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# Exploring *Most Valuable Player*

inspired by Gayle Cornelison  
written and developed by Mary Hall Surface

and the original company of the California Theatre Center

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## The Jackie Robinson Story

**J**ack Roosevelt Robinson was born on January 31, 1919, the youngest of five children, to Jerry and Mallie Robinson in Cairo, Georgia. When Jack was still a baby, his father left the family, and his mother moved the children to Pasadena, California. Working as a maid, Mallie Robinson eventually was able to buy a house in an all-white neighborhood. The family was subjected to bigotry and racial cruelty, but they stood their ground and faced it together.

Both Jackie and his older brother Mack were gifted athletes. Mack finished second to Jesse Owens at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, while Jackie was lettering in baseball, football, basketball, and track at Muir Technical High School. At Pasadena Community College, on a single day in 1938, Jackie set a new record for the collegiate long jump in the morning and helped his basketball team win the junior college championship in the afternoon. That day's performance won him a scholarship to UCLA, where he became the first athlete to make four varsity teams. Surprisingly, baseball was his poorest sport in college. Jackie met the girl he wanted to marry at UCLA, Rachel Isum. They dated for many years while Jackie searched for a career path.

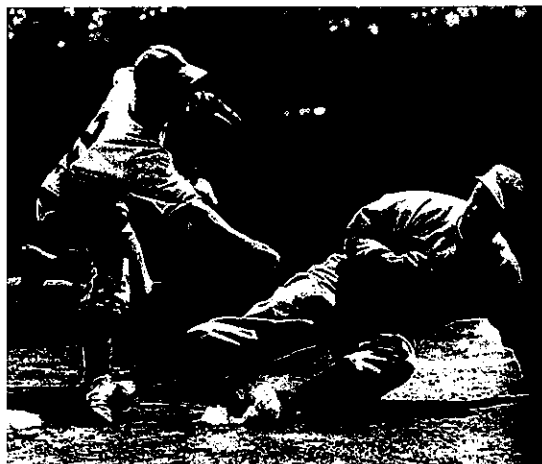
While Jackie longed for a professional career in sports, he knew that there were few options open to him as a black man in the 1930s, so he dropped out of college and went to work to support his mother. He taught sports to disadvantaged children for the National Youth Administration. He also played semi-professional football until the United States entered World War II and he was drafted.

In the army, Jackie encountered many policies of racial discrimination. Army bases were segregated, and Blacks were given the oldest, most decrepit housing. Robinson applied for Officers' Candidate

School (OCS) but was denied admission, despite the fact that he fulfilled all the criteria for enrollment. He took his case to another black soldier, heavyweight boxing champion Joe Louis, who eventually helped Jackie get into OCS.

While serving as a second lieutenant and leader of a tank division at Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson was asked by a bus driver to move to the back, despite the fact that such discriminatory practices had been banned. Even though the driver was of lesser rank, Robinson found himself the subject of a military courtmartial trial for disobedience. He was cleared of the charge but labeled a troublemaker and denied the opportunity to serve overseas. With an honorable discharge, Robinson landed a job as a basketball coach at a small Negro college in Texas in 1944.

In April 1945 Robinson was drafted by the Kansas City Monarchs, a professional team in the Negro American League, and quickly made a name for himself as a shortstop and hitter. But life with the Monarchs wasn't easy: the schedule was grueling, the travel to games often long and unpleasant, the restaurants and hotels that would serve Blacks were often



*Jackie Robinson stole 197 bases over his career.*

*(continued on the back)*

When Jackie Robinson broke the color line in 1946 to join the Brooklyn Dodgers, he ended sixty years of segregated baseball in America. Starting in 1887, Cap Anson of the Chicago White Stockings, the foremost player of his day, refused to take the field against Newark of the Eastern League because their star pitcher, George Stovey, was Black. The few active black ballplayers were eased out of organized baseball, and all Blacks were barred from major league baseball by the turn of the twentieth century.

