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The Real Story of Baseball's Integration That You Won't See in 42

By Peter Dreier



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One of America's most iconic and inspiring stories—Jackie Robinson breaking baseball's color line in 1947—is retold in the film *42*, which opens nationally this weekend. Even if you're not a baseball fan, the film will tug at your heart and have you rooting for Robinson to overcome the racist obstacles put in his way. It is an uplifting tale of courage and determination that is hard to resist, even though you know the outcome before the movie begins.

But despite bravura performances by relatively unknown Chadwick Boseman as Robinson and superstar Harrison Ford as Branch Rickey (the Brooklyn Dodgers' general manager who recruited Robinson and orchestrated his transition from the Negro Leagues to the all-white Major Leagues), the film strikes out as history, because it ignores the true story of how baseball's apartheid system was dismantled.

The film portrays baseball's integration as the tale of two trailblazers—Robinson, the combative athlete and Rickey, the shrewd strategist—battling baseball's, and society's, bigotry. But the truth is that it was a political victory brought about by a social protest movement. As an activist himself, Robinson would likely have been disappointed by a film that ignored the centrality of the broader civil rights struggle.

That story has been told in two outstanding books, Jules Tygiel's *Baseball's Great Experiment* (1983) and Chris Lamb's *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* (2012). As they recount, Rickey's plan came after more than a decade of effort by black and left-wing journalists and activists to desegregate the national pastime. Beginning in the 1930s, the Negro press, civil rights groups, the Communist Party, progressive white activists, and radical politicians waged a sustained campaign to integrate baseball. It was part of a broader movement to eliminate discrimination in housing, jobs, and other sectors of society. It included protests against segregation within the military, mobilizing for a federal anti-lynching law, marches to open up defense jobs to blacks during World War II, and boycotts against stores that refused to hire African Americans under the banner "don't shop where you can't work." The movement accelerated after the war, when returning black veterans expected that America would open up opportunities for African Americans.

Robinson broke into baseball when America was a deeply segregated nation. In 1946, at least six African Americans were lynched in the South. Restrictive covenants were still legal, barring blacks (and Jews) from buying homes in many neighborhoods—not just in the South. Only a handful of blacks were enrolled in the nation's predominantly white colleges and universities. There were only two blacks in Congress. No big city had a black mayor.

It is difficult today to summon the excitement that greeted Robinson's achievement. The dignity with which Robinson handled his encounters with racism—including verbal and physical abuse on the field and in hotels, restaurants, trains, and elsewhere—drew public attention to the issue, stirred the consciences of many white Americans, and gave black Americans a tremendous boost of pride and self-confidence. Martin Luther King Jr. once told Dodgers star Don Newcombe, another former Negro Leaguer, "You'll never know what you and Jackie and Roy [Campanella] did to make it possible to do my job."

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Jackie Robinson, right, and Martin Luther King, Jr. (Solipsis)

Robinson, who spent his entire major league career (1947 to 1956) with the Dodgers, was voted Rookie of the Year in 1947 and Most Valuable Player in 1949, when he won the National League batting title with a .342 batting average. An outstanding base runner and base stealer, with a .311 lifetime batting average, he led the Dodgers to six pennants and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1962.

* * *

42 is the fourth Hollywood film about Robinson. All of them suffer from what might be called movement myopia. We may prefer our heroes to be rugged individualists, but the reality doesn't conform to the myth embedded in Hollywood's version of the Robinson story.

In *The Jackie Robinson Story*, released in 1950, Robinson played himself and the fabulous Ruby Dee portrayed his wife Rachel. Produced at the height of the Cold War, five years before the Montgomery bus boycott, the film celebrated Robinson's feat as evidence that America was a land of opportunity where anyone could succeed if he had the talent and will. The movie opens with the narrator saying, "This is a story of a boy and his dream. But more than that, it's a story of an American boy and a dream that is truly American."

In 1990 TNT released a made-for-TV movie, *The Court Martial of Jackie Robinson*, starring Andre Braugher, which focused on Robinson's battles with racism as a soldier during World War II. In 1944, while assigned to a training camp at Fort Hood in segregated Texas, Robinson, a second lieutenant, 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. By depicting Robinson as a rebellious figure who chafed at the blatant racism he faced, the film foreshadows the traits he would have to initially suppress once he reached the majors.

