

The Unconquerable Doing the Impossible: Jackie Robinson's 1946 Spring Training in Jim Crow Florida

To the student:

As you read this accounting of Jackie Robinson's Jim Crow experience, ponder the following:

- The role individuals played such as Rachel Robinson, Branch Rickey, Mary McLeod Bethune, Joe Davis and David Brock, Mayor William Perry, Clay Hopper, Johnny Wright, Wendell Smith, and Billy Rowe in shaping Robinson's response to the discrimination heaped upon him?
- What factors, internal or external, enabled Jackie Robinson to succeed in his quest to cross baseball's color line?
- The influence of ideas, human interests, such as the popularity of baseball and sport in American life, and the American consciousness
- The impact of press coverage on human behavior and beliefs
- The impact of World War II in reducing regionalism and replacing it with patriotic nationalism, civil rights organizations, enfranchisement and voting leverage, economic need and greed

Los Angeles, February, 1946

On the late afternoon of February 28, 1946, Jack Roosevelt Robinson and his new bride, the former Rachel Isum, waited for their American Airlines flight from the Lockheed Terminal at the airport in Los Angeles, destined for Daytona Beach, Florida. Jack's attire was very proper, a gray business suit, while Rachel was splendidly outfitted in her new husband's wedding gifts, a three-quarter length ermine coat with matching hat and an alligator handbag. Although they had originally thought to travel by train, the Robinsons had decided to fly to New Orleans, then to Pensacola, and finally to Daytona Beach. There, Jack was to report by noon on March 1 to the training camp of the Montreal Royals, the top triple-A minor league farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team.

The Robinsons were dressed not merely to travel that day, they were dressed to make history. The moment Jackie Robinson reported to training camp he would be breaking the color line in major league baseball that had existed since Moses Fleetwood Walker was released from the Toledo Blue Stockings in 1884, largely in response to a drive to ban black players begun by Chicago White Stockings player-manager Adrian "Cap" Anson.

As the newlyweds prepared to board their flight, Jackie's mother, Mallie, handed the dapper couple a shoebox filled with fried chicken and hard-boiled eggs. Rachel and Jackie cringed. They were trying to avoid doing anything that supported negative stereotypes of African Americans. They were flying, rather than traveling by train, to be sure Jackie would arrive in good time. They knew blacks were lampooned for bringing picnics onto trains and being tardy. Yet, Mallie insisted they take the box cautioning, "I thought something might happen and I didn't want you starving to death and getting to that baseball camp too weak to hit the ball."

Mallie had experience with the problems Jim Crow laws could create for travelers. But all of them knew Jack would face even greater danger for challenging Jim Crow baseball in the Deep South. February, 1946, had brought with it two shocking hate crimes involving black veterans. On the 13th, uniformed black Army veteran Isaac Woodward, Jr. was removed from a bus in Batesburg,

South Carolina, and blinded by police chief Linwood Shull; Shull would be acquitted of the crime in November by an all-white jury. Only two days before the Robinsons left Los Angeles, black Navy veteran James Stephenson had gotten into an argument with a white radio repairman that escalated into a race riot in Columbia, Tennessee. From February 25-26, local police, state troopers, and state guardsmen went through the black community arresting a hundred people; two died in police custody. In 1946, there would be nine **lynchings** and additional mob incidents; former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt responded by helping to form the National Emergency Committee Against Mob Violence.

New Orleans, Louisiana

The overnight flight from California to Louisiana was uneventful. Rachel saw Jim Crow signs for the first time in her life at the New Orleans airport, and very deliberately drank from a "White" drinking fountain and used a "White" ladies room. They had arrived at 7:00 a.m. and were waiting for their 11:00 departure for Pensacola, Florida, when airline employees paged them to tell them that they had been "bumped" by the military and would have to wait for the noon flight. When the Robinsons asked where they could eat, they were told that they could not be seated in either the airport restaurant or coffee-shop. As the delay dragged on, they looked for a hotel where they could rest. The airport hotel was for "whites-only", so the cabbie took them to a dingy hotel that accommodated blacks. Rachel later recalled, "I was almost nauseated. It was a dirty, dreadful place and they had plastic mattress covers." Dejected, they gratefully ate the contents of Mallie Robinson's picnic box.

