

2023

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Recommended Citation

Cantrell, Amy Elizabeth (2023) "“A Freedom Rider Before Freedom Rides:” Jackie Robinson Beyond Baseball," *Gettysburg College Headquarters*: Vol. 2, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/gchq/vol2/iss1/3>

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“A Freedom Rider Before Freedom Rides:” Jackie Robinson Beyond Baseball

Abstract

This paper seeks to evaluate the historical discourse surrounding the narrative of Jackie Robinson. Famed for being the first African American player to break the long withstanding color barrier in professional sports, a vast majority of discussion surrounding his story has centered solely on his athletic prowess and triumphs. However, as this paper will explore, Jackie Robinson’s contributions to the wider framework of racial equality and civil rights within America extend far beyond the baseball diamond. Evaluating both his laurels as an activist and socio-political figure as well as how these merits have been depicted, or neglected, in media representations of his life, this paper identifies the very important, yet often overlooked, aspects of Robinson’s life and accomplishments beyond baseball.

Keywords

Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights, Baseball, Integration

Cover Page Footnote

This paper was the product of my involvement in a Historical Methods course taught by Professor Scott Hancock of Gettysburg College’s Africana Studies and History departments. Professor Hancock’s guidance was instrumental in advising both the research and writing components of this project.

“A Freedom Rider Before Freedom Rides:” Jackie Robinson Beyond Baseball – *Amy E. Cantrell, Gettysburg College*

Jack “Jackie” Robinson is widely heralded as the pioneer of integration in professional sports. His ten-year career with the Brooklyn Dodgers between 1947 and 1957 marked a paradigm shift towards increased inclusivity not only in America’s favorite pastime, but also throughout the nation’s social, political, and economic framework. Competing at a time of heightened racial prejudice and discrimination, Robinson faced hostility on all fronts, yet his perseverance, drive, and resilience transformed the sporting world for a national audience. Beyond his baseball career, Robinson played a vital role in shaping the narrative of the Civil Rights Movement, a fact often overlooked in recounts of his life. By utilizing his newfound platform in a campaign for integration and equality, Jackie Robinson became a paramount figure for African American civil rights progression. Unfortunately, the tendency to focus solely on the story of his baseball career has undermined these contributions. Adopting a wider scope, the full weight of his commitment to civil rights, both on and off the baseball diamond, showcases a man who dedicated the entirety of his life towards combatting the racial disparities which have defined American institutions and society. As Martin Luther King Jr. so aptly described him in 1962, Robinson was a “sit-inner before the sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides.”¹

Prior to his baseball career, Robinson had already made strides to challenge dispositions of bigotry. In 1939, Robinson began his collegiate career at University of California, Los Angeles, enrolling at a time when “the student population was less than 1% African American and there

¹ Martin Luther King, “Hall of Fame,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1962.

was not a single black faculty member.”² To this day, he remains the only athlete to letter in four sports in the college’s history – baseball, football, basketball, and track.³ Despite Jackie Robinson’s collegiate stardom, propelled by his competitive spirit, after a brief two years he left to join the army. He enlisted in April of 1942, at 25 years of age, and was assigned to a segregated unit in Fort Riley, Kansas where over the next two years he would rise to the rank of second lieutenant. However, in the summer of 1944, Robinson would receive a court-martial after refusing to move to back of a military bus in Camp Hood, Texas. The ordeal occurred as Robinson was travelling back to base following a social gathering at a segregated officers’ club. Robinson’s refusal directly challenged a racialized standard of the Jim Crow south, one predicated on an aggressive resistance to social integration efforts following the end of the Civil War in 1865. Although the military camp, as other federal properties, did not legally enforce such discriminatory regulations, these social constructs persisted in accordance with the norms many white soldiers operated within. Throughout the ensuing investigation, prejudices flared as several of the white witnesses commented on their disapproval of Robinson’s actions and even his high-ranking position in the army. On July 17th, he was charged with six violations of the Articles of War, one of which included drunkenness despite the fact that Robinson did not drink.⁴ Robinson would later commend his lawyer’s closing remarks and assessment that the trial reflected “not a case involving any violation of the Articles of War, or even of military tradition, but simply a situation in which a few individuals sought to vent their bigotry on a Negro they considered ‘uppity’ because he had the audacity to exercise rights that belonged to him as an American and a Soldier.” Deliberations

