

Sport, Race, and the Baseball Business: The Jackie Robinson Story Revisited

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The integration of Jackie Robinson into the major leagues of organized professional baseball is one of the great dramas of modern times. But the motivations of Brooklyn Dodger general manager Branch Rickey have not been adequately explored. Nor has the consequent decline of the Negro baseball leagues been thoroughly studied.

After decades of success in St. Louis, Branch Rickey took over the Brooklyn Dodgers during World War Two. He quickly began scouting young talent to take up the slack for the veteran players serving in the war. He included Negroes in his search, while keeping a very low profile on this matter. To avoid the impression he was catering to the growing integration movement was very important to Rickey, who realized most baseball men were socially conservative. To camouflage his intentions even further, Rickey helped to sponsor a Negro league in 1945, with a franchise to operate in Brooklyn.

In August 1945, he interviewed Jackie Robinson, who thought he was being scouted for the Brown Dodgers of the new Negro league. But Rickey was looking for a courageous, college-educated Negro to become a pioneer in breaking the color line which had existed in major league baseball since the late nineteenth century. He decided to sign the former UCLA star and World War Two veteran to a contract at the Dodgers' farm club in Montreal for 1946.

Most baseball executives greeted Rickey's decision calmly, claiming it was his club's business and that no color line ever existed. But privately they were angered at Rickey's cornering the market on Negro players for the Dodgers. (He shortly signed other Negro players like Roy Campanella and Don Newcombe.) These executives felt Rickey was acting contrary to his role as member of a major league committee seeking an integration policy for all of baseball. In 1948, this resentment broke into the open with angry charges being leveled at Rickey by former New York Yankee owner Larry MacPhail.

Although Rickey clearly was cunning in his strategy, it is likely that integration would have been delayed indefinitely if Rickey had not been on the scene. Most baseball owners were not eager to initiate action in the delicate area of race relations. They usually reacted negatively to the direct action measures tried by civil rights advocates.

Robinson's success in Brooklyn in 1947 began a decade-long domination of the National League by the Dodgers. The Dodgers went on to attendance records as Rickey realized the gate attraction of the Jackie Robinson story, lonely pioneer battling great odds. Robinson became a subject of great controversy despite his brilliant performances. He constantly spoke out for integration, and did not fear to name teams he felt slow to give blacks chances. After Rickey was forced out of the Dodger front office in the middle 1950s, he commented that perhaps Robinson was not the ideal pioneer he had envisioned. But whatever their late disagreements, between 1945 and 1950, Rickey and Robinson proved a very effective tandem in bringing both financial and artistic success to the Dodgers and insuring integration would succeed as a permanent baseball policy.

But the Negro leagues were mortally crippled by the integration of the white leagues. The loss of most of its stars and the lack of efficiency and respectability in its operation proved too burdensome. Although some Negro team owners criticized the hostility of both Rickey and Robinson to black leagues which had provided great baseball for several decades, by the end of the 1950s no organized black baseball league existed.