Pensacola, Florida

Finally, around 7 p.m., they boarded the flight to Pensacola that would continue on to Daytona. However, when they landed to refuel in Pensacola, they were "bumped" again. Although they were told three passengers had to be taken off so the plane could carry extra fuel for an expected storm, they saw two white passengers board. There would not be another flight to Daytona until the next day, and Jackie was already late for spring training. He called Dodgers owner-manager Branch Rickey for advice and decided to take the Greyhound bus to Daytona Beach, although it meant a 16-hour ride. Rickey told the press that Jackie had been delayed by "bad weather."

In the meantime, Jackie and Rachel boarded the Greyhound bus and the driver ordered them to the rear. Although he had defied discriminatory seating in the Army, Jackie kept his promise to Rickey that he would not create a scene, so the Robinsons sat in the uncomfortable back seat and tried to sleep. When the bus stopped in Jacksonville, Florida, they discovered the blacks-only waiting room was tiny and infested with flies. Rachel was too insulted to eat carry-out food, so they had apples and candy bars. Finally, in the late afternoon of Saturday, March 2, they arrived in Daytona Beach.

Daytona Beach, Florida

When the bus finally pulled into the station, it was greeted by a racially mixed crowd. Rachel Robinson recalled, "I had never been so tired, hungry, miserable, upset in my life as when we finally reached Daytona Beach." When they got off the bus, they discovered that Branch Rickey had arranged for a welcoming committee of three African-American men. Wendell Smith, a sportswriter for the Pittsburgh Courier (the most widely circulated black newspaper of the time), and his photographer, Billy Rowe (who had covered the Japanese surrender on the USS Missouri), had been hired by Rickey to protect, chauffeur and advise Jackie. The third man at the station was black pitcher, John Richard Wright, who Rickey had also signed to the Royals. Blacks and whites alike surged forward to get a better look at Robinson, unaware that Wright was also challenging segregated baseball. Branch Rickey had arranged for Jackie and Rachel Robinson to stay the night at the home of black pharmacist Joe Davis and his wife, Dufferin. After Rachel went

upstairs to settle into a small, private room, Jackie released his anger and told the threesome, "I never want another trip like that one." Jackie told Smith and Rowe he was ready to return to California. They argued with him to reconsider and sleep on it, and they were successful in convincing Robinson to stay.

The enormity of the challenge of crossing baseball's color line, accentuated by the awful trip to Florida, had become crystal clear to Jackie. His four-letter career as an athlete in college at UCLA and his World War II service as an officer in the U.S. Cavalry would carry no weight. There was no practice scheduled for Sunday, but Jackie and Rachel had to travel another 40 miles that day to Seminole County. Because there was an overabundance of postwar talent and Rickey had to work through nearly 200 prospects, he decided to keep the Dodgers in Daytona Beach and move the Royals to rural Sanford, Florida's celery capital. Rickey had arranged for them to stay with Mr. and Mrs. David Brock, a prominent black couple, at their large home, with its wide veranda. The team's lakefront hotel, the Mayfair, would not accept them.

Sanford, Florida

Anxiously, Jackie Robinson suited up in his Montreal Royals uniform for the first time on Monday, March 4, and reported to the park at 9:30 in the morning along with Johnny Wright. They were immediately stopped by reporters who largely ignored Wright but peppered Robinson with questions. When asked, "What would you do if one of these pitchers threw at your head?" Jackie replied, "I'd duck!" Dodgers scout Clyde Sukeforth then introduced Robinson to the Montreal manager, Clay Hopper. After two days of practice, Rickey and Hopper decided to switch Robinson's playing position to see if he could work out as a first or second baseman, rather than a shortstop where he was experienced.

