

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

By Jean West

Overview

From the time 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, major league baseball had been segregated. In 1946, Jackie Robinson, a 28-year-old college-educated Army veteran and talented athlete, headed to Florida with his wife to see if he would succeed in earning a place on the Montreal Royals, the top farm team of the Brooklyn Dodgers. If he could endure the trials of Jim Crow in Florida and demonstrate his talent, the young African American would break baseball's color barrier. This lesson, aimed at middle and high school students, focuses on the individual, and his experiences, reactions to, and the results of his actions under Jim Crow. The activities, geared toward middle and high school students, are designed for a variety of learning styles and will examine the factors that contributed to Jackie Robinson's success in crossing professional baseball's color line.

Curriculum Standards

As defined by the NCSS National Curriculum Thematic Strands, this lesson addresses the following themes:

- People, Places and Environment- examining human-environment interactions to create spatial views and geographic perspectives of the world
- Individuals, Groups, and Institutions--understanding the paradigms and traditions that undergird social and political institutions
- Civic Ideals and Practices- studying the ideals, principles, and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic

Objectives

- Analyze cause-and-effect relationships bearing in mind multiple causation including (a) the importance of the individual in history (b) the influence of ideas, human interests, and beliefs; and (c) the role of chance, the accidental and the irrational
- Explain the origins of the postwar civil rights movement and the role of popular culture and the media in the assault on segregation
- Obtain historical data from a variety of sources including: library and museum collections, historic sites, primary sources, oral testimonies, the Internet

Time Required

This lesson will take from one to three class periods to complete.

Materials Needed

- Essay, "**The Unconquerable Doing the Impossible: Jackie Robinson's 1946 Spring Training in Jim Crow Florida**"
- The video *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) with the title character played by Jackie Robinson himself

- **Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson interview essay**
- Jimcrowhistory.org Web Site materials

The Lesson

Anticipatory Set

Show students the scene from *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950) where Branch Rickey interviews Jackie Robinson. If you don't have access to this film, or as a supplement to it, pass out the overview essay of Robinson's interview with Branch Rickey [link to Robinson Rickey Interview.doc]. Focus on the following conversation between Branch Rickey, owner-manager of the Dodgers, and Jackie Robinson:

Ask students about the following:

Rickey demanded, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: But whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.' Now, can you do it? I know you are naturally combative. But for three years--three years--you will have to do it the only way it can be done. Three years--can you do it?"

Jackie Robinson answered, "Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks. If you want to take this gamble, I'll promise you there will be no incidents."

Procedures

1. The students should become familiar with the physical journey Robinson took as well as his mental journey in his quest for a spot on the Dodgers baseball team. Ask students to locate and mark the following places on the U.S. and Florida maps: Los Angeles, CA; New Orleans, LA; Pensacola, FL; Jacksonville, FL; Daytona Beach, FL; Sanford, FL; and DeLand, FL.
2. Direct students to read the essay, "The Unconquerable doing the Impossible: Jackie Robinson's 1946 Spring Training in Jim Crow Florida".[link to essay]
3. Lead a class discussion on the topics from the essay, points to ponder section.
4. Direct each student to locate or create an object, photograph or illustration, interview or written document that represents to them the single most important factor why Jackie Robinson's "noble experiment" was successful. Ask each student to write an explanation addressing:
 - How this factor represents the struggles Robinson needed to overcome
 - How this factor enabled Jackie Robinson to succeed in his quest to cross baseball's color line
 - How the created or selected item reflects this factor
 - Evaluate the factor estimating its overall importance in Jackie Robinson's success on the numerical scale of baseball performance (1.000 would mean that the factor was the only thing in the world that made Jackie Robinson successful; .500 would mean that all other factors contributed at least halfway to Robinson's success and this factor accounts for the rest.)
Example of an item: Students could bring in a box that would represent the chicken lunch Robinson's mother gave him in Los Angeles.
5. Provide all students with the opportunity to present their items and statistics to the whole class for up to three minutes.

Extension Activity

Challenge students to research another prominent figure in African-American History that had to overcome the barriers of Jim Crow in order to succeed. They can submit their documented essays to the jimcrowhistory.org Web Site for possible inclusion on the site.

Assessment

- Student has created or found an item -- 10%
- Student has identified a single, most important reason for Jackie Robinson's success -- 10%
- Student has related the item to a reason for Jackie Robinson's success -- 10%
- Student has assessed the relative importance of their factor in the overall success of Jackie Robinson in the form of a baseball statistic -- 5%
- Student presents findings to class -- 5%
- Facts are accurate -- 20%
- Report is clearly communicated -- 20%
- Research and preparation are evident -- 20%

Interdisciplinary Connections

This lesson can be used in conjunction with:

English/Language Arts Classes -- Compare and contrast the fictional events and community dynamics of *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee with Jackie Robinson's experiences in Florida in 1946.

Multimedia Classes -- Compare a contemporary film about baseball with one filmed prior to 1947, for example, *Pride of the Yankees*, or *The Lou Gehrig Story* (1942).

Mathematics Classes -- Examine the statistics of Jackie Robinson's career and compare them with those of other top players by creating charts or graphs.

Physical Education Classes -- Compare Jackie Robinson's records as an athlete of track, football, basketball, and baseball with the records held by the top athletes of your school

U.S. Government Classes -- Research the executive orders by President Truman, the judicial opinions of the Warren Court, and the civil rights acts passed by the U.S. Congress that dismantled segregation.

Journalism Classes -- Examine the history of the black press, compare and contrast coverage of the same event by different correspondents. Go to the [Jim Crow Gateway](#) to start your research.

Computer/Graphic Design Classes -- Design a commemorative baseball card summarizing Jackie Robinson's baseball career; if looking for a service project, sell the cards and donate the proceeds to the **Jackie Robinson Foundation** or other altruistic cause.

Drama -- Create and perform a play or dance based on Jackie Robinson's experiences fighting discrimination.

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