

About My Father

By Sharon Robinson



Jackie Robinson with daughter Sharon.

April 15 marks the anniversary of Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color barrier in Major League Baseball. A student once asked me: "What is the color barrier?" Baseball's "color barrier" refers to the time in U.S. history when black- and brown-skinned ballplayers were kept out of the Majors. In 1947, my father, Jackie Robinson, broke through that barrier. He opened the door for others to follow.

Fifty years later, *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life* was created to help students understand Jackie Robinson's legacy of change. By participating in this program, you'll come to understand the values that made my father successful on the field, and which also guided him as a parent. You'll likewise discover strengths in your own character to help you overcome barriers in your life. Let's get started!

American baseball became popular during the Civil War. Briefly in the late 1800s, two black players, Bud Fowler and Moses Fleetwood Walker, played alongside whites. But by 1890, Major League Baseball, like most of the U.S., was "segregated." Black- and brown-skinned players were in the Negro Leagues. Whites played in the Majors.

In 1945, Branch Rickey stepped forward to break baseball's color barrier. Rickey

was the president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers™. He sent scouts to explore the pool of players. Many Negro League players

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were well-known and highly skilled. Players such as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson topped the list provided by Mr. Rickey's scouts. But they agreed on Jack Roosevelt Robinson.

The scouts told Mr. Rickey about Jackie Robinson. During his season with the Negro League team the Kansas City Monarchs, Robinson played shortstop. He hit .387, honed his skill at stealing bases, and was chosen for the league's All-Star Game.

They presented my dad's college statistics next. While at UCLA, he was the leading basketball scorer in his conference. He was also the national champion in the long jump, an All-American halfback in football, and a varsity baseball shortstop. In fact, he was the first athlete at UCLA to letter in four sports in a single year.

In a now-famous meeting, Branch Rickey painted the

rough conditions my dad would face in the Majors. Racist fans would shout angry insults. A spiteful opponent might spike him with metal cleats. Rickey hoped my father would have the strength of character to fight back with his bat and not his fist. My dad agreed to this plan. Two months later, he signed with the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers™ farm team.

Rickey was right: My dad faced amazing odds. He fought back with perfectly timed bunts, hard line drives, and stolen bases. On April 15, 1947, he stepped

onto the grass of Ebbets Field™ as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers™. He went on to play 10 seasons and earned such awards as Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player.

It took 13 seasons before every Major League Baseball team had at least one black player. Today, things have changed. Major League Baseball players come from around the world. They break barriers of culture, language, race, and religion. Like you, they meet challenges with the same set of values that helped my father succeed on and off the field. ♦

Jackie Robinson sliding into home, 1949.