Jackie's concern about competing with veteran players to remain on the Royals was interrupted when racism intruded. Branch Rickey had miscalculated the degree to which Jim Crow was entrenched in Sanford. As an example, an inanimate object, a second-hand piano, purchased in 1924 from the courthouse for use in a segregated school in nearby Oviedo, was filed as a "Negro Piano" in the school board's record; living human beings challenging segregation certainly would not be tolerated. A large group of white residents had met with the mayor of Sanford and demanded that Robinson and Wright be run out of town. At dinnertime on March 5, Sanford officials informed the Royals that black and white players would not be allowed on the same playing field together. Fearing that a mob might threaten them at the Brock house, Rickey sent Wright and the Robinsons immediately back to Daytona Beach. Deeply disturbed by the situation, Jackie talked about quitting and returning to the Negro Leagues, but Smith and Rowe again persuaded him to hang on.

Back to Daytona

Jackie and Rachel Robinson were again put up in the Daytona Beach home of Joe and Duff Davis. Their Spruce Street location provided the Robinsons a sanctuary in the heart of the black community. Initially, they felt isolated in the Davis's little second floor room, but as they began to move freely in downtown Daytona Beach, they regarded it as a "haven filled with comfort." The politically active Davises introduced the young couple to the legendary Mary McLeod Bethune, as well as community leaders, college faculty, and an assortment of stimulating people.

Daytona Beach was uncommonly progressive for a Florida town of the era. This could be attributed in large part to the then 70-year-old Mary McLeod Bethune, who had founded a school for black girls in the town in 1904. It had grown into **Bethune-Cookman College** and was the focal point for a well-educated, middle class black community. In addition to being an educator, Mary McLeod Bethune was a political activist. She had defied the Ku Klux Klan in Daytona Beach and worked with the local Ring politicians to register black voters; by 1937 half of the adult black

citizens of Daytona Beach were eligible to vote. Ballot box clout moderated some Jim Crow laws; for example, blacks could try on shoes (although not clothing) at stores, and some drove city buses. Noted black author W.E.B. Du Bois shocked Mrs. Bethune when he told her he was not allowed to view history books he had written in southern libraries because of segregation laws; in response, she opened up her college's library which became the first desegregated library in Florida.

By turning out the vote, Mary McLeod Bethune attracted national political attention. She advised presidents Hoover, Roosevelt, and Truman on black affairs. Using her clout as an administrator with the National Youth Administration, she attracted several WPA construction projects to struggling Daytona Beach. The community had been devastated financially by bank failures and loss of tourism during the Depression. The economic woes persisted into World War II, when wartime travel restrictions kept the town from recovering. Mrs. Bethune, who advised the War Department about recruitment of women, convinced the Army to open a Women's Army Corps (WAC) training center in Daytona Beach. Between 1942 and 1944, nearly 14,000 service women from across the United States revived the city's hotels and guesthouses. Racism in Daytona was also moderated by the seasonal influx of Northern tourists and part-time residents including wealthy philanthropists such as James W. Gamble (of Proctor and Gamble) who was a trustee of Bethune-Cookman College and the Rockefellers, also benefactors of the college.

However, with war's end and the departure of the WAC training center, the city was again facing bleak times. Mayor William Perry, approached by Rickey before the black ballplayers' contracts were signed, viewed the prospect of landing the spring training of a major league organization as a matchless opportunity to help the local economy. The Dodgers had trained in North Daytona on an open field nicknamed "Ebbets Field" in 1914, when City Island Ballpark was being built, but the last major league spring training in the town was in 1937 by the St. Louis Cardinals. Once the signings were official, Mayor Perry announced, "No one objects to Jackie Robinson and Johnny Wright training here. We welcome them and wish them the best of luck!" City officials guaranteed that Jackie Robinson could play at the ballpark. In return, Rickey promised that Robinson would not challenge any of the city's segregation laws outside of the ballpark. Robinson and Wright could not stay in the ocean-front Riviera Hotel with their white teammates, nor eat in the same restaurants. They were barred from going to the Daytona's wide, sandy beach; the closest beach for blacks was Bethune Beach, developed by Mrs. Bethune, but it was dozens of miles away, near Cape Canaveral.

During the following weeks, Jackie and Rachel turned to each other for strength. She accompanied him to practice every day, watching while seated in the Jim Crow section. The Dodgers worked out on the white side of town while the Royals, including their two black prospects, practiced in the city's black district on Kelly Field to avoid further confrontation. The stress of racism and the hopes he was carrying for so many people caused Robinson to overthrow and strain his arm. His fielding and batting suffered and he wondered if he would be cut from Montreal's roster and sent down to a lower-division farm team. Rachel, a nurse, treated the injury with cold compresses and they spent their evenings eating out in modest black restaurants and playing cards.

