

## Jackie Robinson Breaks Baseball's

Color Barrier, 1945

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Jackie Robinson gained national recognition in 1941 when he became the first athlete in the history of UCLA to earn a letter in four different sports in the same year (football, basketball, track and baseball). Drafted into the Army, he was discharged in 1945 and joined the Kansas City Monarchs of the American Negro League. That same year, he had a visit from Clyde Sukeforth a Dodger scout who told him that Brooklyn Dodger general manager Branch Rickey would like to meet with him.

When Robinson traveled to New York City for the meeting he was unaware that he was going to be asked to become the first Black player in major league baseball. The decision to open up "America's favorite pastime" to African-Americans was in no small part due to the contribution they had made to the country's war effort. Happy Chandler, the newly installed Baseball Commissioner, was quoted as saying that: "if they (African-Americans) can fight and die on Okinawa, Guadalcanal (and) in the South Pacific, they can play ball in America." Branch Rickey agreed, but everyone knew that the first Black to break through the color barrier would not only have to be talented enough to play in the majors but strong enough to withstand with dignity the inevitable racial taunts that would be hurled his way. Jackie Robinson was their man.



Jackie Robinson

The meeting took place in Rickey's office on August 28, 1945 and lasted about three hours. Rickey grilled the twenty-six year old Robinson on his resolve and challenged him with racist scenarios that he may have to confront on and off the field. Satisfied with his response, Rickey assigned Robinson to the Montreal Royals - a Dodger farm team - for the 1946 season. Robinson was moved up to the Dodgers at the beginning of the 1947 season.

"Can you do it? Can you do it?"

The account begins as Jackie enters Branch Rickey's office. The Dodger boss sits in a leather swivel chair behind a mammoth walnut desk. After some small talk, Rickey lights up a cigar and gets down to the heart of the interview:

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contract to the Kansas City Monarchs?"

"Are you under

'No, sir,' Robinson replied quickly. 'We don't have contracts.'

'Do you have any agreements - written or oral - about how long you will play for them?'

'No, sir, none at all. I just work from payday to payday.'

Rickey nodded and his bushy brows mashed into a scowl. He toyed with the ever-present cigar, seeking the right words, 'Do you know why you were brought here?'

'Not exactly. I heard something about a colored team at Ebbets Field. That it?'

'No . . . that isn't it.' Rickey studied the dark face, the half-open mouth, the widened and worried eyes. Then he said, 'You were brought here, Jackie, to play for the Brooklyn organization. Perhaps on Montreal to start with -'

'Me? Play for Montreal?' the player gasped.

Rickey nodded. 'If you can make it, yes. Later on - also if you can make it - you'll have a chance with the Brooklyn Dodgers.' Robinson could only nod at this point.

'I want to win pennants and we need ballplayers!' Rickey whacked the desk. He sketched the efforts and the scope of his two-year search for players of promise. 'Do *you think* you can do it? Make good in organized baseball?'

Robinson shifted to relieve his mounting tension.

'If . . . if I got the chance,' he stammered.

'There's more here than just *playing, Jackie,*' Rickey warned. 'I wish it meant only hits, runs and errors-things you can see in a box score. . . .'

...'Can you do it? Can you do it?' Rickey asked over and over.

Shifting nervously, Robinson looked from Rickey to Sukeforth as they talked of his arms and legs and swing and courage. Did he have the guts to play the game no matter what happened? Rickey pointed out the enormity of the responsibility for all concerned: owners of the club, Rickey, Robinson and all baseball. The opposition would shout insults, come in spikes first, throw at his head.

'Mr. Rickey,' Robinson said, 'they've been throwing at my head for a long time.'

Rickey's voice rose. 'Suppose I'm a player. . . in the heat of an important ball game.' He drew back as if to charge at Robinson. 'Suppose I collide with you at second base. When I get up, I yell, 'You dirty, black son of a -' He finished the castigation and added calmly, 'What do you do?'

Robinson blinked. He licked his lips and swallowed.

'Mr. Rickey,' he murmured, 'do you want a ballplayer who's afraid to fight back?'

'I want a ballplayer with guts enough *not* to fight back!' Rickey exclaimed almost savagely. He paced across the floor and returned with finger pointing. 'You've got to do this job with base hits and stolen bases and fielding ground balls, Jackie. *Nothing else!*'

He moved behind his big desk again and faced the cornered Robinson. He posed as a cynical clerk in a southern hotel who not only refused him a room, but cursed him as he did so. What would Robinson do? He posed as a prejudiced sportswriter, ordered to turn in a twisted story, full of bias and racial animosity. How would Robinson answer the sportswriter? He ordered the player from imaginary dining rooms. He jostled him in imaginary hotel lobbies, railroad stations. What would Robinson do?

'Now I'm playing against you in a World Series!' Rickey stormed and removed his jacket for greater freedom. Robinson's hands clenched, trembled from the rising tension. "I'm a hotheaded player. I want to win that game, so I go into you spikes first, but you don't give ground. You stand there and you jab the ball into my ribs and the umpire yells, 'Out!' I flare up - all I see is your face-that black face right on top of me -'

Rickey's bespectacled face, glistening with sweat, was inches from Robinson's at this point. He yelled into the motionless mask, 'So I haul off and punch you right in the cheek!'

An oversized fist swung through the air and barely missed Robinson's face. He blinked, but his head didn't move.

'What do you do?' Rickey roared.

'Mr. Rickey,' he whispered, 'I've got two cheeks. That it?'

#### References:

Branch Rickey's account appears in: Mann, Arthur, Branch Rickey, American in Action (1957); Rampersad, Arnold, Jackie Robinson, a Biography (1997).



Branch Rickey