

Jackie Robinson Most Valuable Player

by Adam Grant



Characters

Narrators 1 and 2

Jackie Robinson

Rachel Robinson,
Jackie's wife

Teammates 1 and 2

Attendant

Scout

Counterman

Branch Rickey,
*President of the
Brooklyn Dodgers*

Bus Driver

Frank Simms,
a journalist

Wendell Smith,
a journalist

Billy Rowe,
a journalist

Clay Hopper,
*Manager of the
Montreal Royals*

Sheriff

Announcer

Eddie Stanky,
a teammate

Newspaper



SCENE 1

NARRATOR 1: In the spring of 1945, a young man named Jackie Robinson became the shortstop of the Kansas City Monarchs, one of the Negro baseball leagues' top teams. The men who played on teams in the Negro leagues led difficult lives.

NARRATOR 2: Traveling much of the time in the South, they suffered from the region's terrible Jim Crow laws. Negro leaguers also made much less money than white baseball players. For some players, this was just part of life, but not for Jackie.

NARRATOR 1: He felt that nothing short of total equality was acceptable for any people, and he fought for his ideals every day, even on the team bus, traveling from game to game.

JACKIE: You fellas had better get ready, because one day, they're going to bring one of us up to the majors. I'm telling you now.

TEAMMATE 1: Forget it, rookie. It ain't never gonna happen.

NARRATOR 2: A few minutes later, the bus pulled off the road.

JACKIE: Why are we stopping here?

TEAMMATE 2: We need gas. And we have to get it here.

JACKIE: Why this gas station?

TEAMMATE 1: Most places around here won't even serve us. So we gotta fill the extra tanks here. Don't wanna get caught out there somewhere with no gas and nowhere to get it.

NARRATOR 1: Jackie got off the bus.

JACKIE: Hey, attendant, where's your restroom?

ATTENDANT: Uh, we ain't got one.

JACKIE: You don't have a restroom?

ATTENDANT: Well, we have one, but it's for whites only.



JACKIE: Okay, we'll get our gas somewhere else, then.

ATTENDANT: What? You can't do that! You guys always buy one hundred gallons of gas here. We have a deal.

JACKIE: Now here's the new deal. We all use the restroom, or we don't buy any gas. You got that?

ATTENDANT: All right, go ahead. But don't tell anybody.

NARRATOR 2: When the team got back on the bus, they all held their heads a little higher.

JACKIE: It's a small victory, but it makes a difference.

SCENE 2

NARRATOR 1: As the season progressed, there were more and more rumors that someone from the Negro leagues might be brought up to the majors. African-American newspapers and lobby groups were carefully keeping the issue constantly in the news.

NARRATOR 2: Sometimes at the ballpark, Jackie would see a tall, lanky white man in the stands. He seemed to be watching Jackie, scouting him.

TEAMMATE 2: Hey Jack, who is that guy? He was watching you in Chicago last week. What's up?

JACKIE: I don't know, I've never seen him before.

NARRATOR 1: After one game, the man approached Jackie.

SCOUT: I work for Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Mr. Rickey asked me to come down and watch you play.

JACKIE: Pleased to meet you. But what does Rickey want with me?

SCOUT: He has a few things in mind, maybe starting a Negro league team in Brooklyn. I'd like you to come to New York and meet Mr. Rickey.

NARRATOR 2: Later, Jackie told his girlfriend Rachel about the meeting.



- RACHEL:** Oh Jack. He probably wants you to play for the Dodgers.
- JACKIE:** No, I don't think so. I'm beginning to wonder if they're ever going to integrate baseball. There's so much resistance to it.
- RACHEL:** But if it's true, think of the contribution you could make, just by playing baseball.
- JACKIE:** In a way, it's a big step toward all kinds of integration, isn't it?
- NARRATOR 1:** Just then, the phone rang. It was Frank Simms, a journalist from an important African-American weekly newspaper.
- FRANK:** I just heard something strange. Are you meeting with Branch Rickey in New York?
- NARRATOR 2:** Jackie didn't know whether to be excited or suspicious about the meeting he was about to have in New York. But he knew one thing for sure—something big was happening.