² “Jackie Robinson, 1919-1972: A Century of Impact,” Jackie Robinson (University of California, Los Angeles, January 24, 2019), <https://newsletter.alumni.ucla.edu/connect/2019/feb/jackie/default.htm>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martin Stezano, “Jackie Robinson’s Battles for Equality on and Off the Baseball Field,” History (A&E Television Networks, April 13, 2018), <https://www.history.com/news/jackie-robinson-color-barrier-baseball>.

of an all-white jury would eventually acquit Robinson of all charges. Because of this, he would request retirement from the Army and receive an honorary discharge several months later.⁵ The next year would mark Robinson's first meeting with the Dodgers' General Manager Branch Rickey and the beginning of his future as a national icon.

During this monumental meeting, Branch Rickey is famously reported to have stressed his need for "a man with the guts enough not to fight back."⁶ Rickey's request for Robinson to "turn the other cheek" underlined the struggle Robinson would go on to face, one fraught with resistance from his competition, fans and even his own teammates. Rising above this struggle, he would proceed to win the first-ever baseball Rookie of the Year award in 1947 and act as a key player in six World Series throughout his time in baseball, including the triumphant 1955 series against the New York Yankees.⁷ The remainder of his career would be marked by versatility in play and strong athletic prowess. However, this ten-year span, though undoubtedly historic, fails to enshrine the entirety of his life's dedication towards furthering civil equality, even prior to the rise of the popular movement during the 1960s.

Championed by Branch Rickey as being fiercely resilient to bigotry, Robinson has historically often been depicted, inadvertently or not, as a conciliatory figure. Resilient to the struggles that came from being the first African American player to break the long withstanding color-line in professional baseball. However, prior to, during, and after his baseball career, Robinson operated along lines of fierce and persistent confrontation to racial prejudices and segregation. Following his retirement from Major League Baseball, Robinson used his position as

⁵ Adam Kama, "The Court Martial of Jackie Robinson," *The Army Lawyer*, no. 1 (2020): pp. 68-82, <https://doi.org/http://ezpro.cc.gettysburg.edu:2048/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/trade-journals/court-martial-jackie-robinson/docview/2396316754/se-2?accountid=2694>.

⁶ Norman O Unger, "Jackie Robinson Dies at 53," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 25, 1972, p. 32.

⁷ Jessie Kratz, "Jackie Robinson's 100th," A Blog of the U.S. National Archives (National Archives and Records Administration, February 27, 2019), <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2019/02/27/jackie-robinsons-100th/>.

a celebrated national icon as well as his newly acquired role as Vice-President of New York's Chock-Full O-Nuts restaurant chain to push an agenda of civil liberty and equality.

Often collaborating with major accredited organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Robinson assisted in organizing boycotts, delivered speeches, and collaborated on initiatives to further equal opportunity for African Americans. On one such occasion, Robinson would be photographed picketing alongside protestors in Cleveland, Ohio, during a protest of segregated lunch counters. The event was organized by the NAACP and included strong student involvement.⁸ The boycott of the discriminatory practices in restaurants and shops reflected grassroots approaches towards countering segregation and prejudices, a tactic Robinson often advocated for. In 1956, Robinson's efforts were lauded as the organization awarded him the esteemed Spingarn Medal. Citing his role as a symbol of hope and progress for racial minorities, specifically for the youth populations, the NAACP noted that he "has been keenly aware of his responsibilities as a citizen of a democracy."⁹

⁸ Eric Moskowitz, "On Jackie Robinson Day, 100 Photos of the Icon on the Field and with Family," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, January 31, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/31/sports/jackie-robinson-photos-100th-birthday.html>.

⁹ "Library of Congress," *Library of Congress* (United States Legislative Information, December 8, 1956), <https://www.loc.gov/collections/jackie-robinson-baseball/articles-and-essays/baseball-the-color-line-and-jackie-robinson/citation-for-jackie-robinson/>.



Jackie Robinson alongside picketers in Cleveland, Ohio, on April 23rd, 1960. Sponsored by the NAACP, the picket was organized in protest of discrimination at lunch counters and was a part of a larger, nationwide boycott.