Branch Rickey began to work with Jackie personally, urging him to "Take a lead! Be bold! Make them worry!" The coaches moved Jackie from shortstop to second base, then to first base, and finally, back to second, amazed at how quickly he adapted and learned the new positions. He also began winning the admiration of the white players, including two whose positions Robinson might take, Stan Bréard, a popular veteran Montreal shortstop, and second baseman Lou Rochelli.

The First Game

The first scheduled exhibition game between the Montreal Royals and Brooklyn Dodgers was set for Sunday, March 17, 1946. Daybreak brought threatening skies, but by the 3 p.m. game time the skies over City Island Ballpark were clear. A standing-room only crowd, estimated between 3,000-4,000 spectators, waited for the game to start. Conspicuously absent was Branch Rickey who would not break the Sabbath, not even to support Jackie Robinson. Perhaps the greatest anticipation in the park was felt by the nearly 1,000 African-American spectators who were required under the Jim Crow laws to sit apart from the grandstand in an area behind first base and along the right field foul line. Robinson suited up, but expected the local authorities to stop him from playing, as they had in Sanford.

Instead, Jackie Robinson got to play ball. He also had the chance to play against major leaguers including Pee Wee Reese, Eddie Stanky, and Dixie Walker, all of whom would figure prominently in his life in 1947. Jackie made his professional debut playing the second base position he was just starting to learn. When his name was announced there were a few weak "boos," and a resounding cheer from the Jim Crow section. He played five innings, coming to bat three times. Jackie was hitless, although he got on base the third time up by a fielder's choice, then stole second base and subsequently scored. He fielded perfectly. Although Montreal lost the game, 7-2, it was a turning point psychologically for Jackie. In 1948 he recalled, "When I got home, I felt as though I had won some kind of victory. I had a new opinion of the people in the town. I knew, of course, that everyone wasn't pulling for me to make good, but I was sure that the whole world wasn't lined up against me. When I went to sleep, the applause was still ringing in my ears."

The applause hadn't gone unnoticed by national sportswriters who reported that Jackie Robinson had been applauded by both races in the stadium. While most of the Florida newspapers ignored or downplayed Robinson's breakthrough, the Daytona Beach Evening News acknowledged the historic importance of the game writing, "Playing under terrific pressure, Robinson conducted himself well afield during his five-inning stint. He handled two chances aptly."

Jim Crow On the Road

On March 21, an exhibition game between Montreal and the Jersey City Giants at Durkee Field in Jacksonville, Florida, was cancelled by George G. Robinson, executive secretary of the Jacksonville Recreation Department. He told the Royals, "It is part of the rules and regulations of the Recreational Department that Negroes and whites cannot compete against each other on a city-owned playground." A week later, on the 28th, Jacksonville cancelled a second game and padlocked the stadium.

Under the stress of harassment and the burden of his historic mission, Jackie had trouble sleeping for more than four hours a night. He was hurting from spike marks and being hit by pitches, and fell into a batting slump that lasted over a week. When he finally made a perfect bunt on March 30th, the agricultural department at Bethune-Cookman College sent over chicken and vegetables to the Harris home for a victory dinner. Rachel Robinson later observed, "It was a communal victory for sure."

However, more troubles followed. On April 5, Jacksonville cancelled a third game, and authorities in Savannah, Georgia and Richmond, Virginia announced their refusal to let the Royals play with Robinson and Wright. Rickey would not play without the two black players, so the games were cancelled.

Montreal began a game in Sanford against the St. Paul Saints on Sunday, April 7 before about a hundred spectators. In the second inning, Jackie singled, stole second, and then scored on a base hit. The Royals were getting ready to take the field for the third inning when the chief of police of Sanford arrived and told manager Clay Hopper that he would prosecute him unless Robinson and Wright left the dugout. Hopper pulled them from the game and they left the field.

