

Jack Roosevelt Robinson

Baseball's First Black Superstar

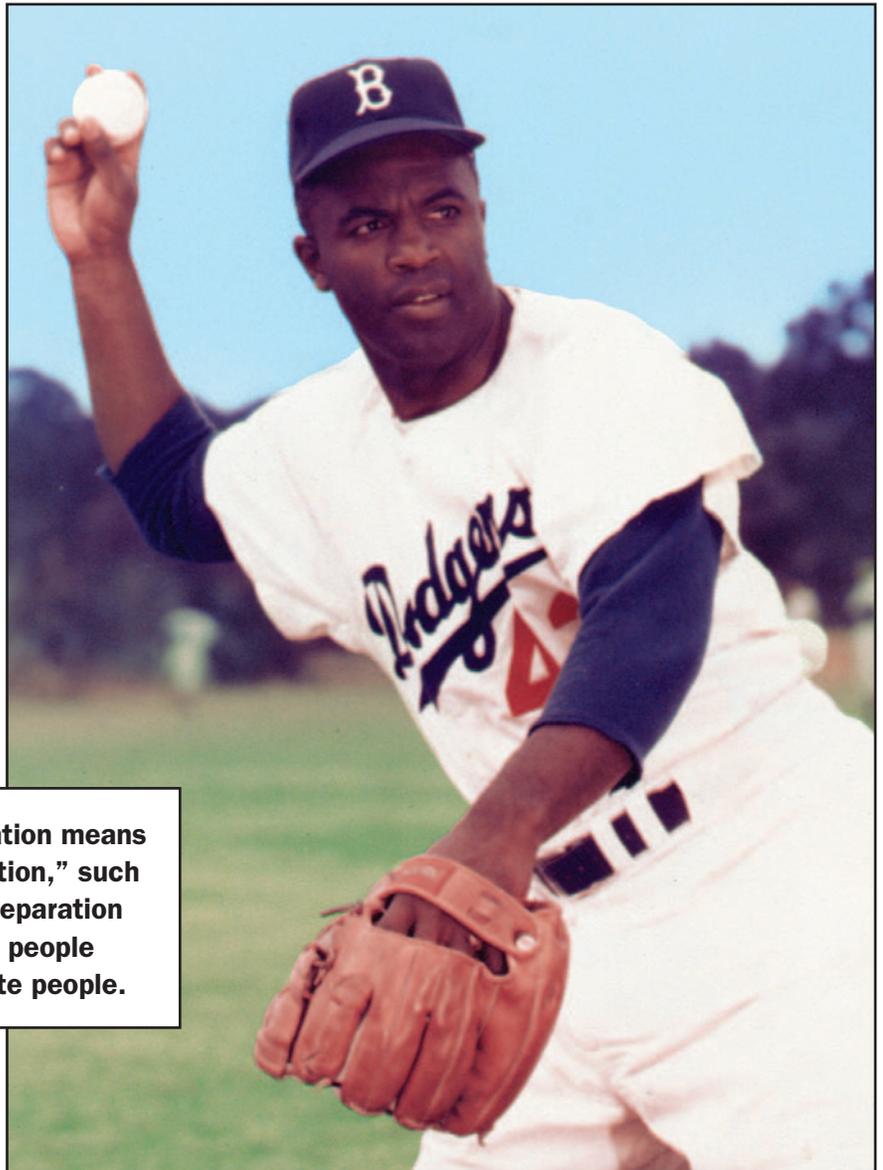
On a chilly April afternoon in 1947, Jack Roosevelt Robinson stood at bat in Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, New York. The nation watched and held its breath. This was the first time in organized baseball that a black man took the field to play with and against white players.

Up until this time, if a black man wanted to play professional baseball, he played in the Negro Leagues. Jackie Robinson had played for the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro Leagues team. He hated the way blacks were treated.

An End to Segregation

Branch Rickey, president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, could see the problems black players faced. He wanted to help end **segregation** in sports. In 1942, Rickey started looking for a black person who was a great player and a great human being. Rickey knew that he would make history by bringing a black player onto his team.

Segregation means "separation," such as the separation of black people and white people.





Jackie Robinson and Branch Rickey signing the contract.

Rickey sent scouts to Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Negro Leagues, where they found Jackie Robinson. Robinson was smart and educated. He was an aggressive player with great balance who could quickly change direction. Branch Rickey thought Jackie Robinson just might be the man he was looking for to join the Brooklyn Dodgers team.

A Player with Guts

When Robinson and Rickey met, they discussed Rickey's secret plan to bring black players into the National League. Rickey worried about the younger man's temper. So, he tested Robinson by shouting racial slurs and insults at him.

Robinson was confused: "Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?"

"Mr. Robinson," Rickey said, "I want a player with guts enough not to fight back."

They agreed that Robinson would not respond to verbal or physical attacks for three years. Then, he could speak up and take action. Robinson agreed to play for the Montreal Royals, a minor-league

team that sent its best players to the Dodgers. The news made national headlines.

Heading to the Major League

After Robinson played well on the Royals, Rickey decided to make his move. On April 10, 1947, Rickey announced: "The Brooklyn Dodgers today purchased the contract of Jack Roosevelt Robinson from the Montreal Royals. He will report immediately." Reactions across the country ranged from hostility to enthusiasm. In major-league baseball, no team owners and few players supported Rickey's decision.

On April 15, the Dodgers opened the season with the Boston Braves. Some of the players, including Pee Wee Reese, were polite, and the Brooklyn fans were enthusiastic. Then, during a game with the Philadelphia Phillies, Robinson received the most bitter personal attack imaginable. Robinson kept his temper, though, as he had promised, and his teammates began to stick up for him. Dodger second baseman Eddie Stanky shouted at the Phillies players: "You yellow-bellied cowards! Why don't you yell at someone who can answer back?"

Standing Up Against Racism

The threats and abuse toward Robinson continued. Players spiked him and kicked him. Pitchers aimed for his head. Teams refused to play until Robinson was fired. But National League President Ford Frick said, "This is the United States of America, and one citizen has as much right to play as another. The National League will go down the line with Robinson whatever the consequence."

Robinson's teammates slowly accepted him. Some accepted him because they knew he could help win games. And some accepted him because they hated injustice and liked Robinson. In one event that has become baseball legend, Pee Wee Reese came onto the field and put his arm around Robinson's shoulder. It was the first time many people had ever seen friendly physical contact between the races.

America's MVP

In time, things changed. *The Sporting News* named him "Rookie of the Year." The baseball writers named him "Most Valuable Player." His popularity with Americans of all races grew. Songs were written about him. There was a Jackie Robinson comic book. There was a movie called *The Jackie Robinson Story*.

In his career with the Brooklyn Dodgers, Robinson set many team and league records. The Dodgers won their first World Series in 1955, defeating

their longtime rivals the New York Yankees. Robinson wanted to leave the game while he still played well. After 10 years with the Dodgers, he retired from baseball. Five years later, he was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame.

The American League and the National League, called major leagues, are organizations of baseball teams.

A Positive Impact for All

African American leader Roy Wilkins said, "Jackie forced people, all people, to reconsider their assumptions about race." Robinson was fond of saying, "A life is not important, except in the impact it has on other lives." By his actions, his example, and his courage, Jackie Robinson had an impact on the lives of all Americans.

Adapted from an article by Leslie Anderson Morales



The Brooklyn Dodgers, National League Champions in 1953.