HBO's *The Soul of the Game*, released in 1996, focused on the hopes and then the frustrations of Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson, the two greatest players in the Negro Leagues, whom Branch Rickey

passed up to integrate the majors in favor of Robinson, played by Blair Underwood. Rickey had long wanted to hire black players, both for moral reasons and because he believed it would increase ticket sales among the growing number of African Americans moving to the big cities. He knew that if the experiment failed, the cause of baseball integration would be set back for many years. Rickey's scouts identified Robinson—who was playing for the Negro League's Kansas City Monarchs after leaving the army—as a potential barrier-breaker. Rickey could have chosen other Negro League players with greater talent or more name recognition, but he wanted someone who could be, in today's terms, a role model. Robinson was young, articulate and well educated. His mother moved the family from Georgia to Pasadena, California in 1920 when Robinson was 14 months ago. Pasadena was deeply segregated, but Robinson lived among and formed friendships with whites growing up there and while attending Pasadena Junior College and UCLA. He was UCLA's 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. Rickey knew that Robinson had a hot temper and strong political views, but he calculated that Robinson could handle the emotional pressure while helping the Dodgers on the field. Robinson promised Rickey that, for at least his rookie year, he would not respond to the inevitable verbal barbs and even physical abuse he would face on a daily basis.

In 1997, America celebrated Robinson with a proliferation of conferences, museum exhibits, plays, and books. Major League Baseball retired Robinson's number—42—for all teams. President Bill Clinton appeared with Rachel Robinson at Shea Stadium to venerate her late husband.

But the next Hollywood movie about Robinson didn't arrive until this year's *42*, written and directed by Brian Helgeland (screenwriter of *L.A. Confidential* and *Mystic River*), under the auspices of Warner Brothers and Legendary Pictures. The real story of baseball's integration has plenty of drama and could have easily been incorporated into the film.

* * *

Starting in the 1930s, reporters for African-American papers (especially Wendell Smith of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Fay Young of the *Chicago Defender*, Joe Bostic of the *People's Voice* in New York, and Sam Lacy of the *Baltimore Afro-American*), and Lester Rodney, sports editor of the Communist paper, the *Daily Worker*, took the lead in pushing baseball's establishment to hire black players. They published open letters to owners, polled white managers and players (some of whom were threatened by the prospect of losing their jobs to blacks, but most of whom said that they had no objections to playing with African Americans), brought black players to unscheduled tryouts at spring training centers, and kept the issue before the public. Several white journalists for mainstream papers joined the chorus for baseball integration.

Progressive unions and civil rights groups picketed outside Yankee Stadium the Polo Grounds, and Ebbets Field in New York City, and Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field in Chicago. They gathered more than a million signatures on petitions, demanding that baseball tear down the color barrier erected by team owners and Commissioner Kennesaw Mountain Landis. In July 1940, the Trade Union Athletic Association held an "End Jim Crow in Baseball" demonstration at the New York World's Fair. The next year, liberal unions sent a delegation to meet with Landis to demand that major league baseball recruit black players. In December 1943, Paul Robeson, the prominent black actor, singer, and activist, addressed baseball's owners at their annual winter meeting in New York, urging them to integrate their

teams. Under orders from Landis, they ignored Robeson and didn't ask him a single question.



National Endowment for the Humanities

In 1945, Isadore Muchnick, a progressive member of the Boston City Council, threatened to deny the Red Sox a permit to play on Sundays unless the team considered hiring black players. Working with several black sportswriters, Muchnick persuaded the reluctant Red Sox general manager, Eddie Collins, to give three Negro League players—Robinson, Sam Jethroe, and Marvin Williams—a tryout at Fenway Park in April of that year. The Sox had no intention of signing any of the players, nor did the Pittsburgh Pirates and Chicago White Sox, who orchestrated similar bogus auditions. But the public pressure and media publicity helped raise awareness and furthered the cause.

Other politicians were allies in the crusade. Running for re-election to the New York City Council in 1945, Ben Davis—an African-American former college football star, and a Communist—distributed a leaflet with the photos of two blacks, a dead soldier and a baseball player. "Good enough to die for his country," it said, "but not good enough for organized baseball." That year, the New York State legislature passed the Quinn-Ives Act, which banned discrimination in hiring, and soon formed a committee to investigate discriminatory hiring practices, including one that focused on baseball. In short order, New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia's established a Committee on Baseball to push the Yankees, Giants, and Dodgers to sign black players. Left-wing Congressman Vito Marcantonio, who represented Harlem, called for an investigation of baseball's racist practices.

This protest movement set the stage for Robinson's entrance into the major leagues. In October 1945, Rickey announced that Robinson had signed a contract with the Dodgers. He sent Robinson to the Dodgers' minor-league team in Montreal for the 1946 season, then brought him up to the Brooklyn team on opening day, April 15, 1947.

The Robinson experiment succeeded—on the field and at the box office. Within a few years, the

Dodgers had hired other black players—pitchers Don Newcombe and Joe Black, catcher Roy Campanella, infielder Jim Gilliam, and Cuban outfielder Sandy Amoros—who helped turn the 1950s Dodgers into one of the greatest teams in baseball history.

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Viewers of *42* will see no evidence of the movement that made Robinson's—and the Dodgers'—success possible. For example, Andrew Holland plays *Pittsburgh Courier* reporter Wendell Smith, but he's depicted as Robinson's traveling companion and the ghost-writer for Robinson's newspaper column during his rookie season. The film ignores Smith's key role as an agitator and leader of the long crusade to integrate baseball before Robinson became a household name.