SCENE 3

- NARRATOR 1:** On the morning of August 28, 1945, Jackie Robinson knocked on the door of Branch Rickey's office at Ebbet's Field in Brooklyn.
- RICKEY:** Come on in, young man. Sit down. My scouts say you're one of the finest players in the Negro leagues. Do you know why I called you here?
- JACKIE:** They told me you were thinking of putting together a Negro league team—the Brown Dodgers or something—and might want me to play shortstop.
- RICKEY:** Good, that's what I wanted him to tell you. But it's a lie. I'm thinking of offering you a contract, but I'm not putting together any new team. I want you to play for the Dodgers in the major leagues. What do you think?
- NARRATOR 2:** Jackie was speechless. He couldn't believe this might really be happening.



- RICKEY:** Do you think you're good enough right now to play for our farm team in Montreal?
- JACKIE:** Sure.
- RICKEY:** I know you're a good ball player. Do you have the character, the guts, to break the color line?
- JACKIE:** I think I do.
- RICKEY:** I've had you thoroughly investigated, Robinson. In college, you were a superstar in four sports. You also had a reputation for starting fights.
- JACKIE:** I have a habit of standing up for myself. Some people don't like that in a black man.
- RICKEY:** That's just what I concluded. If you had been white, people would be calling you an intense competitor. But since you're black, they think you're a hothead. That brings me back to the real issue.
- NARRATOR 1:** Mr. Rickey leaned close to Jackie.
- RICKEY:** I've been trying to integrate baseball for years, but among baseball men, I'm practically alone. I know I've only got one shot at it. I have to pick the right player, because if the first black player fails, there will never be another chance. I think you might be the right player.
- JACKIE:** Thank you, sir.
- RICKEY:** I wish I could tell you that all you had to do was be a great baseball player on the field, that your hitting and fielding would show everyone that you belonged in the majors.
- JACKIE:** But it is how I play that really counts, isn't it?



- RICKEY:** It's what ought to count, but people are going to be watching so much more carefully. There are huge numbers of people who are opposed to integrated baseball. They're all around us, and they'll do anything to see us fail. We can't win this thing by fighting. We can never outnumber or overpower the bigots. You'll have to outclass and outplay them.
- JACKIE:** I understand.
- RICKEY:** Fans in the stands will yell at you, the most horrible things you've ever heard. Players on other teams will try to hurt you. Pitchers will throw at your head. Runners will spike you coming into your base.
- JACKIE:** I can handle them.
- RICKEY:** But you must not retaliate. You'll simply have to endure the insults, the cuts and bruises, bad calls from umpires, bad service or no service on the road, hostility from your own teammates.
- JACKIE:** Mr. Rickey, are you looking for someone who is afraid to fight back?
- RICKEY:** I'm looking for someone with the guts *not* to fight back. Can you do that?
- NARRATOR 2:** Jackie thought about the question for a long time.
- JACKIE:** Yes. I think I can.
- RICKEY:** Good. Now you and I must understand each other on this point. For three years I will support and stand by you as long as you don't fight back or argue with anyone. After that, you're free to do what you want.
- JACKIE:** Understood.



RICKEY: It will be the hardest thing you've ever done in your life, much harder than the baseball part. But it's the only way we can win this thing. Now, one more thing: we'll have to keep this a secret for as long as possible so our enemies have less of an opportunity to sabotage our efforts.

SCENE 4

NARRATOR 1: The Montreal Royals announced the signing of Jackie Robinson. The press went wild. Overnight, Jackie Robinson became one of the most talked-about people in America.

NARRATOR 2: Jackie married Rachel, and a few weeks later, they headed to Florida for spring training with the Royals.

NARRATOR 1: Their plane was scheduled to stop in New Orleans for fuel on the way. But as soon as they landed, an airline worker beckoned Jackie down the hall. When Jackie came back, he was mad.

