

The Southern Press and the Integration of Baseball: Florida Newspapers and Jackie Robinson

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This paper examined the reaction of Florida's white press to Jackie Robinson's integration of baseball in the late 1940s. This examination not only provided insight into how the Southern press responded to integration, but also demonstrated the extent to which these newspapers helped to inform their readers on an issue of critical importance to the South and the nation.

Professional baseball had barred African Americans from participating since 1888, but during the Second World War pressure to integrate the game mounted. The Brooklyn Dodgers, under the leadership of Branch Rickey, took the first step in this direction by signing Jackie Robinson to a contract with their Montreal farm club in October 1945.

Robinson encountered Jim Crow from the first day he entered Florida. Once spring training began, the use of facilities in many Florida towns became a problem. Sanford, Jacksonville and DeLand all refused to allow games or practices in which Robinson would play; only Jacksonville officials publicly cited their desire to maintain racial separation in the use of recreational facilities as the reason for their decision.

Florida press reaction to these events proved perplexing. While none of the state's newspapers criticized Robinson's signing on racial grounds, many questioned the experiment and expressed doubts about Robinson's playing ability. Once spring training began, many state newspapers reported Robinson's achievements with little comment or ignored his achievements altogether. Most Florida newspapers dodged the integration issue. Several newspapers, including the *Tallahassee Democrat*, the *Florida Times-Union*, the *St. Petersburg Independent*, and the *Leesburg Commercial Ledger*, stifled news surrounding the historic breakthrough. Of the state's presses, only two, the *Miami Herald* and the *Daytona Beach Evening News*, showed sympathy for Robinson and demonstrated an understanding of the importance of what he was doing.

Even after spring training, the Florida press continued to ignore Robinson and the significance of his achievements. Many newspapers did not report Robinson's eventual signing with the Dodgers after his 1946 season in Montreal and some neglected to mention his being named Rookie of the Year in 1947.

Florida newspapers failed to keep the public informed on the vital issue of integration, and for the most part resorted to a modern day "gag rule" on this issue. This likely resulted from a desire to avoid controversy as well as a Southern tradition of not discussing race relations.