Photo Source: Associated Press

September of 1957 marked a crucial year in path towards accomplishing the Civil Rights Movement's principal goal of integrating and equalizing the American public school system, one met with combative resistance in the Jim Crow south. Earlier that decade, in 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education* that segregation in schools was unconstitutional, thus launching the tumultuous process of integration. Tensions reached a pinnacle when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus instigated the Little Rock Crisis after calling the state's national guard forces to block school entry of nine African American students at Central

High School.¹⁰ Although President Eisenhower did respond, sending the 101st Airborne Division to uphold the court's decision, Robinson quickly voiced his frustration with what he deemed a weak response. Specifically, Robinson criticized Eisenhower's statement that African Americans should have "patience," arguing that the government needed to adopt a stronger, more aggressive stance to ensure "the freedoms we [African Americans] are entitled to under the Constitution." He went on to declare that "we want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago."¹¹

Throughout the 1960s, Robinson also employed his regular column in the newspaper, *The New Amsterdam News*, to advance arguments not only for integration in sports, but also issues relating to a wider narrative of African American civil rights. Often, "Robinson came to take almost militant stands, challenging oppression by calling for boycotts... years before such strategies were adopted by a younger generation."¹² His articles affirmed support and solidarity along a wide array of athletic, political, and social issues ranging from Muhammad Ali's religious-based refusal to pledge military service to commentary regarding presidential elections. Although a devout supporter of the Republican party, Robinson would eventually become a stark critic of Richard Nixon.

Robinson had long advocated for a more racially diverse GOP, arguing throughout much of the 1950s that it would be beneficial for racial minorities to avoid becoming confined to one singular political party. Although it was a shock when Robinson initially committed to Nixon's

¹⁰ Gerald D Jaynes, "Little Rock Nine," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., November 8, 2021), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Little-Rock-Nine>.

¹¹ Jackie Robinson to President Eisenhower, May 13, 1958, in *Civil Rights: The Little Rock School Integration Crisis*, <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/186627?q=jackie%20robinson#.VgWe6FhEAd8.link>.

¹² Raymond McCaffrey, "From Baseball Icon to Crusading Columnist: How Jackie Robinson Used His Column in the African-American Press to Continue His Fight for Civil Rights in Sports," *Journalism History* 46, no. 3 (2020): pp. 185-207, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00947679.2020.1757345>.

campaign, he cited Nixon's progressive attitudes towards race-related issues as a determining factor in his decision. Additionally, Robinson expressed his disdain of the opposing candidate, Senator John F. Kennedy's "open courtship of Southern governors."¹³ Kennedy, who recognized the value of Robinson as a galvanizer of African American voters, would send a letter to him in July of 1960, four months prior to the elections. In the letter, Kennedy hoped to reiterate his commitment to the civil rights issues Robinson so valued whilst also addressing his expressed concerns over Kennedy's relationship with Southern politicians. Kennedy specifically noted that although he had engaged in dialogue with Governors from every state, a stipulation of his role in politics, "that does not imply my agreement with them or their agreement with me on particular issues." Going on to reassert his allegiance in ending all discrimination ranging from housing to the administration of justice, Kennedy commended peaceful protestors as examples of a uniquely American tradition of standing up for one's rights. He also emphasized his appreciation for Robinson's devotion to "fulfilling the American promise of equal opportunity for all," something guaranteed in both the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. Ending the letter by reaffirming what he hoped would finally be the shift in Robinson's perspective needed to sway voters, Kennedy declared his unwavering commitment to an issue that would define not only the upcoming elections but also American political discord throughout the remainder of the century.¹⁴

Soon thereafter, Robinson would become an outspoken critic of the Nixon-Lodge campaign despite his initial support. His reasoning for the switch stemmed primarily from Nixon's

¹³ Michael G Long, "Jackie Robinson Fought for a Racially Inclusive GOP," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago Tribune, May 31, 2019), <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-perspec-jackie-robinson-100-politics-mlk-nixon-0131-20190130-story.html>.

