

"Jackie Robinson" by Henry Aaron

I was 14 years old when I first saw Jackie Robinson. It was the spring of 1948, the year after Jackie changed my life by breaking baseball's color line. His team, the Brooklyn Dodgers, made a stop in my hometown of Mobile, Ala., while barnstorming its way north to start the season, and while he was there, Jackie spoke to a big crowd of black folks over on Davis Avenue. I think he talked about segregation, but I didn't hear a word that came out of his mouth. Jackie Robinson was such a hero to me that I couldn't do anything but gawk at him. They say certain people are bigger than life, but Jackie Robinson is the only man I've known who truly was. In 1947 life in America — at least my America, and Jackie's — was segregation. It was two worlds that were afraid of each other. There were separate schools for blacks and whites, separate restaurants, separate hotels, separate drinking fountains and separate baseball leagues. Life was unkind to black people who tried to bring those worlds together. It could be hateful. But Jackie Robinson, God bless him, was bigger than all of that. Jackie Robinson had to be bigger than life. He had to be bigger than the Brooklyn teammates who got up a petition to keep him off the ball club, bigger than the pitchers who threw at him or the base runners who dug their spikes into his shin, bigger than the bench jockeys who hollered for him to carry their bags and shine their shoes, bigger than the so-called fans who mocked him with mops on their heads and wrote him death threats.

When Branch Rickey first met with Jackie about joining the Dodgers, he told him that for three years he would have to turn the other cheek and silently suffer all the vile things that would come his way. Believe me, it wasn't Jackie's nature to do that. He was a fighter, the proudest and most competitive person I've ever seen. This was a man who, as a lieutenant in the Army, risked a court-martial by refusing to sit in the back of a military bus. But when Rickey read to him from *The Life of Christ*, Jackie understood the wisdom and the necessity of forbearance.

To this day, I don't know how he withstood the things he did without lashing back. I've been through a lot in my time, and I consider myself to be a patient man, but I know I couldn't have done what Jackie did. I don't think anybody else could have done it. Somehow, though, Jackie had the strength to suppress his instincts, to sacrifice his pride for his people's. It was an incredible act of selflessness that brought the races closer together than ever before and shaped the dreams of an entire generation.

Before Jackie Robinson broke the color line, I wasn't permitted even to think about being a professional baseball player. I once mentioned something to my father about it, and he said, "Ain't no colored ballplayers." There were the Negro Leagues, of course, where the Dodgers discovered Jackie, but my mother, like most, would rather her son be a schoolteacher than a Negro Leaguer. All that changed when Jackie put on No. 42 and started stealing bases in a Brooklyn uniform. Jackie's character was much more important than his batting average, but it certainly helped that he was a great ballplayer, a .311 career hitter whose trademark was rattling pitchers and fielders with his daring base running. He wasn't the best Negro League talent at the time he was chosen, and baseball wasn't really his best sport — he had been a football and track star at UCLA — but he played the game with a ferocious creativity that gave the country a good idea of what it had been missing all those years. With Jackie in the infield, the Dodgers won

six National League pennants.

I believe every black person in America had a piece of those pennants. There's never been another ballplayer who touched people as Jackie did. The only comparable athlete, in my experience, was Joe Louis. The difference was that Louis competed against white men; Jackie competed with them as well. He was taking us over segregation's threshold into a new land whose scenery made every black person stop and stare in reverence. We were all with Jackie. We slid into every base that he swiped, ducked at every fastball that hurtled toward his head. The circulation of the Pittsburgh Courier, the leading black newspaper, increased by 100,000 when it began reporting on him regularly. All over the country, black preachers would call together their congregations just to pray for Jackie and urge them to demonstrate the same forbearance that he did.

Later in his career, when the "Great Experiment" had proved to be successful and other black players had joined him, Jackie allowed his instincts to take over in issues of race. He began striking back and speaking out. And when Jackie Robinson spoke, every black player got the message. He made it clear to us that we weren't playing just for ourselves or for our teams; we were playing for our people. I don't think it's a coincidence that the black players of the late '50s and '60s — me, Roy Campanella, Monte Irvin, Willie Mays, Ernie Banks, Frank Robinson, Bob Gibson and others — dominated the National League. If we played as if we were on a mission, it was because Jackie Robinson had sent us out on one.

Even after he retired in 1956 and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1962, Jackie continued to chop along the path that was still a long way from being cleared. He campaigned for baseball to hire a black third-base coach, then a black manager. In 1969 he refused an invitation to play in an old-timers' game at Yankee Stadium to protest the lack of progress along those lines.

One of the great players from my generation, Frank Robinson (who was related to Jackie only in spirit), finally became the first black manager, in 1975. Jackie was gone by then. His last public appearance was at the 1972 World Series, where he showed up with white hair, carrying a cane and going blind from diabetes. He died nine days later.

Most of the black players from Jackie's day were at the funeral, but I was appalled by how few of the younger players showed up to pay him tribute. At the time, I was 41 home runs short of Babe Ruth's career record, and when Jackie died, I really felt that it was up to me to keep his dream alive. I was inspired to dedicate my home-run record to the same great cause to which Jackie dedicated his life. I'm still inspired by Jackie Robinson. Hardly a day goes by that I don't think of him.

1. The author's purpose in writing this article is to--
 - a. praise Jackie Robinson
 - b. describe segregation in baseball
 - c. explain the importance of being patient
 - d. explain why he became a ballplayer

2. Which of the following statements uses loaded words?
 - a. "I was 14 years old when I first saw Jackie Robinson."

- b. "I didn't hear a word that came out of his mouth."
- c. "For three years he would have to turn the other cheek and silently suffer all the vile things that would come his way."
- d. "Jackie's character was much more important than his batting average..."

3. Which of the following words best describes the tone of this article?

- a. critical
- b. mournful
- c. admiring
- d. regretful

4. All of the following statements are facts **except**

- a. "He campaigned for baseball to hire a black third-base coach, then a black manager."
- b. "With Jackie in the infield, the Dodgers won six National League pennants."
- c. "I believe every black person in America had a piece of those pennants."
- d. "...he retired in 1956 and was elected to the Hall of Fame in 1962..."

5. The author uses the anecdote about Robinson risking a court-martial to show that Robinson--

- a. did not respect laws.
- b. was a proud person who fought for respect.
- c. could not control his temper.
- d. did not like being a soldier.

6. Which of the following statements is the most accurate evaluation of the author's argument?

- a. It relies almost entirely on emotional appeals.
- b. Facts, statistics, and other objective evidence make up the argument's main support.
- c. It uses a mix of fact and emotional appeals to convince the reader.
- d. Aaron includes little support in his argument.

Constructed Response

According to the author, why did Jackie Robinson have to be "bigger than life"? Explain your reasoning using at least two details from the text.