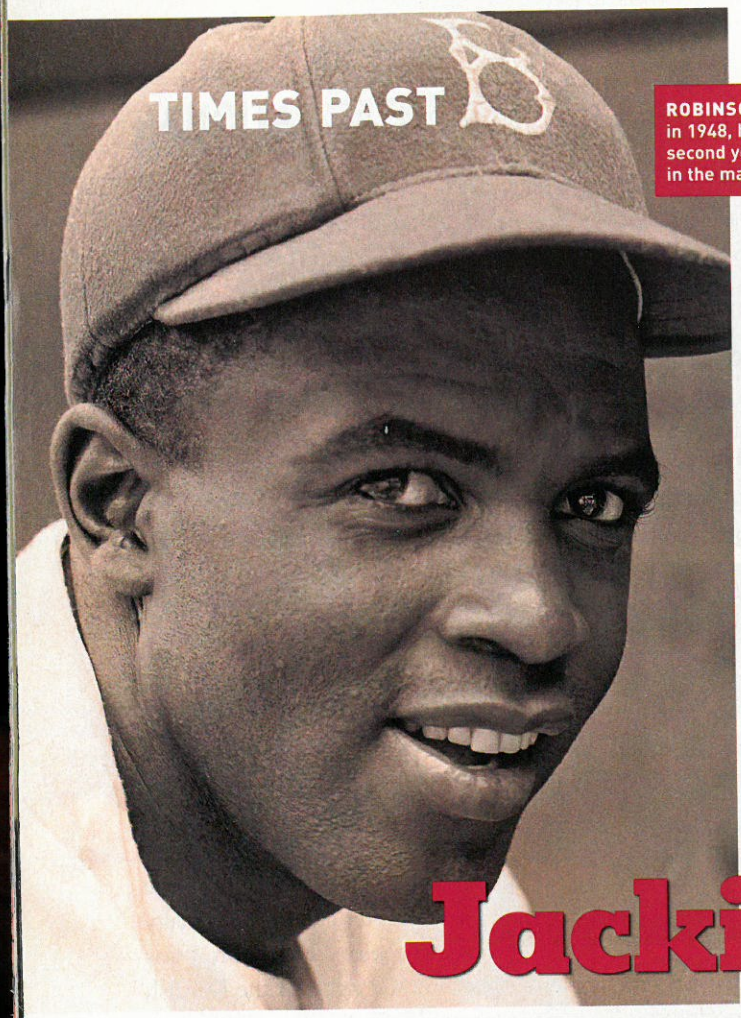
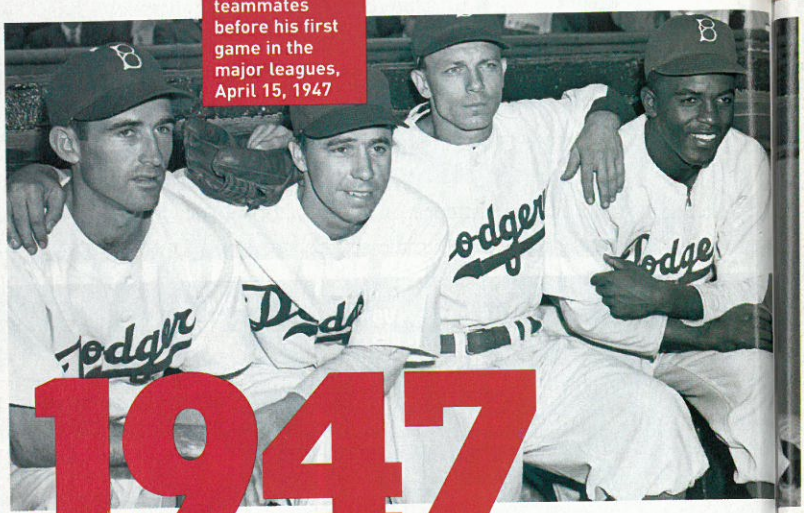
TIMES PAST



ROBINSON in 1948, his second year in the majors



POSING with teammates before his first game in the major leagues, April 15, 1947

1947

Jackie Robinson I

Long before the civil rights movement took center stage, baseball's color barrier fell when Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers

BY SUZANNE BILYEU

On April 15, 1947, an unusually chilly day in New York, a large crowd gathered at Ebbets Field for the Brooklyn Dodgers' opening-day game against the Boston Braves. Like any rookie, the 28-year-old first baseman for the Dodgers, Jackie Robinson, was nervous. In his first at-bat, he was called out by a hair at first base. But in the seventh inning, Robinson scored the winning run after reaching base on a bunt.

While few people remember the details of that game 60 years ago (the Dodgers won, 5-3), Robinson's participation echoed far beyond the sports world: He had broken the color barrier in major-league baseball.

It wasn't front-page news the next day—*The New York Times* mentioned Robinson's debut in its sports pages—but it later came to be seen as a civil rights milestone, taking place a year before President Harry S. Truman ordered the integration of the military, seven years before the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed school segregation, and more than a decade before the civil rights movement became the focus of the nation's attention.

"He was a freedom rider before freedom rides," Martin Luther King Jr. later said of Robinson, who endured a difficult struggle for acceptance among white players and fans.