¹⁴ John F. Kennedy to Jackie Robinson, July 1, 1960.

omission of Harlem during his campaign as well as his lackluster response to Reverend King's imprisonment, Nixon offering "no comment." Following Kennedy's electoral victory, Robinson was also quoted saying that he was surprised with President Kennedy's attention to civil rights issues, noting that he was "doing a really good job in almost everything including the field where I thought he might not—civil rights."¹⁵ Despite this shift, years later, in 1966, he would be hired as the Special Assistant for Community Affairs for Governor Nelson Rockefeller of New York, solidifying his continued commitment to the Republican Party, although it should be noted that Rockefeller was perceived as more liberal and progressive than other party members of the era. In reference to his political ambitions, Robinson would announce his primary goal as disseminating Rockefeller's record and attention to minority groups, something he hoped would improve his popularity amongst the African American minority. This assignment would further allow him to continue advocating for his championed idea of a racially inclusive Republican party.¹⁶

Even delving into international debates, Robinson offered commentary on the proposed boycott of the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico. Although the boycott was ultimately cancelled, those Olympic games marked a watershed moment in international history and continue to stand as a consequential symbol of black power movements. In reference to the most vocal athletes, track stars Tommie Smith and John Carlos, Robinson stated, "I do support the individuals who decided to make the sacrifice by giving up the chance to win an Olympics medal. I respect their courage. We need to understand the reason and frustration behind these protests."¹⁷ His emphasis on the reasoning behind the boycott reflected popular opinion of many African American athletes and activists at the time and was emblematic of growing frustration with their

¹⁵ "Nixon Is Criticized by Jackie Robinson," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1961, p. 15.

¹⁶ "Jackie Robinson Is Appointed Aide to Rockefeller," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1966, p. 31.

¹⁷ Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (Ballantine Books, 1998), 422.

long-held struggle for equality both on and off playing fields. Both Dr. King and Robinson often criticized how America championed African American athletic greats yet welcomed them home to the same racial prejudices and hostility once competition ceased.¹⁸ Beyond this vocalized support, Robinson also signed onto an initial official statement facilitated by the American Committee on Africa alongside professional basketball player K.C. Jones and other African American athletes, both professional and collegiate. The statement, denoting a more globally centered reasoning behind the boycott, condemned the International Olympics Committee's restoration of South Africa's membership in the games. During a period of highly contested white minority rule, the signatories emphasized that should "the IOC accept South African tokenism, it will appear that the international sportsmen condone South Africa's apartheid policy."¹⁹ This was a particularly monumental act given its direct confrontation of enduring and deeply seated racial norms at an international level.

¹⁸ Dave Zirin, "The Explosive 1968 Olympics," *International Socialist Review*, no. 61 (2008), <https://doi.org/https://isreview.org/issue/61/explosive-1968-olympics/index.html>.

¹⁹ "African Activist Archives," *African Activist Archives* (Michigan State University Libraries Special Collections, February 8, 1968), https://africanactivist.msu.edu/document_metadata.php?objectid=210-808-10983.



Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King Jr. discussing the integration of the University of Mississippi prior to a press conference in New York. September 19th, 1962.

Photograph Source: Bettmann Archive, Getty Images

Jackie Robinson's relationship with celebrated leader Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. was also symbolic of his commanding position within a wider frame of civil rights beyond athletics. The two received honorary Doctor of Law degrees from Howard University in 1957, Robinson becoming Dr. John Roosevelt Robinson to the academic world. He was the first professional athlete to have been honored in such a way by the esteemed university.²⁰ Later, during the 1962 annual "Freedom Dinner," hosted by the Southern Christian Leadership Council in Birmingham, Alabama, Robinson would deliver a speech on King. Praising the activist for his actions, Robinson

²⁰ "Jackie Robinson Now Dr. John," *The New York Times*, June 8, 1957, p. 9.

stated, “I think every Negro and fair-minded white person ought to throw their arms around him, give him all the backing and support possible and acclaim him for what he is – a great leader of the Twentieth century.”²¹ Robinson and his son would later attend King’s infamous “I Have a Dream” speech in August of 1963 and continue to cross paths with King, their friendship and mutual respect evolving as the movement accelerated. Although they did disagree on certain issues, most notably their opposing stances on the Vietnam War – which Dr. King was vehemently opposed to and Robinson perceived as a patriotic necessity, the two often worked in cohesion to mobilize and inspire a nation. Prior to Dr. King’s untimely death in 1968, he would be quoted saying “Jackie Robinson made my success possible. Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did.”²²