On April 10th, officials in DeLand, Florida, cancelled a game claiming the stadium lights were not working, even though it was a day game. The game was moved back to Daytona, only twenty miles away. The Dodgers management rescheduled several other road games into Daytona Beach, which historian Jules Tygiel described as "an island of enlightenment in a sea of bigotry." While Daytona Beach was no utopia for African Americans, city officials kept their word and no games were ever cancelled there. Only Daytona Beach gave Jackie Robinson the opportunity to prove his talent.

Eventually, Branch Rickey cancelled the final games of its spring training schedule. Although the disturbances were costly and upset team morale, Rickey felt the great benefit of integrating baseball to the Dodgers as a team and American society as a whole were worth the trouble. Branch Rickey's "noble experiment" was doubly vindicated when both Jackie Robinson and Johnny Wright earned places on the Montreal Royals team. On April 15th, Jackie and Rachel Robinson, along with the rest of the team, boarded a special chartered train that carried them out of Florida to New York City where new history would be made.

Jackie Robinson's breakthrough in Daytona Beach came at a time when there were 175 Southern cities and towns with minor league teams. However, it wasn't until 1952 when a handful of teams signed a few black players including Percy Miller Jr., Nat Peeples, and Jim and Leander Tugerson. Most teams cited a lack of proper facilities for failing to desegregate since hotels, restaurants, dressing rooms and showers were still operating under Jim Crow laws. Jacksonville, Florida, which cancelled Jackie Robinson's exhibition games in 1946, finally held its first desegregated game in 1953 when three black players from the Jacksonville Braves of the Class A South Atlantic league played in the stadium. (One of the three was Hank Aaron, the Hall of Famer who holds the record of 755 career home runs.) Full integration of the minor leagues wasn't achieved until 1964 following local black boycotts and federal legislation and court decisions that struck down Jim Crow laws. In 1997, officials from Sanford, Florida, issued an apology for their predecessors who had forced Jackie Robinson and the Montreal Royals to leave town 51 years earlier.

Daytona Beach's own Jim Crow laws, dating back to around 1900, began to crumble in the wake of Jackie Robinson's spring training. Peabody Auditorium, the city auditorium, was desegregated in 1948. The seating and hiring practices of Daytona Beach's city bus system were fully desegregated in 1955. The same year, the "World's Most Famous Beach" was opened to people of all races. By the early 1960s the city had desegregated local lunch counters, its parks and city golf course, the Daytona Beach police department and Volusia County grand juries, and the public Halifax Hospital. It was also at this time that City Island Ballpark ended segregated seating at its games.

Daytona Today

City Island Ballpark endures as a tangible reminder of Jackie Robinson's personal struggle against Jim Crow. On September 9, 1990, a bronze statue was dedicated at the entrance to the stadium. The **statue of Robinson** in his Montreal Royals uniform talking with two young children, one black and one white, was created by Montreal Canadian artist Jules La Salle. City Island Ballpark was also renamed Jackie Robinson Ballpark at this time.

In 1996, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of his debut game with the Montreal Royals, Rachel Robinson dedicated a memorial marker at the Daytona Beach ballpark. Once barred from sitting in the grandstand, she was honored center diamond. In the game that followed, Bethune-Cookman College, which had conferred an honorary doctorate degree on Jackie Robinson in 1953, defeated Florida A & M University, another historically black college, by 11-2. Volusia County Schools, segregated when Robinson played, brought 1,500 students to tour the ballpark and visit a photo exhibit about segregated baseball at Bethune-Cookman College. In 1997, when major league baseball dedicated its season to Jackie Robinson, many minor leaguers, including

the Daytona Cubs (the Chicago Cubs' Advanced A farm team) wore a "Breaking Barriers" commemorative arm patch. In 2002, Jackie Robinson Stadium announced it would undertake a \$17.5 million dollar renovation that would include a museum devoted to Jackie Robinson.

Jackie Robinson died of a heart attack in 1972, and one of his favorite mottoes became his epitaph, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." Rarely has a ballplayer, or any professional sports figure, had the impact that Jackie Robinson had on life in the United States.

This essay was written by Jean West, a teacher at RJ Longstreet Elementary, in Florida.