Segregated baseball flourished off and on from the turn of the century until 1920 when Rube Foster, owner and manager of the Chicago American Giants, called a meeting of some of the western team owners, and the first organized black league was formed: the Negro National League. Three years later the Eastern League followed with the Eastern Colored League, and a new era for black ballplayers and their public was born.

Through the Great Depression and World War II, the fortunes of the individual clubs fluctuated. Teams formed hastily

## The Negro Leagues

and sometimes disbanded before a season was over. Still, organized black baseball survived to produce the backdrop against which the eventual integration of the major leagues would occur.

While their more well-known white contemporaries gained fame and wealth in the major leagues, black ballplayers traveled the country playing in every imagina-



Jackie Robinson and Satchel Paige in the Kansas City Monarchs, 1945.

ble venue, from major league ballparks to hastily converted fields. They barnstormed against white

major leaguers in post-season play, and traveled to Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Cuba during the winter to play ball in a more integrated environment. Statistics show that black clubs beat white major leaguers roughly 60% of the time.

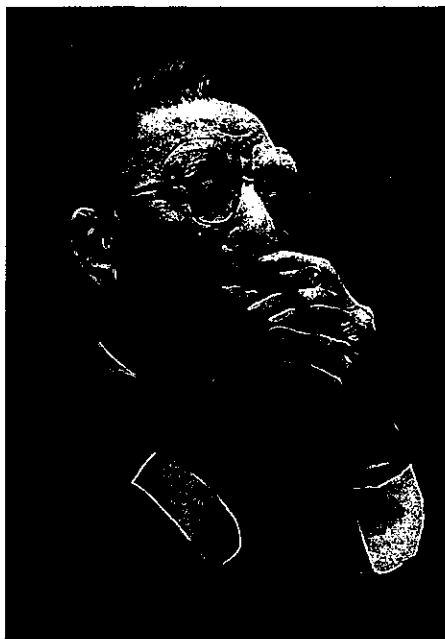
Despite the hardships of segregation and significantly lower salaries, Negro Leaguers played with zeal and style, developing many innovations in the game. This intensity of play produced some of the best athletes ever to play baseball. Names such as Satchel Paige, who went up to the major leagues as the oldest rookie ever at age 42, and Josh Gibson, whose power at the plate was legendary, are familiar to the general public today, but most remain unrecognized.

The Negro Leagues existed for seventy years. Fourteen years after Jackie Robinson played his first game with the Brooklyn Dodgers, they disappeared, because players were being recruited into major league teams where they frequently outplayed their white colleagues. ★

After graduation from college, Rickey returned to baseball as an administrator. He quickly made a name for himself as a shrewd businessman and an innovator, and he rose in position and influence within the game. In 1942, he was named general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

One of Rickey's obstacles to integrating his team was long-time baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who was against admitting Blacks to major league teams. When Landis died in 1944, commissioner Albert Chandler said he didn't object to black players in the majors. "If they can fight and die on Okinawa, Guadalcanal, and in the South Pacific, they can play baseball for America."

Rickey knew he would encounter other opposition among players, owners, and even the public, but he continued, secretly, with what the press would later call "The Great Experiment" by sending scouts to see the best of the Negro League players. Thus, in 1945 Rickey's scouts discovered Jackie Robinson, and "The Great Experiment" began. ★



Ohio Wesleyan University where he also doubled as the college baseball coach. When his black catcher was prevented from registering at the same hotel as the white players, Rickey pledged to himself that he would do all he could to end racial discrimination.

## Branch Rickey & "The Great Experiment"

Branch Rickey was one of the most innovative administrators in the history of baseball. In addition to helping break the color barrier in the major leagues, Rickey developed the "farm" system of developing players in a series of minor league teams to prepare them for the majors. (Indianapolis's own minor league team, the Indians, is a farm team for the Milwaukee Brewers). During his career, he was part owner and general manager of several teams, including the St. Louis Cardinals, the Pittsburgh Pirates, and of course, the Brooklyn Dodgers. Rickey was also one of the most colorful characters in the game.