Following King’s arrest and subsequent jailing in 1963, the catalyst for his infamous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Robinson and his wife, Rachel, would host a jazz concert to raise funds for King’s organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The “Afternoon of Jazz,” held at Robinson’s home in Stamford, Connecticut, directly responded to calls for bail money by Reverend King’s executive assistant, Walker Tee Walker. The Birmingham campaign had left hundreds imprisoned and abused, including children. Utilizing his connections and influence, Robinson organized a lineup of musicians ranging from Dizzy Gillespie to Marian Logan, all of whom agreed to perform pro bono. The event would go on to raise over \$14,000. Two months later, spurred by the success of the first, a second such event would bring in an additional \$30,000 for the SCLC and the NAACP, King then free and in attendance. The

²¹ David Prince, “MLK, Jackie Robinson, and US,” Prince on Preaching (David Prince, January 16, 2017), <https://www.davidprince.com/2017/01/16/mlk-jackie-robinson-us/>.

²² Vincent Davis, “The Memory and Legacy of Jackie Robinson Lives on, in Perpetuity,” New York Amsterdam News (Amsterdam News, April 18, 2019), <https://amsterdamnews.com/news/2019/04/18/memory-and-legacy-jackie-robinson-lives-perpetuity/>.

Robinsons would continue to host these “Afternoons of Jazz” several times in the following years, primarily in response to major socio-political events. In 1964, they would collect approximately \$30,000, this time directed towards the construction of a community center in honor of the young activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner, who were brutally murdered in Philadelphia that summer. The murders, which resonated throughout American minority communities, were connected to the activists’ involvement in the Freedom Summer, a campaign aimed at fostering greater African American voter turnout in the south. Several years later, in 1971, the devastating death of their son, Jackie Jr., would prompt the family to host yet again, the profits benefiting a drug rehabilitation center in his honor. At the time of his death, he was working as assistant regional director for Daytop, Inc., a drug rehabilitation center based in Connecticut. Jackie Jr. had a tumultuous history with drugs, having become addicted after returning from military service in Vietnam, one that inspired the Robinsons’ continual involvement in drug awareness and rehabilitation programs.²³ Beyond this activism, the “Afternoons of Jazz” events continue to this day, now facilitated by Rachel Robinson. Currently all proceeds are administered by the Jackie Robinson Foundation, distributed in scholarships to minority students in needs.²⁴

²³ “Jack Robinson Jr. Dies in Car Crash,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 1971, p. 22.

²⁴ Michael G Long, “Music to His Ears: How Jackie Robinson's Love of Jazz Helped Civil Rights Movement,” *The Undeclared* (ESP Enterprises, April 15, 2020), <https://theundefeated.com/features/how-jackie-robinsons-love-of-jazz-helped-civil-rights-movement/>.



An “Afternoon of Jazz” hosted at the Robinson’s home in Stamford, Connecticut on September 8th, 1963. The event was organized to raise much-needed funds for Martin Luther King Jr.’s organization, The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Photograph Credit: Associated Press

Robinson was also able to use his prestige to foster communications with the government at a more personal level. Throughout his life, he sent a series of letters and telegrams to America’s White House, addressing significant events and encouraging more aggressive action from various presidencies in furthering social justice initiatives. In 1957, he telegraphed President Dwight D. Eisenhower urging for a stronger and more active Civil Rights Act, voicing the opinion of the “many true Americans who insist on equal rights for all.”²⁵ In 1965, responding to the violent opposition which met the peaceful marchers in Selma, Alabama, Robinson sent a telegram to President Lyndon B. Johnson. Jarred by the assault on the protestors – those including women,

²⁵ Jackie Robinson to E. Frederick Morrow, telegram, August 13, 1957, *Jackie Robinson: Civil Rights Advocate*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

children, and clergy members – many of whom were killed or left with severe injuries, Robinson yet again vocalized the shock and frustration of an African American collective. His statement articulated the importance that “you [President Johnson] take immediate action in Alabama. One more day of savage treatment by legalized hatchet men could lead to open warfare by aroused negroes. America cannot afford this.”²⁶ The warning seemingly foreshadowed the rise of more combative organizations, such as the Black Panther Party, the following year.