JACKIE: They said we had to wait for the next plane because some military personnel had to use our seats. I don't see any soldiers, do you?

RACHEL: No, but let's just go along with it and hope we can leave on the next plane. I'm starving. Let's find something to eat.

NARRATOR 2: When they got to the airport lunch counter, they found other problems.

COUNTERMAN: Sorry, folks. I can't serve you at this counter.

JACKIE: Where can we get some food around here?

COUNTERMAN: I guess I can give you food to take out if you promise to eat it someplace where no one can see you.

JACKIE: Forget it, man.



- NARRATOR 1:** Twelve hours later, Jackie and Rachel finally boarded another plane, but when it stopped again the Robinsons had to give their seats to a white couple. Jackie decided that they might do better on a bus.
- NARRATOR 2:** But a few hours after they had boarded a Greyhound, they were interrupted again.
- BUS DRIVER:** Listen, you two have got to give me these seats. I've got white people who need them. You've got to move to the back.
- JACKIE:** But it's packed back there.
- BUS DRIVER:** Would you like me to call the White House and ask the President to change the laws? Go on back there.

SCENE 5

- NARRATOR 1:** By the time Jackie and Rachel arrived in Daytona Beach, Jackie was furious. When he found out that they could not stay in the hotel with the rest of the team, he was about ready to quit and go home.
- NARRATOR 2:** Two important African-American journalists, Wendell Smith and Billy Rowe, were covering Jackie's first spring training, and they became his best friends there. That first night, they had to convince Jackie to stay.
- BILLY:** Jackie, you know racism exists all over America; that's nothing new. That's the reason you're down here.
- JACKIE:** I can't take a plane, I can't stay with the team in the hotel. I even heard they might have to move the whole team to a new town because the locals might make trouble.
- WENDELL:** Jackie, what you are trying to do is much bigger than what happens in this town, or even in the South. It's about changing our whole society.



- NARRATOR 1:** As they argued into the night, Jackie finally started to listen to them, and even agree.
- WENDELL:** You have a chance to prove to all those white folks that we deserve to participate fully in our society, that they have no right to exclude us from anything that matters.
- BILLY:** They'll have to realize that we deserve everything our society has to offer, and that we are willing to fight for it with dignity. But along the way, we're gonna have to take some abuse.
- WENDELL:** You knew it was going to be hard, and it's going to get much harder, but if we don't make it this time, there may not be any next time.
- NARRATOR 2:** Armed with new determination, Jackie reported to spring training the next morning. Crowds of reporters were there. They reported it this way:
- NEWSPAPER:** The white Montreal players have accepted Jackie Robinson as their teammate. There has been no friction.
- NARRATOR 1:** Of course the reality was a little different. That first morning a crowd tried to block Jackie's entry onto the field. He had to find a hole in the back of the fence and crawl through it.
- NARRATOR 2:** Tension was high on and off the field at the Royals camp. Team manager, Clay Hopper, had begged Rickey not to sign Jackie.
- NARRATOR 1:** Once, Mr. Rickey and Clay Hopper were watching practice, when Jackie made an amazing play in the field.
- RICKEY:** Did you see that, Hopper? That play was superhuman!
- HOPPER:** Mr. Rickey, do you really think so? After all, he's only a black player.
- NARRATOR 2:** Rickey, stunned, didn't answer. He knew that racism had been bred so deeply into Clay Hopper that no conversation was going to change things. It would take some time.



