



A tribute long overdue

Pasadena needs a permanent educational facility to enshrine Jackie Robinson's place in our local and national history

By [Peter Dreier](#) 04/25/2013

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Thanks to the new film "42," Jackie Robinson's ties to Pasadena are getting national attention. At the same time, the city government is putting resources into fixing up Robinson Park and expanding the Jackie Robinson Center on North Fair Oaks Avenue. Those two landmarks, along with the huge busts of Jackie and his older brother, Mack, in front of City Hall, help keep their memories alive in their hometown.

But this is not sufficient. There is no place in Pasadena where young people can learn about the Robinsons' upbringing and athletic exploits, or Jackie's odyssey as a sports pioneer and civil rights activist. There is no local site that documents the brothers' athletic triumphs at Muir High School and Pasadena Junior College (now Pasadena City College). Where in Pasadena can residents or tourists learn about Jackie's struggle against segregation as an Army officer in World War II, his brief career in the Negro Leagues, or the protests that broke baseball's color barrier? Where can they find out about the hardships Mack endured as a black member of the US team at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, which Adolf Hitler and the Nazis sought to use as a celebration of white supremacy?

Pasadena needs a Jackie Robinson Museum to make sure that the current and future generations of Pasadenans and visitors can learn not only about this American icon, but also about the local and national racism that Robinson confronted and fought to overcome.

In the Robinson brothers' youth, Pasadena's black residents (5 percent of the city in 1940) were second-class citizens; its movie theaters and municipal pool were segregated and blacks faced constant harassment from local police.

When Mack (1914-2000) returned from Berlin, where he won the silver medal in the 200-meter race (coming in fourth-tenths of a second behind Jesse Owens), he was not welcomed back as a local celebrity. "I looked forward to a hero's welcome," Mack recalled, "but the family greeted me and that was basically it." In 1937, he set a national junior college record in the broad jump (later broken by Jackie) and he won national collegiate and Amateur Athletic Union track titles at the University of Oregon the next year. But despite the fact that he had attended college and was a well-known athlete, the only job Mack could get when he returned to Pasadena was cleaning the city's streets and sewers.

In the 1940s, Mack joined an effort to push the city to desegregate the public swimming pool at Brookside Park (which was open to blacks only once a week, just before the water was changed). In 1944, after a judge ordered local officials to desegregate the pool, the city retaliated by firing its black employees, including Mack. He later became a truant officer at Muir High and fought to get the city to sponsor youth programs.

After two years at PCC, Jackie (1919-1972) attended UCLA, where he was its first four-sport athlete (football, basketball, track and baseball), twice led the Pacific Coast League in scoring in basketball, won the NCAA broad jump championship and was a football All-American. Many consider him America's greatest all-around athlete. During World War II, Jackie confronted racism when his superiors sought to keep him out of officer's candidate school. He eventually broke that barrier and became a second lieutenant. But in 1944, while assigned to a training camp at Fort Hood in segregated Texas, Jackie refused to move to the back of an army bus when the white driver ordered him to do so, even though buses had been officially desegregated on military bases. He was court martialed for his insubordination, tried, acquitted, transferred to another military base and honorably discharged four months later. After his military service, Jackie

was barred from playing in the all-white major leagues and played for the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro Leagues.

In 1945, Branch Rickey, the Dodgers' general manager, selected Robinson to break the color barrier. He selected Robinson not only because he was an outstanding player, but also because he was well-educated, religious, articulate, an army veteran and had lived among and played with white teammates in Pasadena and at UCLA.

Robinson first took the field in a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform — the first black major leaguer — on April 16, 1947. His actions on and off the diamond paved the way for America to confront its racial hypocrisy. His dignity in handling ugly physical and verbal abuse among fellow players and fans, and persistent racism in hotels and restaurants, stirred white Americans' consciences and gave black Americans a tremendous boost of pride. Thanks to Jackie's achievement, the Brooklyn Dodgers gained the loyalty of millions of black and white Americans who saw it as a steppingstone to tearing down other forms of racism. His efforts were as important as the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision or the Montgomery bus boycott in dismantling legal segregation and reducing bigotry. Martin Luther King told Robinson's black teammate Don Newcombe, "You'll never know what you and Jackie and Roy [Campanella] did to make it possible to do my job." In fact, the integration of baseball was bigger than Robinson's personal crusade. A decade-long campaign waged by the Negro press, civil rights groups and the political left set the stage for Robinson and Rickey.