Branch Rickey began in professional baseball as a catcher for the Yankees and the Browns. He took some ribbing from his teammates because he would not play on Sundays. He had promised his mother back in Duck Run, Ohio, that he would never enter a ball park on a Sunday, a promise he kept all his life. Rickey was an astute judge of talent, and he realized he was too limited a player to stay in the game, so he used his summer baseball salaries to finance a legal education at

## For Thought & Discussion

### Segregation

The story of *Most Valuable Player* takes place during the 1940s—15 to 20 years before the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. "Jim Crow" laws were enforced throughout the South, and similar practices were often found in the North as well. Such laws designated "separate but equal" opportunities and facilities for Blacks; in reality, things were always separate but rarely equal.

In addition to not being allowed to play on the same sports teams with Whites, Blacks were not allowed to attend school with Whites. They were required to sit in the back of public buses and in secondary facilities on all public transport. There were separate areas in restaurants for Blacks, while many restaurants refused to serve them at all. The same held true for hotels, public swimming pools, and other public facilities that frequently refused Blacks. There were even separate drinking fountains and public restrooms for Blacks. Blacks were segregated in terms of where they could live and what stores they could patronize. Blacks were discouraged from voting and in some instances were threatened with violence and death if they tried to do so.

Discuss what effect segregation had on American society and culture during the last century. Do any of these practices still exist today?

### Racial Slurs

The word *nigger* is used frequently in *Most Valuable Player* to illustrate the verbal abuse that confronted Jackie Robinson throughout his life. It is used by a variety of characters in the play to denigrate black people in general and Jackie Robinson in particular. The context of the play illustrates that the use of this word and other racial slurs is born of an ignorance and hatred that should not be imitated.

The word was not originally used for verbal assault. It first appears in historical documents in 1587 as *negar*, an alternate spelling of *Negro*. *Nigger* was a common word in both England and America by the 17th century; it was considered nothing more than an alternate pronunciation of *Negro*. By 1825, however, both abolitionists and Blacks found the word offensive and began to object to its use. More than 150 years later, the use of the word has not been eliminated.

Discuss the effects of racial slurs and name-calling.

Discuss the use of the word *nigger* by both African Americans and others in music, books, movies, and everyday life today. Take into account that many still view it as a derogatory term.

### Other Topics

Racism and prejudice are not the same thing. Define prejudice. What is meant by discrimination? Why do you think people are prejudiced?

Racism still exists in our society and in our community. Give some examples of how racism effects our lives every day. As citizens and as people, what can we do to further a more tolerant, multicultural society?

Why does it take courage not to fight back? Why did Branch Rickey encourage Robinson to take this course?

Research another famous minority sports figure such as African Americans Satchel Paige and Roy Campanella, Native American Jim Thorpe, or even Jewish player Sandy Koufax, and discuss how they encountered prejudice and limitations. ★

Jackie Robinson fought discrimination in many ways; here he is seen marching for an NAACP boycott.



## Did You Know?

Jackie Robinson was a good friend of such important men as newsman Edward R. Murrow, the Reverend Martin Luther King, and the Reverend Jesse Jackson. Jesse Jackson delivered Robinson's eulogy when Jackie died in 1972.

Jackie Robinson was the first student in UCLA history to win letters in four sports: baseball, basketball, football, and track.

The Dodgers got their name because the ballpark was situated near several trolley tracks and people had to dodge the trolleys to get to the field and see their team play.

The Brooklyn Dodgers moved to Los Angeles in 1958. Ebbets Field no longer exists.

Pee Wee Reese got his nickname as a boy when he was an expert marbles player and won games with the use of a "pee-wee shooter."

There is a legend that baseball was invented in 1839 by Abner Doubleday in a meadow in Cooperstown, New York, but there is no real evidence to prove this theory. However, the Baseball Hall of Fame is located in Cooperstown because baseball traces its roots to a similar rural atmosphere.

