

# The Political Collision of Black Sport Heroes: Robeson and Robinson

by  
Ronald A. Smith  
Penn State University

Two blacks, Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson, played roles in the desegregation of American sport and in doing so collided politically. Of the two, Paul Robeson is little remembered. Robeson achieved national prominence first in athletics when he twice won all-American honors in football at Rutgers in 1917 and 1918. He won a total of 12 varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball, and track and field, and he later played professional football in the early years of the National Football League. Robeson also led his college class in scholarship, was voted into the Phi Beta Kappa, graduated from Columbia Law School, and eventually became a world renowned Shakespearean actor and folk singer. Jackie Robinson, two decades younger than Robeson, was a four sport letterman at U.C.L.A. prior to desegregating baseball when he signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1945. Both men, in their own ways, sought to rid the nation of racial prejudice and Jim Crow laws and customs, but because of a difference in the means used to achieve this end, only Jackie Robinson is generally remembered. The collision between Robeson and Robinson occurred in 1949 over the issue of communism. Paul Robeson, from the 1930s, had praised the Soviet Union for what he considered was the society most free of racial prejudice. When World War II was concluded and the Soviets were soon considered alarming threats to the American form of capitalism and democracy, Robeson was held in contempt for his outspoken pro-communist ideology which was combined with his verbal unrestraint for black rights everywhere. In 1949, Robeson spoke in Paris, France before the World Congress of Partisans of Peace, a radical left organization. He said:

It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against the Soviet Union which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity.

The House Un-American Activities Committee reflected the outcry of the American government over the statement that blacks would be unwilling to fight the Soviets if the need arose. The chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee asked Jackie Robinson to testify before his committee "to give the lie to statements by Paul Robeson." Robinson agreed. With well-planned testimony, Robinson acknowledged Robeson as a famous ex-athlete and great singer and actor, but Robinson rejected any help which Robeson and the Communist party might have offered in wiping Jim Crow policy out of American society. Robinson said he and other Americans had "too much invested in our country's welfare, for any of us to throw it away because of a siren song sung in bass. . . . We can win our fight without the Communists and we don't want their help." Jackie Robinson had willingly become party to the vendetta to remove Paul Robeson from the public eye. A short time later Robeson's concerts were violently opposed by right wing groups like the American Legion; his recordings were removed from record shops; his name was deleted from a sport record book; and he was harrassed by the F.B.I. and had his passport cancelled by the Secretary of State. The hysteria of the McCarthy Era of post-World War II made Robeson into a political leper and caused his name to go into almost total eclipse. Though both Robeson and Robinson were on the cutting edge of racial reform in America, they approached change from different directions. Robeson wanted reform on his

own terms based on moral principles, not necessarily those of white society. Robinson was more willing to compromise with white society for a time to accomplish positive racial goals and his own advancement. Robeson was more idealistic and unyielding, and because of it he was politically, economically, and socially alienated from the greater society. Robinson was more realistic and pragmatic, and he fared far better socially and financially than did Robeson. It is likely that future historians will judge both Robeson and Robinson, despite their acknowledged differences, not only as athletic heroes but as heroes in race relations as well.