Years later, only six months prior to his death, Robinson would pen a letter to the Deputy Special Assistant to the President, Roland Elliott. The letter would signal a growing shift in popular opinion during the time, one indicative of growing African American frustration with passive governmental responses, a trend which prompted a transfer away from King’s nonviolent methodology. Robinson warned, “Black America has asked so little, but if you can’t see the anger that comes from rejection, you are treading a dangerous course. We older blacks, unfortunately, were willing to wait. Today’s young blacks are ready to explode! We had better take some definitive action or I am afraid the consequences could be nation shattering.”²⁷ This pessimism was further aggravated by major setbacks to the nonviolent progressive movement for civil rights. The assassinations of important political and social figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, President Kennedy, and his brother, Bobby Kennedy, weighed heavily on any headway made. Personal struggles, including his growing health issues and the loss of his son and mother, only augmented Robinson’s growing frustrations with government inaction.

Robinson would succumb to a heart attack on October 24th, 1972, only nine days after his attendance of that year’s World Series Game Two in Cincinnati, Ohio. There, Robinson threw out

²⁶ Jackie Robinson to President Lyndon B. Johnson, telegram, March 9, 1965, *Jackie Robinson: Civil Rights Advocate*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

²⁷ Jackie Robinson to Roland L. Elliot, telegram, April 20, 1972, *Jackie Robinson: Civil Rights Advocate*, The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

the first pitch and gave a speech commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of his induction into professional baseball. Much like with the government, Robinson's relationship with the MLB had unfortunately soured, primarily as a result of the organization's unwillingness to hire racial minorities to managerial positions. During his speech, Robinson would reiterate his hope for a more inclusive MLB, noting "I am extremely proud and pleased to be here this afternoon, but I must admit that I am going to be tremendously more pleased and more proud when I look at that third-based coaching line one day and see a Black face managing in baseball."²⁸ Sadly, his death would prevent this dream from being realized for him. Three years later, however, Frank Robinson would become the first African American baseball manager for the Cleveland Indians and all of baseball.²⁹

Robinson's obituary, featured on the front page of *The New York Times* the day after his death, would declare him "America's most significant athlete" in regard to "sociological impact." Highlighting his role as a pioneer of integration in professional sports as well as his later role as an "influential member of the Republican party," the article recalled Robinson's commitment to his beliefs and willingness to challenge what opposed them. Referencing his stout commitment to this ideology, Robinson said, "I was told that it would cost me some awards... but if I had to keep quiet to get an award. It wasn't worth it. Awards are great, but if I got one for being a nice kid, what good is it?"³⁰

²⁸ Rich Puerzer, "Jackie's Last Stand: Jackie Robinson's Last Public Appearance and His Appeal for the Integration of Major League Baseball Management," Society for American Baseball Research (Society for American Baseball Research, April 15, 2021), <https://sabr.org/research/article/jackies-last-stand-jackie-robinsons-last-public-appearance-and-his-appeal-for-the-integration-of-major-league-baseball-management/>.

²⁹ Jeremy Hayes, "On This Day: 42 Years Ago, No. 42 Jackie Robinson Called for Change in Baseball," The Suffolk Journal (Suffolk University, October 15, 2014), <https://thesuffolkjournal.com/15706/sports/on-this-day-42-years-ago-no-42-jackie-robinson-called-for-change-in-baseball/>.

³⁰ Dave Anderson, "Jackie Robinson, First Black in Major Leagues, Dies," *The New York Times*, October 25, 1972, p. 1.

Over 2,500 people would attend his funeral, where Reverend Jesse Jackson would deliver a hero's eulogy. He remembered that "when Jackie took the field, something within us reminded us of our birthright to be free. And somebody without reminded us that it could be attained... for a fleeting moment, American became one nation under God. This man turned the stumbling block into a steppingstone."³¹ Buried in Cypress Hills Cemetery in Brooklyn, the very place where Robinson forever altered the course of history, his tombstone reads "1919-1982." Jackson would declare that "on that dash is where we live. And for everyone there is a dash of possibility, to choose the high road or the low road, to make things better or worse. On that dash, he snapped the barbed wire of prejudice."³²

Regrettably, much contemporary work on Robinson fails to account for the vastness of his contributions to the civil rights movement beyond his baseball career and rather confines him to the sole image as a benign and peaceful athlete. The three cinematic accounts of the Jackie Robinson story have thus served as reflections of the broader American public's responses to racial dilemmas, ones which often distort the true narrative. First released in 1950, *The Jackie Robinson Story* delved into his childhood through the beginning years of his Dodger career. Forty years later, in 1990, *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* would also convey a story along this timeline, though beginning with his college career rather than his childhood. Lastly, the most contemporary piece, the 2013 biopic *42*, examined the brief span of his minor league experience with the Montreal Royals through his first Major League season.

