of the most racially integrated college sports teams at the time, but Robinson was still among a very small minority of non-white athletes on all his teams.

1. the inclusion of different types of people (such as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization
2. to earn an award for excellence in school activities

Fighting Racism

- [5] Even early in his life, Robinson confronted racism head on. In 1938, while still at junior college, he was arrested after disputing the police's detention of one of his black friends. He managed to escape a long jail sentence, but this and other run-ins with the police earned him a reputation of being very combative against racial oppression.

When the U.S. entered World War II, Robinson enlisted in the army. He never saw direct combat, but his military career was marred³ by racial problems. While stationed in Texas, Robinson boarded a non-segregated bus, but he was instructed to sit in the back anyway. He refused, and military police took him into custody for his insubordination.⁴ Fortunately, one month later, an all-white jury acquitted⁵ him, but the situation foreshadowed only more of the same prejudice he'd face later in life.

A Negro Player with Guts

Robinson joined the professional Negro Leagues to play baseball in early 1945. He signed with the Kansas City Monarchs and had great success, but he was frustrated by all the disorganization that plagued⁶ the Negro Leagues. At the time, a few Major League teams were recruiting from the Negro Leagues, and Robinson struck up a relationship with the General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey.

Rickey liked the potential he saw in Robinson, but he had one question. He knew Robinson would face racial discrimination and injustice if he joined the Major Leagues. Could he be “a Negro player with enough guts *not* to fight back?” Robinson promised that he could, and signed a contract with the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers' top minor league team. After just one season, he transferred to the Brooklyn Dodgers.

As he stepped onto the field as first baseman in 1947, Jackie Robinson became the first Major League baseball player to break the color barrier⁷ since 1880. He was 28 years old.

- [10] African-American fans flooded to Dodgers games, and even the general public and the press had a mostly positive view of the team's newest addition. However, Robinson faced discrimination from a few of his own team members, who threatened to sit out of games if he was allowed to play. Management took Robinson's side — “I say he plays,” said the manager. “I say he can make us all rich. And if any of you cannot use the money, I will see that you are all traded.”

Other teams also disliked Robinson's admittance into the League. Many threatened not to play against him. Most managers rejected these threats and forced the players to participate anyway. Instead, they took it out on Robinson directly during the games. Some players were physically violent — he once received a 7-inch gash in his leg from an opponent who spiked him with his cleats — while others hurled verbal racial insults at him and his teammates. The racism from other teams only united the Dodgers, however, and the team grew more accepting of him.

3. **Mar (verb):** to damage or spoil to a certain extent
4. **Insubordination (noun):** defiance of authority
5. to free someone from a criminal charge by verdict of not guilty
6. **Plague (verb):** to cause continual trouble or distress
7. an unspoken social code of racial segregation or discrimination

Major Success

Robinson won Rookie of the Year in 1947. In later seasons, more African-Americans joined other teams in the Major Leagues, as Robinson continued to excel. His success gained him fans from all over the country. He started at second base for the National League in the 1949 All-Star game, and he helped the Dodgers win the 1949 National League pennant.

Over the next several years his success grew, and by 1955 the Dodgers pulled out a win in the World Series. Robinson was 36 and starting to feel the effects of his age. In 1956 he did not dominate the league as much as he used to, partially because of side effects he suffered from diabetes. When the Dodgers traded him to the New York Giants, Robinson decided to quit baseball altogether and become an executive for a coffee company instead.

A Legendary Impact

After his retirement Robinson remained a baseball legend. In 1962, he received baseball's highest honor when he was elected into the Hall of Fame. His playing style changed many team strategies. For example, he inspired players to be more aggressive in their base-running, rather than relying only on the distance they could hit the ball.

- [15] Robinson also made important racial breakthroughs in the sports world. The first baseball player to break the color barrier in 60 years, he paved the way for many future African-American and minority athletes. His career helped the upcoming Civil Rights Movement by giving Americans a heroic African-American sports figure to rally around.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following identifies a central idea of the text? [RI.2]
 - A. Jackie Robinson's undeniable talent made it easy for coaches and team members to accept him, despite the racial tension of the era.
 - B. While Jackie Robinson faced racial discrimination early on in his life, this stopped once he became the first African-American Major League Baseball player.
 - C. As the first African-American Major League Baseball player, Jackie Robinson was significant in the increased racial diversity that followed in baseball and in other aspects of American culture.
 - D. Once Jackie Robinson left baseball, the impact he had on the sport dwindled, and the racial diversity present on teams decreased.

2. PART B: Which section from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "African-American fans flooded to Dodgers games, and even the general public and the press had a mostly positive view of the team's newest addition." (Paragraph 10)
 - B. "The racism from other teams only united the Dodgers, however, and the team grew more accepting of him." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "Robinson was 36 and starting to feel the effects of his age. In 1956 he did not dominate the league as much as he used to, partially because of side effects he suffered from diabetes." (Paragraph 13)
 - D. "Robinson also made important racial breakthroughs in the sports world. The first baseball player to break the color barrier in 60 years, he paved the way for many future African-American and minority athletes." (Paragraph 15)

3. PART A: What is the meaning of "combative" in paragraph 5? [RI.4]
 - A. compliant
 - B. ready to fight
 - C. ineffective
 - D. reckless

4. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Even early in his life, Robinson confronted racism head on." (Paragraph 5)
 - B. "When the U.S. entered World War II, Robinson enlisted in the army." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "He never saw direct combat, but his military career was marred by racial problems." (Paragraph 6)
 - D. "Robinson boarded a non-segregated bus, but he was instructed to sit in the back anyway." (Paragraph 6)

5. How does paragraph 8 contribute to the development of ideas in the text? [RI.5]

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In your opinion, why did Branch Rickey ask Jackie Robinson to not fight back against discrimination? Why was this considered having “guts”? How would this idea be treated today?
2. In the context of the article, what makes a hero? How did Jackie Robinson’s accomplishments in baseball make him a hero to many? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
3. In the context of the article, how has America changed over time? How has America changed in its treatment and acceptance of people of color? In what capacity did Jackie Robinson represent the beginning of this change?
4. In the context of the article, how does a person overcome adversity? How did Jackie Robinson overcome the discrimination he experienced (in life and in baseball) despite being told not to fight back? How did Robinson continue to challenge discrimination during this time?