

Tygiel, Jules. *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983. Pp. xii, 392. Index, notes, illustrations. \$16.95 (cloth).

Certainly one of the most thoroughly discussed and popular subjects in American sport history is the story of Jackie Robinson and the integration of organized baseball. Few topics elicit such a responsive chord or stir people's emotions more than the Robinson saga. It is a tale of courage and heroics, both on the part of Robinson and Branch Rickey, the "Mahatma" or "Deacon" of the national game. The details of Robinson's signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers can be vividly recounted even by those with a limited knowledge of baseball history. Perhaps no other episode in sport so conveniently fits our national perception of equality and fair play.

While there has been a plethora of books written about the Robinson legend, no work covers the subject more thoroughly than Jules Tygiel's recent study *Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy*. Combining exhaustive research with lucid writing, Tygiel's work makes significant advances over any of the books written previously about the Robinson legacy, including Murray Polner's *Branch Rickey: A Biography*, and Harvey Frommer's *Rickey and Robinson: The Men Who Broke Baseball's Color Barrier*. Maybe more than anything else, Tygiel's study forces us to confront some of the more somber truths and parables associated with the "national game." Despite arguments to the contrary, American baseball had not been a "melting pot" for diverse ethnic groups, nor had it eliminated the racial disparities that distinguished other phases of society. He makes it clear that organized baseball was characterized by a persistent white racism that made desegregation a painfully slow process. Closing its doors to blacks in the latter nineteenth century, organized baseball did not become desegregated again un-

til 1945. In that year Rickey shook all of baseball, and much of the country, when it was announced that Montreal, the Dodgers top farm team, had signed Robinson to a contract. Robinson's signing, however, did not cause other owners to suddenly beat down the bushes looking for qualified black players for their clubs. As late as 1953 only six teams had black players. Organized baseball would not be completely desegregated until 1959, nearly fourteen years after the signing of Robinson.

The central characters in *Baseball's Great Experiment* are obviously Rickey and Robinson, with the latter receiving most of the attention. Tygiel, an associate professor of history at San Francisco State University, retells much of the story, recounting Rickey's meticulous planning and Robinson's chilling reception among teammates and opponents alike. But he does much more than that. He gives us new insights and a different historical perspective on the Robinson saga. He describes in vivid detail, for instance, the vigorous campaign to intergrate organized baseball waged by the American Communist Party and such prominent black sportswriters as Wendell Smith, Sam Lacy, and Joe Bostic. He acknowledges the impact that World War II and the nation's heightened racial awareness had on baseball. Tygiel also shatters one of the parables that has evolved from the Robinson legend—namely, that if Rickey had not signed Robinson in 1945, the color-line “would have remained erect for years to come.” He convincingly argues that baseball would have been integrated by 1950, “even if Rickey had not courageously engineered that collapse.” The political pressure that was mounting in the United States, particularly in the New York area, would have forced the issue in a few years. “It is also likely,” writes Tygiel, “that if Rickey had not set the precedent, Bill Veeck would have.” (p. 207)

Perhaps the most distinguishing feature of *Baseball's Great Experiment* is that it is more than just a recapitulation of the Robinson story. Tygiel goes beyond the usual accounts of Rickey's search for a black player or of the trials and tribulations Robinson faced during his playing days with the Dodgers. He gives a most interesting account of racial developments in the minor leagues and the part that the desegregation of baseball in the South played in the struggle against Jim Crow. He also assesses the impact that the integration of organized baseball had on the black leagues and the ultimate fortune of the heroes of that league. Most important, Tygiel carries the story of baseball integration through 1959, when the Boston Red Sox became the last major league team to sign a black player. In the process, he describes the frequently neglected stories of such pioneers of baseball intergration as Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe, Larry Doby, Satchel Paige, and Willie Mays. For the first time we gain some valuable information about the role of these black stars in the breaking of baseball's color barrier.

What is particularly insightful here is how Tygiel is able to reveal the divergent reactions expressed by each of these athletes when encountering racial discrimination and segregation. Too many sport historians have falsely seen black athletes as a homogeneous group, perceiving them not only as sharing

physical characteristics but also as thinking and acting alike. Tygiel does not make that mistake. He makes it clear that each of the black ballplayers possessed particular value schemes and dealt with the integration process in his own unique way. Nowhere does this point come across more plainly than when Tygiel discusses the personality differences between Robinson and Larry Doby, the American League's first black player. Tygiel explains that Doby possessed "a strikingly similar background to Robinson." But "the common experiences they had shared created two totally different men. Robinson was aggressive, outspoken, and audacious. Doby was shy, quiet, and unassuming." Robinson seemed relatively at ease with the press. "while Doby submitted to them rather reluctantly." (p. 214)

Like any book, *Baseball's Great Experiment* does have its minor flaws. Tygiel incorrectly states that Emmett Ashford, major league baseball's first black umpire, was brought up in the National League when in fact it was the American League. (p. 339) He inappropriately refers to J. G. Taylor Spink, the late publisher of *The Sporting News*, as Tom. (e.g. p. 42) Tygiel also mistakenly credits Joe Medwick with spiking Robinson. (pp. 202-203)

Minor editing errors like these do not diminish the significant contributions that Tygiel's study has made to the sport history literature. *Baseball's Great Experiment* is an excellent historical synthesis that vividly shows the interrelationship between baseball and other facets of American society. The black ballplayers' part has been illuminated in a manner that has expanded our knowledge both of the "national game" and the racial realities of American culture. I cannot overestimate the value of this scholarly and well-written book. It is the standard by which other books on the Robinson legend will be judged.

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