

Fortitude on the Baseball Diamond

The Second World War ended in 1945. In 1945 the citizens of Philadelphia had the Athletics and the future Los Angeles Dodgers resided in Brooklyn. Following a long-upheld but unwritten rule of major league baseball, the A's and the Dodgers employed only white players. Major league baseball was a closed shop to African Americans.

Also in 1945, however, the commissioner of major league baseball made this pronouncement about African Americans: "If they can fight and die in the South Pacific, they can play ball in America."

Comes the hour, comes the man. In August of 1945, Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, met with Jackie Robinson, U.S. Army veteran and former student and football star at UCLA. Robinson was at that time the short-stop for the Kansas City Monarchs of Negro League Baseball.

Rickey had Robinson in mind to be the player to test the commissioner's hypothesis that black men could now be employed on the field by a major league baseball team.

We who live in the post-civil rights movement era can scarcely comprehend the deeply entrenched racism of much of America at that time. Branch Rickey knew, and so did Jackie Robinson, that the first major league black ballplayer would face torrents of abuse, from the stands and on the field, from opponents and even teammates. Because segregation was legal in America, road trips would bring them to hotels where Jackie Robinson could not rest and restaurants where he could not eat.

Chin music — a fastball thrown at the face — was a fact of life for aggressive hitters in that era. What would happen to

an aggressive hitter who was the first and only black man in the game?

Robinson was hit by a lot of pitches. In his second year with the Dodgers he led the National League in that category. Providentially, the Dodgers were one of two major league clubs to mandate the use of protective batting helmets. One was fractured by a pitch while on Robinson's head.

Unprovidentially, Robinson's fielding position was second base — the pivot point of the double play. This made him the Dodger most likely to come into contact with a sliding base runner. The color of his skin made him the Dodger most likely to be spiked by a sliding base runner. And he was.

During that very long meeting in August of 1945, Rickey made it clear that Robinson's baseball abilities were not in question. Rickey talked about what else would be required of Robinson: fortitude.

The time-honored baseball response to an opposing player who tries to hurt you is to hurt them back. Robinson would not have that option. At that time the idea of a black man fighting a white man in public, never mind why, was unthinkable to the American public. Rickey believed it had to be nonexistent in major league baseball for the color barrier to remain broken.

The courage Branch Rickey was looking for from Jackie Robinson was the courage not to pay back abuse with abuse, curses with curses, violence with violence. America needed civil disobedience on the baseball diamond. Robinson needed to bear the weight of injustice without retaliating. To turn the other cheek. To have the fortitude not to fight back, to avenge himself against his tormentors only by getting on base and scoring.

You see, neither the commissioner nor Branch Rickey could break major league baseball's color barrier simply by deciding to do so. A man was needed, an African American man of special character. Baseball skills of the highest order were the prerequisite, but they were not enough. It was the fortitude of Jackie Robinson that broke baseball's color barrier. He absorbed the pressure. He bore the burden. Courage.

By the way, Jackie Robinson's outstanding career .409 on-base percentage puts him in the top 1 percent of everyone who ever played major league baseball.



32 Robinson was hit by a lot of pitches. In his second year with

the Dodgers he led the National League in that category:

Baseball-Reference.com, http://www.baseball-reference.com/leaders/HBP_leagues.shtml. Accessed July 15, 2013.

33 One helmet was fractured by a pitch while on Robinson's head: Roger Kahn, "Baseball's Secret Weapon: Terror," Sports Illustrated, July 10, 1961; [http://](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1147902/3/index.htm)

sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1147902/3/index.htm. Accessed August 4, 2013