

## Jackie Robinson, 1919-1972: The First Black Player in Modern Major League Baseball

He became a national hero to both black and white Americans because of his skill, bravery and restraint. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*  
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ANNOUNCER:

Welcome to PEOPLE IN AMERICA, a program in Special English on the Voice of America. Today Shirley Griffith and Rich Kleinfeldt tell about a man who changed professional baseball in the United States. Jackie Roosevelt Robinson was the first black man to play in modern major league baseball.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

After World War Two, many Americans still believed that people of different races should not mix.

In some parts of the country, blacks and whites lived in separate areas and went to separate schools. Blacks who tried to change the system risked being beaten or killed.

Blacks were not permitted to play on professional baseball teams or in any other major league sport. No black man had played for a major league baseball team since eighteen eighty-four. In that year, American baseball organizations agreed to bar blacks. That began changing when Jackie Robinson played his first game for New York's Brooklyn Dodgers on April fifteenth, nineteen forty-seven.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Jackie Robinson grew up in a family of five children in Pasadena, California, near Los Angeles. His father had left. His mother did not earn much money, so Jackie Robinson learned to make his own way in life. It was in California that Jackie Robinson first learned the ugliness of racial hatred. White families who did not want to live near them repeatedly tried to force them to move away.

Jackie Robinson established himself early as an athlete. He was a star player while attending the University of California at Los Angeles.



Jackie Robinson

Jackie won honors in baseball, basketball, football and track. He was named to the All-American football team. He was considered the best athlete on America's west coast.

Jackie Robinson left college early because of financial problems. He joined the United States Army in nineteen forty-one, during the Second World War. He became a lieutenant after boxing champion Joe Louis pushed for Robinson to be trained as an officer. However, after three years, Robinson was dismissed from the army because he objected to a racial order. He refused to move to the back of a bus.

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen forty-five, there were not many jobs open to a black man, even someone who had attended college. Robinson wanted to play professional baseball. Blacks, however, were not permitted to play in the major leagues. So, he decided to play with the Negro Baseball League. The Negro League teams were started in the nineteen twenties to give black people a place to play baseball.

Many of the best baseball players in the United States played in the Negro Leagues before white professional teams began accepting black players. The skills and records of black ball players were as good as major league white players. It was a hard life for Negro League players. They took long trips by bus. They changed clothes in farmhouses and shared bath water with teammates.

Many eating places did not serve food to blacks. They had to eat outside or on the road. And they were not permitted to sleep at hotels for whites. Many players slept on the bus.

VOICE TWO:

Jackie Robinson played for the Kansas City Monarchs. It was one of the most famous baseball teams in the Negro League. But, he was unhappy in the Negro League because of the difficult life there. In a statement from the book "The History of Baseball, Nineteen-Oh-Seven," actor Ossie Davis expresses hope for change in the sport.

OSSIE DAVIS: "Baseball should be taken seriously by the colored player -- and in this effort of his great ability will open the avenue in the near future wherein he may walk hand in hand with the opposite race in the greatest of all American games -- baseball."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

In nineteen forty-five, Jackie Robinson signed an agreement with Branch Rickey to play for the Dodgers. Rickey was president of the team. He wanted to find a

black player who could deal with the insults and racial pressure he would face in the league.

He wanted a black player who would show restraint at all times. Rickey thought Jackie Robinson was good enough as a player and strong enough as a person to succeed. He made Robinson promise that he would never show his anger on the baseball field. Jackie Robinson accepted that condition. He said:

JACKIE ROBINSON: "I knew that I was going to be somewhat out front and perhaps, I would have to take a lot of abuse. I knew that this was bigger than any one individual and I would have to do whatever I possibly could to control myself."

VOICE TWO:

Some observers said that Jackie Robinson was not the best player in the Negro Leagues. Others said that he was chosen for his communications skills and educational level and because he was an established sports star.

David Faulkner wrote a book about Robinson's life. It is called "Great Time Coming: The Life of Jackie Robinson from Baseball to Birmingham." In it, he talks about the end of racial divisions in baseball.

DAVID FAULKNER: "For many years, there had been an active campaign against segregated baseball led by Negro newspaper editors and, strangely enough, by the Communist party, which from the middle nineteen thirties on, had actively campaigned against segregated baseball. There were a number of pending bills in different legislatures challenging fair employment practices. By nineteen forty-five, there was a lot of heat in a lot of different areas -- professional baseball was certainly feeling that. Robinson in a sense was the right person at the right time."

VOICE ONE:

Shortly after Jackie Robinson signed the agreement with the Dodgers, he married Rachel Isum. They had three children. It was important to Branch Rickey that Jackie Robinson be married. He thought that the public would accept Robinson more quickly if he was married. He thought that it would lessen the fears of white men that white women would find Robinson desirable.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

In nineteen forty-six, Jackie Robinson began playing for the Dodgers' minor league Canadian team, the Montreal Royals. During that time, Branch Rickey tested Robinson's ability to deal with racial pressure he would face in the major league.



Jackie Robinson entering the Dodgers' clubhouse for the first time

In nineteen forty-seven, Jackie Robinson became the first black to play modern major league baseball. He played for the Dodger's major league team, New York's Brooklyn Dodgers. In doing so, the pressure increased. He received death threats on and off the field. During games, pitchers threw the ball at his head. Several teams threatened not to play against the Dodgers. And, some of his own team members tried to have him banned from the team.

It was not easy for Robinson on road trips, either. He was never permitted to stay at the same hotels or eat in the same places as his white team members.

#### VOICE ONE:

Jackie Robinson had difficulty on and off the baseball field, but he did not let that interfere with his game. He was a great player and leader, winning the National League's Most Valuable Player award in nineteen forty-nine. He also led the Brooklyn Dodgers to six league championships and to baseball's World Series Championship in nineteen fifty-five.



Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson helped show that blacks and whites could live, work and play together. He became a national hero to both black and white Americans because of his skill, bravery and restraint. Robinson's success opened the door for other black athletes to play on all-white professional teams. Soon, other blacks began to appear on major-league teams. By the end of the nineteen fifties, every major league team had black and Hispanic players.

#### VOICE TWO:

Jackie Robinson retired from baseball in nineteen fifty-six at the age of thirty-seven. He became a businessman, a political activist and a strong supporter of civil rights. In nineteen sixty-two, Jackie Robinson was elected to baseball's Hall of Fame, an honor given only to baseball's best players. He died in nineteen seventy-two. He was fifty-three years old.

(MUSIC)

ANNOUNCER:

This Special English program was written by Cynthia Kirk. It was produced and directed by Lawan Davis. The announcers were Shirley Griffith and Rich Kleinfeldt.

I'm Mary Tillotson. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.