The former, *The Jackie Robinson Story*, stressed the then championed ideal that "fairness will prevail," the narrative voice asserting that the triumph of Robinson's baseball career was only

³¹ *Eulogy for Jackie Robinson, Baseball: A Film by Ken Burns* (The Baseball Film Project, 1994), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsI_X6iRb7Y.

³² Dave Anderson, "But on That Dash Is Where We Live," *The New York Times*, October 28, 1972, p. 1.

made possible by a “country that is truly free... a country where every child has the opportunity to become president or play baseball for the Brooklyn Dodgers.”³³ Given the rise of Cold War tensions which fueled a need for nationalism, the film strategically omitted the prevalence of systemic racism in America. This omission aligned with many narratives pushed in 1950s mainstream media yet disregarded Robinson’s stark critiques of American social and political structures, ones which disproportionately harmed African Americans and other minority groups.

Therefore, the subsequent 1990 made-for-television adaptation offered a wider and more visceral examination of racial issues during the beginning of Robinson’s life. Featuring clips and imagines from the Jim Crow era, such as the infamous photograph of the lynching which inspired the song, “Strange Fruit” by Billie Holiday, this movie strayed from the passive themes of the first. However, it once more neglected Robinson’s experiences and efforts beyond the beginnings of his career. Although it discussed the lesser-known events of his court-martial, the film failed to reach a wider audience and thus much of the relevant information was left unacknowledged. Even so, this was the first piece which attempted to shift Robinson’s legacy away from his athletic career. The film’s coda included the lines, “In 1947 Jack Roosevelt Robinson became the first black man to play major league baseball, and in 1962 he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. He devoted the rest of his life to the civil rights movement and the quality of all men.”³⁴ Additionally, the emphasis on a more grassroots approach to baseball integration allowed for the commendation of strong African American figures who played vital roles in the process, including the efforts of those such as long-time Pittsburgh Courier journalist Wendell Smith.³⁵ This more progressive approach developed into a primary reason for critique of the most recent account, 42.

³³ *The Jackie Robinson Story* (Eagle-Lion Films, 1950).

³⁴ *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson* (Turner Pictures, 1990).

³⁵ Elliot Abramson, “42: The Jackie Robinson Story,” *Nine* 22, no. 1 (2013): pp. 176-180, <https://doi.org/https://www.proquest.com/docview/1503107415?parentSessionId=hV%2BxfT5nI%2B8pXC6T9tglp>

Arguably most indicative of modern perceptions of Jackie Robinson, *42* offered a more emotional recount of his first season with the Dodgers. Though powerful, it too failed to fully encapsulate the depth of his contributions to the civil rights movement and, in a sense, reversed the ideas forwarded by *The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson*. Depicting Branch Rickey as the moral heroine mainly responsible for integration, the film disregards others' efforts, especially those by African American journalists and activists who also argued for integration beyond the economically based reasons of Rickey. The movie was also criticized for its portrayal of Robinson as more accommodating and relatively docile, its narrow scope limiting awareness of Robinson as a fierce opposer of bigotry and racism. Because of the focus on Robinson solely as a ballplayer, the audience was impeded from understanding the extent of his accomplishments beyond sports.³⁶ This in turn has shaped the way that today's public views and remembers the man who dedicated his life towards furthering the fight for racial equality and progress.

Frustrated by the historically narrow focus of Hollywood, and America as a whole, on his career in baseball, Robinson was prompted to dedicate a vast majority of his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*, to his life beyond sports. Deemed "too political" by the initial publisher, Random House, the book would ultimately be first published in 1972, only two years prior to his death.³⁷ Yet despite this attempt to shift the scope of conversation, modern portrayals of his life, as seen in *42*, continue to offer a limited view of his life and efforts. Notably, all three mentioned accounts fail to address Robinson's socio-political endeavors following his baseball career.

