

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL BASEBALL HALL OF FAME



WHEN LEADERSHIP

SMASHED THE RACIAL BARRIER

IN THE SPRING OF 1947, JACKIE ROBINSON BECAME THE FIRST AFRICAN-AMERICAN TO PLAY MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL. IN 1948, LARRY DOBY BECAME THE FIRST TO PLAY IN THE AMERICAN LEAGUE. BOTH HAVE BEEN INDUCTED INTO THE BASEBALL HALL OF FAME; DOBY'S INDUCTON WAS IN JULY OF 1998. BRANCH RICKEY WAS THE MAN WHO SET IT ALL IN MOTION.

Of all the unusual personalities ever seen in baseball, no one matches the late Branch Rickey — not Casey Stengel, Leo Durocher, or George Steinbrenner. This baseball genius served as chief executive officer for the St. Louis Cardinals, Pittsburgh Pirates and the Brooklyn Dodgers between 1917 and 1955. Fortunately for baseball, Rickey was a visionary leader. Without his high ideals and courage the “color barrier” of baseball might have lasted much longer.

Branch Rickey first confronted baseball segregation when he began coaching for Ohio Wesleyan University. The team included one black man, Charles Thomas. At the opening of the rookie coach's first game the opposing team players came onto the field, took one look at Thomas, and said they wouldn't play. Rickey walked over to the opponents' bench, pointed a finger at their coach and shouted, “*You will play Charles Thomas or you won't play OWU.*” His players practiced for an hour before the visitors finally agreed to play. Rickey, only 21 years old, had stood his ground — and won.

The next season Rickey's OWU team was in South Bend, Indiana, to play Notre Dame. The team had made

reservations to stay in the Oliver Hotel, but when the hotel manager saw Charles Thomas in the lobby, he declared that only whites were welcome there. Rickey ordered a cot for Thomas to be put into his own room. “*Under no circumstances,*” he said firmly, “*will I leave or allow Thomas to be put out.*”

Without Charles Thomas in his memory, Branch Rickey may not have been as willing to endure the struggles of the 1940s. But his desire to change baseball's racial climate also came out of his Christian faith, which is why he made the decision to bring a black player to the Dodgers.

The man would have to be gifted and tough enough, though, to withstand the beanballs and body blocks that would come his way; intelligent, articulate and morally upright so that bigoted critics could not get to first base; and he must be willing to receive abuse without returning it.

Rickey's scouts found him a player. At UCLA, he starred in football, basketball and track as well as in baseball. Twice he led the PAC 10 in basketball scoring and in his junior year he earned All-American honors in football. In track, he won the NCAA championship for the long jump, and he hit .466 one year in baseball. His name? Jackie Robinson.

Branch Rickey admired Robinson's strength but he worried about his defiance. Yes, he had enough spirit to break baseball's color barrier, but could he walk the emotional tight rope required of a racial pioneer? Or would he lash out in rage and ruin the cause?

The two men met in Rickey's Brooklyn office on August 28, 1945. Rickey stunned him when he said, “*I brought*

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you here to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers — if you can!”

“If I can!” sputtered Robinson.

“Suppose,” said Rickey, “a player comes down from first base — you are the shortstop and the player slides, spikes high, and cuts you on the leg. As the blood runs down your leg, the white player laughs in your face, and sneers, ‘How do you like that, nigger boy?’”

Robinson asked Rickey, “Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?”

“I’m looking for a ball player with guts not to fight back!”

Rickey said as he reached into his desk drawer and brought out a book by Giovanni Papini, an Italian once famous as an atheist but one who had experienced a stunning conversion. He read to Robinson,

“Every man has a respect for courage in others, especially if it is moral courage, the rarest and most difficult sort of bravery... the results of nonresistance, even if they are not always perfect, are certainly superior to those of resistance or flight... To answer blows with blows, evil deeds with evil deeds, is to meet the attacker on his own ground, to proclaim oneself as low as he... Only he who has conquered himself can conquer his enemies.”

Rickey laid the book down. “Now,” he said to Robinson, “you will have to promise me that for the first three years in baseball you will turn the other cheek. Three years — can you do it?”

“Mr. Rickey,” said Jackie Robinson, “I’ve got two cheeks.”

Jackie was ready for the Dodgers. But both he and Rickey knew that the 1947 season would be the greatest challenge of their lives. Could Jackie hold up under the constant abuse he would receive? Could Rickey, in his mid-60s by now and suffering from Meniere’s Disease, cope with reporters’ attacks and also support Robinson?

The first major test came from within Dodger ranks. Several of the players signed a petition stating that they would not play for the Dodgers if a black man did. The movement might have become a major threat except for Pee Wee Reese. Reese was expected to side with Jackie’s foes, but unexpectedly chose not to. He later became Robinson’s closest friend on the team — and his golfing buddy.

The next tests were to come from opposing teams. For example, the Phillies’ general manager said he feared a riot by fans if Robinson came with the Dodgers to play in Philadelphia. He told Rickey, “We won’t be able to take the field with your Brooklyn team if that boy Robinson is in uniform.”

Rickey was ready with a firm reply. “If we must claim the game 9-0 [the score for any forfeit], we will do just that, I assure you,” he said.

The Phillies played, but, led by their manager, they yelled ugly things about Robinson and his wife, and they told the other Dodgers not to touch Jackie’s towels or comb if they wanted to avoid disease.

And the death threats — Robinson was receiving so many of them that Rickey finally had the Dodger office open all his mail.

The first season took a heavy toll on both Rickey and Robinson. Rickey got flak from many other baseball executives — and plenty of hate mail. As a result, he was troubled more than ever by his disease. Despite his own problems, though, Rickey and his wife Jane regularly invited the Robinsons to their home and took them on picnics.

The eventual victory soon became obvious, both in Jackie’s performance and in the fan response. He hit .297 that first season, led the league in stolen bases, won the Rookie of the Year award and helped take the Dodgers to the World Series. Following successes brought Jackie the Most Valuable Player award in 1949, when he hit .342; and a World Series crown for the Dodgers in 1955. As for the fans, both white and black responded to him. A national poll taken at the end of 1947 revealed him to be one of America’s most popular figures, second only to Bing Crosby.

Other blacks followed Robinson to the Dodgers, and Larry Doby signed with Cleveland, the first black in the American League. Seven years before the Supreme Court outlawed segregation in America’s schools many major league teams had at least one black player.

Rickey was thrilled. “God was with me when I picked Jackie,” he said. “I don’t think any other man... could have done what he did those first two or three years.”

Robinson never did stop expressing his sincere thanks to his Dodger boss. He said, “I really believe that in breaking down the color barrier in our ‘national game,’ he did more for the Negroes than any white man since Abraham Lincoln.”

Rickey frequently reminded people that his Christian faith had moved him to sign Robinson. He wrote “Power to make others happy is the greatest asset in the world, I think. We must believe in the doctrine of ‘Loving God and one’s brothers.’”

Duke University public policy professor Robert D. Behn summarizes the story this way, “If Robinson had not been such a superior — and intelligent — athlete, if he had not been capable of dealing with psychological pressures and personal burdens that few of us can even imagine, it might have been years before baseball was integrated on the field. But if Rickey had not conceived and implemented his plan so intelligently and carefully the same would have been true.”

Jackie Robinson’s courage broke baseball’s color barrier. Branch Rickey’s leadership and faith in action gave him his chance. Baseball owes them both a great debt. **SF**

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