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 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."

Robinson 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.

In 1960, Robinson supported Hubert Humphrey, the liberal Senator and civil rights stalwart from Minnesota, in his campaign for president. When John Kennedy won the Democratic nomination, however, Robinson shocked his liberal fans by endorsing Richard Nixon. Robinson believed that Nixon had a better track record than JFK on civil rights issues, but by the end of the campaign—especially after Nixon refused to make an appearance in Harlem—he regretted his choice.

During the 1960s, Robinson was a constant presence at civil rights rallies and picket lines, and chaired the NAACP's fundraising drive. Angered by the GOP's opposition to civil rights legislation, he supported Humphrey over Nixon in 1968. But he became increasingly frustrated by the pace of 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."



In 1952, five years after Robinson broke baseball's color barrier, only six of major league baseball's 16 teams had a black player. It was not until 1959 that the last holdout, the Boston Red Sox, brought an African American onto its roster. The black players who followed Robinson shattered the stereotype—once widespread among many team owners, sportswriters, and white fans—that there weren't many African Americans "qualified" to play at the major league level. Between 1949 and 1960, black players won 8 out of 12 Rookie of the Year awards, and 9 out of 12 Most Valuable Player awards in the National League, which was much more integrated than the American League. Many former Negro League players, including Willie Mays, Henry Aaron, Don Newcombe, and Ernie Banks, were perennial All-Stars.



But academic studies conducted from the 1960s through the 1990s uncovered persistent discrimination. For example, teams were likely to favor a weak-hitting white player over a weak-hitting black player to be a benchwarmer or a utility man. And even the best black players had fewer and less lucrative commercial endorsements than their white counterparts.

In the 16 years he lived after his retirement in 1956, Robinson pushed baseball to hire blacks as managers and executives and even refused an invitation to participate in the 1969 Old Timers game because he did not yet see "genuine interest in breaking the barriers that deny access to managerial and front office positions." No major league team had a black manager until Frank Robinson was hired by the Cleveland Indians in 1975. The majors' first black general manager—the Atlanta Braves' Bill Lucas—wasn't hired until 1977.

* * *

Last season, players of color represented 38.2 percent of major-league rosters, according to a report by the Institute for Diversity and Ethics in Sport at the University of Central Florida. Black athletes represented only 8.8 percent of major-league players—a dramatic decline from the peak of 27 percent in 1975, and less than half the 19 percent in 1995. One quarter of last season's African-Americans players were clustered on three teams—the Yankees, Angels, and Dodgers. Their shrinking proportion is due primarily to the growing number of Latino (27.3%) and Asian (1.9%) players, including many foreign-born athletes, now populating major league rosters.

But there are also sociological and economic reasons for the decline of black ballplayers. The semi-pro, sandlot, and industrial teams that once thrived in black communities, serving as feeders to the Negro Leagues and then the major leagues, have disappeared. Basketball and football have replaced baseball as the most popular sports in black communities, where funding for public school baseball teams and neighborhood playgrounds with baseball fields has declined. Major league teams more actively recruit young players from Latin America, who are typically cheaper to hire than black Americans, as Adrian Burgos, in *Playing America's Game: Baseball, Latinos, and the Color Line* (2007) and Rob Ruck, in *Raceball: How the Major Leagues Colonized the Black and Latin Game* (2012) document.

Among today's 30 teams, there are only four managers of color—three blacks (the Reds' Dusty Baker, the Astros' Bo Porter, and the Rangers' Ron Washington) and one Latino (the Braves' Fredi Gonzalez). (Two of last season's Latino managers—the Indians' Manny Acta, and Ozzie Guillen of the Marlins—were fired). One Latino (Ruben Amaro Jr. of the Phillies) and one African American (Michael Hill of the Marlins) serve as general managers. (White Sox GM Ken Williams, an African

American, was promoted to executive VP during the off-season.) Arturo Moreno, a Latino, has owned the Los Angeles Angels since 2003. Basketball great Earvin "Magic" Johnson, part of the new group that purchased the Los Angeles Dodgers last year, is the first African-American owner of a major league team.

Like baseball, American society—including our workplaces, Congress and other legislative bodies, friendships, and even families—is more integrated than it was in Robinson's day. But there is still an ongoing debate about the magnitude of racial progress, as measured by persistent residential segregation, a significantly higher poverty rate among blacks than whites, and widespread racism within our criminal justice and prison systems.

As Robinson understood, these inequities cannot be solved by individual effort alone. It also requires grassroots activism and protest to attain changes in government policy and business practices. *42*, misses an opportunity to recap this important lesson. Robinson's legacy is to remind us of the unfinished agenda of the civil rights revolution and of the important role that movements play in moving the country closer to its ideals.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/the-real-story-of-baseballs-integration-that-you-wont-see-in-i-42-i/274886/>

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