SCENE 6

- NARRATOR 1:** Clay Hopper and most of the players barely tolerated Jackie's presence. But there was more serious resistance from the community.
- NARRATOR 2:** Like the time the Royals played the Jersey Giants in Sanford, Florida. They had just arrived when Branch Rickey walked up to Jackie.
- RICKEY:** Jack, the local sheriff says he's going to close us down if you play today. They have a law against integrated baseball and he's going to enforce it.
- JACKIE:** I don't care, I'm going to play. He's going to have to come out and get me.
- RICKEY:** That's what I was hoping you'd say.
- NARRATOR 1:** In the first inning, Jackie came up to bat and hit a clean single. He stole second and came sliding home on another hit. But when he got back on his feet, he saw the sheriff standing over him.
- SHERIFF:** This game is officially over. Here in Sanford, we've never allowed blacks on the field with whites, and we ain't gonna start today.
- NARRATOR 2:** Jackie went back and sat on the bench, but the sheriff was still following him.
- SHERIFF:** We don't allow blacks on the white bench, either.
- NARRATOR 1:** During every game, fans yelled insults and threats.
- NARRATOR 2:** Most of Jackie's teammates were unfriendly.
- NARRATOR 1:** As a player, Jackie looked pretty ordinary out there. It was hard for him to concentrate on baseball. People wondered if he was good enough to play in the minor leagues.
- NARRATOR 2:** All that wondering stopped during the Royals' first regular season game, against the Jersey Giants.



SCENE 7

NARRATOR 1: That day, Jackie Robinson got four hits, including a home run, and led his team to a 14–0 rout of the Jersey Giants. But what really excited the crowd was his base running.

ANNOUNCER: Robinson lays down a beautiful bunt and he's on first base . . . And now, with the count two and one, Robinson takes off for second. Look at him go. He's in with a stolen base.

NARRATOR 2: The next batter singled Jackie over to third base.

ANNOUNCER: Now, Robinson is dancing off third. The pitcher throws to third but not in time. Now Robinson breaks for home, but he's only bluffing.

NARRATOR 1: Within a few minutes, Jackie made the pitcher so nervous that he lost his concentration and balked the run in.

ANNOUNCER: Robinson trots home. I'll tell you, I've never seen anything like this before. Jackie Robinson just created that run all by himself.

NARRATOR 2: Jackie's year in the minor leagues was filled with ups and downs. When the Royals played in many American cities, Jackie was met with taunts, hate mail and real threats of violence. On other days, he faced supportive crowds who just wanted to see good baseball, and didn't care about his color.

NARRATOR 1: In Montreal, where the Royals played their home games, race was no issue at all. Jackie was the fan's favorite.

NARRATOR 2: When he led the Royals to a championship in the minor league World Series, the fans carried him off the field on their shoulders. Clay Hopper, the manager who had begged Rickey not to sign Jackie, offered him his hand.



HOPPER: You're a great ball player and a fine gentleman. It's been a pleasure having you on the team.

NARRATOR 1: Although he didn't know it yet, Jackie's next stop was the major leagues.

SCENE 8

NEWSPAPER: APRIL 9, 1947: The Brooklyn Dodgers today purchased the contract of Jack Roosevelt Robinson, infielder . . .

NARRATOR 2: Jackie Robinson's first week as a Brooklyn Dodger was ordinary. He did well in the field and got a few hits. The first bad racial incident came the first time he played in Philadelphia.

NARRATOR 1: The Phillies' manager, Ben Chapman, was a known racist who had been in trouble as a player for yelling anti-Semitic slurs at fans.

NARRATOR 2: Chapman got his Phillies players to join him in unleashing a series-long flood of racial epithets at Jackie.

NARRATOR 1: At first, Jackie could barely stand to take all the abuse without answering back. But he remembered the deal he had made. He had to keep his cool. Soon his teammates began to sense the unfairness of Jackie's situation.

NARRATOR 2: Finally, in the third game, one Dodger teammate, Eddie Stanky, came out of the dugout and yelled at the Phillies.

EDDIE: Hey, you cowards! Why don't you pick on someone who can answer back!

NARRATOR 1: It was a small gesture, but that and other events began to unify the Dodgers around Jackie. They began to realize that he was not only a great baseball player but a tremendous person, and there was no legitimate reason to exclude him.



EPILOGUE

NARRATOR 2: Jackie Robinson continued to play quietly through the trials of racism and hatred. On the field he excelled, winning Rookie of the Year honors in 1947, and later winning batting titles and even the American League Most Valuable Player award. The grace, restraint, and intelligence he displayed on and off the field made it impossible for even the worst racists to argue for keeping African Americans out of baseball.