Baseball wasn't invented. It evolved. Games with bats and balls were known thousands of years ago and were played in ancient Egypt. The English had been playing "rounders" for years, and cricket for even longer. In this country, games like "one old cat" had been played by children for many years, and grownups had a game called Round Ball or Town Ball. The man who is credited for setting down the rules of baseball as we know it is Alexander Cartwright, who was a member of the Knickerbocker Club in New York.

Learn more about Jackie Robinson, the Negro Leagues, Civil Rights, and much more at your local library. ★

(continued from the front)

dreary and dirty, and the salary was insufficient to support a family. Jackie's first priority was supporting his mother; Rachel and he had to wait for better days for marriage.

In August 1945 Jackie met Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who told Robinson that he wanted him to be the first black professional baseball player to play on a major league team since 1900. Rickey discussed all the problems Robinson would have to face: opposition from fellow teammates, umpires, newspapermen, even fans. He would have to endure physical abuse, unfairness, and racial slurs of all kinds. Rickey was convinced, based on Jackie's past and his character, that he was the right man to break the color barrier in professional sports, and that the way to do this was never to lose his temper. Robinson asked, "Do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?"

Rickey answered, "I want a player with guts enough *not* to fight back." Robinson signed a contract to play with the Montreal Royals, a farm team for the Dodgers. Robinson's hire was big news. Most sports writers didn't think he could make it; others thought it was time at last to introduce democracy into sports. Before he had even played a game, everyone knew Jackie Robinson's name.

Jackie and Rachel married just before Jackie reported to Florida for 1946 spring training. They found the segregated South a very difficult place in which to live. Blacks had to sit in special sections at the ballparks, and always in the worst seats. Games were often stopped when a city official or police officer would announce that local ordinances forbade Blacks and

## The Jackie Robinson Story

Whites to play together on city-owned property. But Jackie ignored the insults and concentrated on his game; he excelled at bunting and at base stealing.

In Montreal, the fans loved him; Rachel and Jackie found Canadians far less bigoted than their U.S. neighbors. With Robinson's team leadership, the Montreal Royals won the minor league championship.

In 1947, Robinson joined the Dodgers and, wearing the number 42, took his place at first base on Ebbets Field in Brooklyn. His first season was filled with uncomfortable and occasionally dangerous events. Even before he arrived, some of the Dodger players signed a petition asking that Robinson be released from his contract because of the color of his skin; when Rickey replied that he would release any players who were unwilling to play with Robinson, the revolt crumbled.



Players from opposing teams unleashed floods of abuse; on the field players ran the bases with ruthless violence, often spiking Robinson or knocking him to the ground. Rachel Robinson received death threats. But Jackie Robinson met his

opponents with dignity and restraint. And even under the enormous pressure, he played great baseball: he scored 125 runs (second in the league) and led the league in stolen bases. He was named Rookie of the Year and helped the Dodgers to win the National League pennant.

Jackie Robinson played ten years of major league baseball. Throughout his career he continued to break records and win awards. His lifetime batting average was .311, and he stole 197 bases, including stealing home 20 times. He played on six pennant-winning teams and one World Series championship team. **He was named the National League's Most Valuable Player in 1949.** In 1957, at the age of 36, Robinson retired from professional baseball. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1962.

After he left baseball, Jackie Robinson continued to fight for equality and freedom for all people. He was a spokesman and fundraiser for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP); he could frequently be found on marches and in picket lines demonstrating for civil rights. He was a successful businessman, a top executive for the Chock Full o' Nuts Coffee Corporation and the Freedom National Bank. In 1972, at age 54, Robinson died of a heart attack, leaving a lifetime legacy of great accomplishments. His wife, Rachel, heads the Jackie Robinson Development Corporation, a minority owned and operated company devoted to the development of low- and moderate-income housing. Jackie Robinson often said, "a life is not important except in the impact it has on others." He certainly lived up to this standard himself. ★

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