**Jackie changed face of sports**

***By Larry Schwartz***

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It's not often that the essence of a man, especially a complicated man, can be summed up in one sentence. But then again, there haven't been many people like Jackie Robinson.

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

By that standard, few people -- and no athlete -- this century has impacted more lives. Robinson lit the torch and passed it on to several generations of African-American athletes. While the Brooklyn Dodgers infielder didn't make a nation color blind, he at least made it more color friendly.

And he accomplished this feat by going against his natural instincts. He was an aggressive man, outraged at injustice, and quick to stand up for his rights. He had the guts to say no when ordered to the back of the bus in the army, and was court-martialed for his courage. His instinct wasn't to turn the other cheek, but to face problems head on. He was more prone to fighting back than holding back.

That's what Robinson had to do when Dodgers president Branch Rickey selected him to become the first African-American to play in the majors this century. Rickey wanted a man who could restrain himself from responding to the ugliness of the racial hatred that was certain to come.

A shorthand version of their fateful conversation in August 1945:

*Rickey: "I know you're a good ballplayer. What I don't know is whether you have the guts."*

*Robinson: "Mr. Rickey, are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?"*

*Rickey, exploding: "Robinson, I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back."*

This unwritten pact between two men would change the course of a country. Baseball might only be a game, but in the area of black and white, it often is a leader. Robinson's debut for the Dodgers in 1947 came a year before President Harry Truman desegregated the military and seven years before the Supreme Court ruled desegregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

Rickey was dead-on about the racism. As *Sports Illustrated*'s Bill Nack wrote: "Robinson was the target of racial epithets and flying cleats, of hate letters and death threats, of pitchers throwing at his head and legs, and catchers spitting on his shoes."

Robinson learned how to exercise self-control -- to answer insults, violence and injustice with silence. A model of unselfish team play, he earned the respect of his teammates and, eventually, the opposition.

The 6-foot, 195-pound Robinson was the Rookie of the Year and two years later he was MVP. His lifetime average was .311 and he was voted into the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility. Pigeon-toed and muscular, it was No. 42's aggressiveness on the basepaths that thrilled fans. It wasn't so much his two stolen-base titles or his 197 thefts. It was the way he was a disruptive force, dancing off the base, drawing every eye in the stadium, making the pitcher crazy, instilling the Dodgers with the spirit that would help them win six pennants in his 10 seasons.

"Robinson could hit and bunt and steal and run," Roger Kahn wrote in *The Boys of Summer*. "He had intimidation skills, and he burned with a dark fire. He wanted passionately to win. He bore the burden of a pioneer and the weight made him stronger. If one can be certain of anything in baseball, it is that we shall not look upon his like again."

He was born on Jan. 31, 1919, in rural Georgia. His father, Jerry, was a ladies’ man who deserted the family six months after his birth. When his mother Mallie was told by her half-brother, "If you want to get closer to heaven, visit California," she took her five children West in 1920.

They moved into a working-class neighborhood in Pasadena, where they felt the sting of a town's prejudice. Jackie found his home on the playground, playing marbles, soccer, dodgeball, tennis, golf, football, baseball and basketball. He was a demon competitor, desperately wanting to win no matter the game.

After starring athletically at Pasadena Junior College, he became the first to letter in four sports at UCLA. He was a brilliant broken-field runner in football; a pioneer point guard who introduced the fast break to a deliberate, white boys' game in basketball; a bandit on the bases in baseball; and an NCAA champion long jumper. He also earned a reputation as a mad brawler, ready to smash any white man who insulted him.

After Pearl Harbor, he was drafted into the Army and wound up a second lieutenant. At his court-martial for not moving to the back of the bus, his lawyer said Robinson was on trial not because he had violated any articles of war, but because a few officers "were working vengeance against an uppity black man." All charges were dismissed, and several months later, Robinson received an honorable discharge from the Army.

In 1945, he played shortstop for the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro League. That year, Happy Chandler became the major leagues' new commissioner, succeeding the late Kenesaw Mountain Landis, a racist at heart. Chandler, a former governor and senator of Kentucky, said about African-Americans, "If they can fight and die on Okinawa, Guadalcanal (and) in the South Pacific, they can play ball in America."

That summer, Rickey selected Robinson to integrate baseball. In 1946, Robinson, playing second baseman for the Montreal Royals, the Dodgers' top farm team, batted an International League-leading .349 and stole 40 bases and led them to the Little World Series championship.

April 15, 1947, Robinson's first major-league game: "It was the most eagerly anticipated debut in the annals of the national pastime," wrote Robert Lipsyte and Pete Levine in *Idols of the Game*. "It represented both the dream and the fear of equal opportunity, and it would change forever the complexion of the game and the attitudes of Americans."

Robinson went hitless, but did score the winning run. That season, the 28-year-old rookie played first base, the only position open on the Dodgers. (He would move back to second base the next year.) The new position was easy compared to all he had to endure -- an abortive rebellion by some of his teammates, the threat of a strike by the St. Louis Cardinals, black cats thrown on the field. Despite feeling the enormous pressure, he kept his considerable temper under control, just as he had promised Rickey.

One poignant moment occurred when Dodgers shortstop Pee Wee Reese, a native of Louisville, draped an arm over Robinson's shoulder, a quiet expression of support that spoke volumes.

By 1949, Robinson was free to become his own man. He became animated, with his teammates, the opposition, the umpires. When he felt an injustice, he spoke his mind. If a white player had shown the same fire, he would have earned praise, much like Pete Rose did.

The "real" Robinson came into his own this MVP season, leading the league with a .342 average and 37 steals. He also had career-highs in RBI (124) and runs (122).

After a decade with Brooklyn, he was traded to the New York Giants in December 1956. A month later, the 37-year-old Robinson announced his retirement in *Look* magazine.

He became a vice president for Chock Full o' Nuts before going into other businesses and politics. But his body, which had served him so well as an athlete, gave out early. Diabetes and heart disease weakened him and he was almost blind in middle age. On October 24, 1972, he died of a heart attack at 53.

In 1997, baseball dedicated the season to Robinson on the 50th anniversary of his debut.

How should we remember this grandson of a slave and son of a sharecropper? Maybe by what he told a white New Orleans sportswriter: "We ask for nothing special. We ask only to be permitted to live as you live, and as our nation's Constitution provides."

With such simple and justifiable demands, it's no wonder the man had such an impact on so many lives.



**Jackie Robinson led the way for generations of black athletes.**

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