Robinson recognized that the dismantling of baseball's color line was a triumph of both a man and a movement. During and after his playing days, he joined the civil rights crusade, speaking out — in speeches, interviews, and his newspaper column — against racial injustice. In 1949, testifying before Congress, he said: "I'm not fooled because I've had a chance open to very few Negro Americans." He viewed his sports celebrity as a platform from which to challenge American racism. Many sportswriters and most other players — including some of his fellow black players, content simply to be playing in the majors — considered Robinson too angry and vocal about racism in baseball and society.

When Robinson retired from baseball in 1956, no team offered him a position as a coach, manager or executive. Instead, he became an executive with the Chock Full o' Nuts restaurant chain and an advocate for integrating corporate America. He lent his name and prestige to several business ventures, including a construction company and a black-owned bank in Harlem. He got involved in these business activities primarily to help address the shortage of affordable housing and the persistent redlining (lending discrimination against blacks) by white-owned banks. Both the construction company and the bank later fell on hard times and dimmed Robinson's confidence in black capitalism as a strategy for racial integration.

During the 1960s, Robinson was a constant presence at civil rights rallies and picket lines, and he chaired the NAACP's fundraising drive. He was proud of his accomplishments on the baseball field and in society, but he was frustrated by the slow pace of racial change. "I cannot possibly believe," he wrote in his autobiography, "I Never Had It Made," published shortly before he died of a heart attack at age 53 in 1972, "that I have it made while so many black brothers and sisters are hungry, inadequately housed, insufficiently clothed, denied their dignity as they live in slums or barely exist on welfare."

Jackie was also bitter about Pasadena's segregated schools and public facilities. He rarely visited the city after he moved to the East Coast to play for the Dodgers. During his lifetime, the city did little to honor its most famous son. For example, Jackie was never invited to serve as grand marshal of the Rose Parade.

Today, Pasadena prides itself as a diverse city with an international profile. Whatever racial progress the city has made since Robinson grew up here is due in large measure to the efforts of civil rights activists (including Mack and his wife, Delano) and their allies. But the city still confronts a wide economic divide and persistent racial injustice. It is important for Pasadenans to learn from this history in order to celebrate its triumphs and confront its ongoing problems. The Pasadena Unified School District and surrounding school districts should incorporate the

Robinson saga into their curriculums as a way to teach about the history of race relations and the civil rights movement.

I recently talked with several teens who attend Muir High School, Robinson's alma mater. They all knew that Jackie was a baseball player who had lived in the city. But none of them knew anything about the obstacles he faced growing up in Pasadena and during his army and baseball career, his involvement with the civil rights movement, or the protest crusade that helped open the door for Robinson to break baseball's color barrier.

Pasadena needs a permanent educational facility to enshrine Robinson's place in our local and national history. It is time for the city to work with PCC and the Los Angeles Dodgers — as well as local businesses and foundations — to erect a Jackie Robinson museum, library and archives. It would be an educational resource and a tourist attraction, like Babe Ruth's boyhood home in Baltimore, the Ty Cobb Museum in Royston, Ga., and others. Robinson's courage, persistence, intelligence and accomplishments should serve as a model to all young people. Current public anger with both spoiled players and greedy owners should make professional baseball eager to remind disenchanted fans that the game's establishment was once on the cutting edge of social change. And Pasadena should reclaim Robinson as a local hero who was one of the country's greatest pioneers.

Peter Dreier, a Pasadena resident, chairs the Urban & Environmental Policy Department at Occidental College and is author of "The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame" (Nation Books, 2012). Jackie Robinson is one of the people profiled in the book