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³⁶ Lisa Doris Alexander, "The Jackie Robinson Story vs. The Court-Martial of Jackie Robinson vs. *42*: Hollywood's Representations of Jackie Robinson's Legacy," *Nine* 24, no. 1/2 (2016): pp. 89-102, <https://doi.org/https://www.proquest.com/docview/1973344805?parentSessionId=ZS4gFjIJvZqBFxd68gfoMgUEFuGmohVUQQ0PI8QxWgo%3D&parentSessionId=irqQJ2I8xU5tDbMw9X%2FGw%2FqTMazQqoGUzgxMOSneqs%3D&accountid=2694>.

³⁷ Arnold Rampersad, in *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (Random House Publishing Group, 2011), p. 435.

Professor of African American Studies at Wayne State University, Lisa Alexander, would emphasize these failures as the fault of “filmmakers [who] make the mistake of thinking Robinson’s legacy ends there and that does a huge disservice to the audience and to Robinson himself. Unfortunately, the things we should not forget about Robinson’s story have yet to be adequately portrayed in popular film.”³⁸

Undoubtedly, Robinson’s status as the first player to break the color barrier in professional sports should remain celebrated. However, his continued commitment to racial justice should become a staple in discourse. As historian William C. Kashatus noted in 1997, “Had he done nothing else with his life after 1947, Jackie Robinson could have easily rested on his laurels as an American legend. But he didn’t. Instead, he continued to help define the civil rights movement.”³⁹ His life was plagued by the struggles that came with being an African American in a nation struggling to cope with a violent colonial past and the rising dichotomy between integration and long-held racial hierarchies. Yet because of this, Robinson aptly embodied the complexities and intricacies of the Civil Rights movement. His approaches reflected a man who redefined sports and a nation with both passion and controversy. Receiving criticism from all fronts throughout his life, Robinson remained devoted to his beliefs and hoped for an integrated and equal America. This unyielding commitment and self-determination paved the way for a man who would reshape the American social and political structure for the foreseeable future.

Robinson would write in his autobiography, “many people resented my impatience and honesty, but I never cared about acceptance as much as I cared about respect.” He would also write

³⁸ Alexander, “The Jackie Robinson Story vs. The Court- Martial of Jackie Robinson vs. 42: Hollywood's Representations of Jackie Robinson's Legacy,” pp. 89-102.

³⁹ William C Kashatus, “Martin Luther King Inspired by Jackie Robinson,” William C. Kashatus (William C. Kashatus, January 18, 1997), <http://www.historylive.net/op-eds-bill-kashatus/martin-luther-king-inspired-by-jackie-robinson/>.

of his motivations: “I don’t like to be in debt. And I owe... until hatred is recognized as a disease, a scourge, an epidemic, and treated as such.”⁴⁰ His death marked the end of an era for an icon who had done much to promote inclusivity and equality in athletics and beyond. However, his legacy would live on through his charity operations and his lasting impact on the minds and mentalities of American society, throughout which one singular truth persists: Jackie Robinson’s contributions to America were by no means limited to his time on the baseball diamond.

⁴⁰ Jackie Robinson and Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made* (Hopewell, New Jersey: Ecco Press, 1995), 422.

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Caption: "Hosting an Expansive Garden Party with His Wife, Rachel, to Raise Funds for the N.A.A.C.P., the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Congress of Racial Equality. The Party, at the Robinson Home in Stamford, Conn., Was Attended by Martin Luther King Jr., Benny Goodman, and NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins." The New York Times. Associated Press, January 31, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2019/01/31/sports/100-photos-jackie-robinson/s/30Robinson-ast40.html>.

Original Caption: "Former Baseball Star Jackie Robinson Grabbed a Sign and Joined a Picket Line in Cleveland, Ohio, to Protest Discrimination against Blacks at Southern Lunch Counters, 1960. The Picketing Was Organized by the N.A.A.C.P." Associated Press Images. Associated Press, June 12, 2013. <http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/Watchf-AP-A-OH-USA-APHS448024-Jackie-Robinson/79dcf222c28f4cfaa9bc70c4b52e5b9b/27/1>.