

About My Father

By Sharon Robinson

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Jackie and Rachel Robinson and their three children (left to right), 1956: David, Sharon, and Jackie Jr.

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?" The color barrier signifies the time in American history when black- and brown-skinned ballplayers were kept out of the Majors. In 1947, my father, Jackie Robinson, broke through that barrier and opened the door for others to follow.

Fifty years later, the education program *Breaking Barriers: In Sports, In Life* was created to help diverse students of all backgrounds understand Jackie Robinson's accomplishments. By learning about his life, you'll come to understand the values that made my father successful on the field and that guided him as a parent. I hope you'll also discover strengths in your own character to help you overcome barriers in your life. Here is his story:

American baseball became popular during the Civil War. Briefly in the late 1800s, two black players, Bud Fowler and Moses Fleetwood Walker, played alongside white players. But by 1890, Major League Baseball, like most of America, was "segregated." Until 1947, black- and brown-skinned players were in the Negro Leagues, while whites played in the Majors.

In 1945, Branch Rickey, president and general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, stepped

forward to break baseball's color barrier. He studied the field, using scouts to explore the pool of players. There were many Negro League players who were well-

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known and proven professional baseball players. Players such as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson certainly headed the list provided by Mr. Rickey's scouts, but they agreed on Jack Roosevelt Robinson.

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

They presented his college statistics next. Rickey learned that while at UCLA, Robinson was the leading basketball scorer in his conference, 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, Mr. Rickey painted the stressful

conditions Robinson would likely face in the Majors. Rickey role-played a racist fan shouting angry insults. A spiteful opponent might spike him with metal cleats. Rickey was testing whether my father would have the strength of character to fight back with his bat rather than his fist. He convinced Rickey that he would. Two months later, he signed with the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers Minor League team.

As predicted, Jackie Robinson played baseball against 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, earning such awards as Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player.

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

Jackie Robinson sliding into home, 1949