NARRATOR 1: Although many players who followed Jackie into the major leagues also faced racism, Jackie had blazed a trail. His entry into baseball is regarded by many people as the first event of the modern civil rights movement. After he retired from baseball, Robinson fought for civil rights as a columnist and public speaker. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "Jackie Robinson made it possible for me in the first place. Without him I could never have done what I did." Jackie Robinson died in 1972, at the age of fifty-three.



Jackie Robinson

Background

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was born on January 31, 1919, to parents who sharecropped on a Georgia plantation. When Jackie was young, his father left home, and soon after, his mother moved the family to California. Jackie attended Pasadena Junior College before moving on to UCLA. There he was a star in baseball, football, track, and basketball. Some people labeled him “the finest athlete in America.” While in school, Jackie met Rachel Isum, whom he later married. He left UCLA before graduating, in order to support his mother, then entered the army, where he was a lieutenant during World War II.

After being discharged, Robinson joined the Kansas City Monarchs, then a team in the Negro American League. In 1947, he was asked to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers, thus becoming the first African American to play major league baseball. During his career with the Dodgers, Jackie won Rookie of the Year and Most Valuable Player awards and led the team to a World Series title in 1955. He retired in 1957.

In 1962, in his first year of eligibility, he was the first African American inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. After retiring from baseball, he was instrumental in working for political change as a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Jackie Robinson was 53 when he died in 1972.

For Discussion

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

In making major decisions, we often compose a list of pros and cons. Ask students what they think might have been on Jackie Robinson’s list when he was offered the position on the Brooklyn Dodgers. What might have been on Branch Rickey’s list when he thought about hiring African-American players for the Dodgers? As students respond, add to a pros and cons list on the chalkboard or overhead.

FIGHTING BACK

Jackie Robinson did not fight back in the traditional way when other players and the fans demonstrated their prejudice. Ask students to consider what might have happened if he had. How did he fight back in his own way? Continue the discussion by asking students what strategies they might use to fight back that don’t involve violence.

WHAT MAKES A HERO?

Jackie Robinson is a hero to many people. Ask students if there are any of them who might choose Jackie Robinson as a hero. Have them brainstorm the characteristics and/or actions that made him a hero. Invite students to share who else are their heroes. Encourage them to explain why and ask them to consider how their choice might have been different if Jackie Robinson hadn’t broken the color barrier in baseball.



Write About It

IN MY OPINION

After the Dodgers played the Phillies, many national newspapers were filled with stories of the Phillies' bad behavior. Editorials lambasted the Phillies, their manager, and their fans. Ask students to write a news story or an editorial about the incident.

THE NEGRO BASEBALL LEAGUE

Before Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball, African-American players had formed their own baseball leagues—the Negro leagues. Encourage students to find out more about the players, teams, or history of these leagues. They can then present their research in the form of an article for a sports magazine.

TRADING CARDS

From his days with the Kansas City Monarchs to his retirement from the Brooklyn Dodgers,

Jackie Robinson's career was highlighted by honors. Invite students to design baseball cards for different years in Robinson's career. They should include a photo or illustration of Robinson on the front of the cards and biographical and statistical information on the back.

Additional Reading

Black Diamond: The Story of the Negro Baseball Leagues by Patricia C. and Frederick McKissack, Jr. (Scholastic, 1998)

In the Year of the Boar and Jackie Robinson by Bette Bao Lord (HarperCollins, 1986)

Jackie Robinson Breaks the Color Line by Andrew Santella (Scholastic, 1996)

Jackie's Nine: Jackie Robinson's Values to Live By by Sharon Robinson (Scholastic, 2000)

QUOTES

I guess if I could choose one of the most important moments in my life, I would go back to 1947, in the Yankee Stadium in New York City. It was the opening day of the World Series and I was for the first time playing in the series as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers team.

I want to be free to follow the dictates of my own mind and conscience without being subject to the pressures of any man, black or white. I think that is what most people of all races want.

A life is not important, except in the impact it has on other lives.