'NOT AT ALL AFRAID'

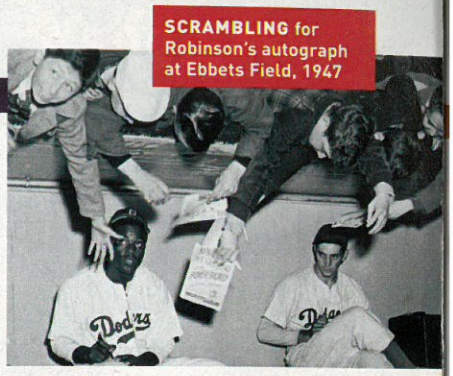
Robinson's early life seemed to prepare him well for his role as a trailblazer. Born in Cairo, Georgia, in 1919, he grew up mostly in Pasadena, Calif., raised by his mother, Mallie, who took in washing and ironing to support her five children. (Robinson's father, Jerry, a sharecropper, abandoned the family when Robinson was an infant.)

When the Robinsons moved to an all-white neighborhood in 1922, someone burned a cross on their front lawn. But the way Mallie Robinson handled such incidents left a lasting impression on Jackie.

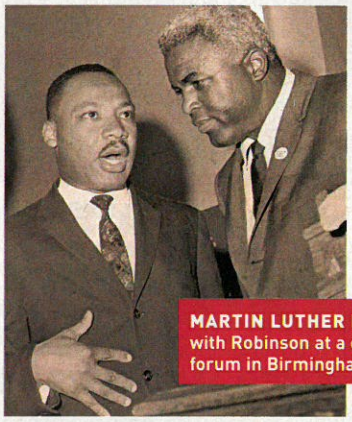
"My mother never lost her com-

PAGE 16: BETTMANN/CORBIS (2); PAGE 17: CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BRUCE BENNETT STUDIOS/GETTY IMAGES; BETTMANN/CORBIS; AP IMAGES (2)

SLIDING back to first base; Robinson was an outstanding base stealer.



SCRAMBLING for Robinson's autograph at Ebbets Field, 1947



MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. with Robinson at a civil rights forum in Birmingham, Ala., 1963

SIGNING his contract with the Dodgers farm team in 1945

n Integrates Baseball

Sports of the Times

The muscular Negro minds his own business and shrewdly makes no effort to push himself. He speaks quietly and intelligently when spoken to and already has made a strong impression. "I was nervous in the first play of my first game at Ebbets Field," he said with his ready grin, "but nothing has bothered me since."

A veteran Dodger said of him, "Having Jackie on the team is still a little strange, just like anything else that's new. We just don't know how to act with him. But he'll be accepted in time. You can be sure of that.

An excerpt from ***THE NEW YORK TIMES***, April 16, 1947

posure," Robinson recalled in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*. "She didn't allow us to go out of our way to antagonize the whites, and she still made it perfectly clear to us and to them that she was not at all afraid of them, and that she had no intention of allowing them to mistreat us."

Robinson excelled at sports from childhood. In 1940, he became the first athlete at U.C.L.A. to earn a letter in four sports—football, basketball, baseball, and track—in a single season.

In 1942, not long after the U.S. entered World War II, Robinson received his draft notice. In a segregated Army, he became one of the first blacks to attend Officer Candidate School and graduated as a second lieutenant.

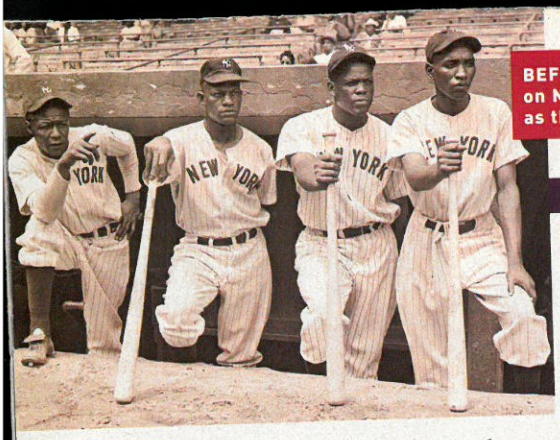
One incident nearly derailed his military career. While stationed at Camp Hood, Texas, he refused to move to the back of the bus, as blacks were supposed to do, on a trip to the neighboring town of Temple. The driver summoned the military police, and the incident led to a court martial. But Robinson was acquitted of all charges and received an honorable discharge in 1944.

NEGRO LEAGUES

The next year, Robinson joined the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro American League, one of the professional baseball leagues made up of predominantly black teams. The Monarchs were considered one of the league's best teams, but Robinson was dismayed by the poor playing and living conditions.

Although major-league baseball had no written rule against black players, the "color line" had been observed since the 1880s. Team owners had long feared that their players would quit rather than play with blacks.

But Branch Rickey, general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, detested baseball's whites-only policy. The war had created a shortage of baseball talent and Rickey figured it was the right time



BEFORE 1947, blacks played only on Negro league teams, such as the New York Black Yankees.

to sign some promising black players.

Robinson, a good ballplayer who had experience playing alongside white athletes, was Rickey's first choice. In 1945, he was invited to Brooklyn to meet with Rickey.

"I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back," Rickey told Robinson, and he acted out situations that Robinson might encounter: He pretended to be a foul-mouthed opponent shouting racial epithets. He swung his fist at Robinson's head. No matter what happened, Rickey said, Robinson must not react.

Robinson signed a contract with the Dodgers organization, and in 1946, he joined a Dodgers farm team, the Montreal Royals, where he led the International League in batting. The team's manager, who initially opposed integrated baseball, told *Newsweek* that Robinson was "a player who must go to the majors."

COLD SHOULDER

But not all of the Dodgers were ready to accept Robinson: Some threatened to strike if he joined the team. By April 1947, Robinson was still playing for the Royals and sportswriters were wondering whether he would be promoted. "Only Rickey knows," wrote Arthur Daley in *The New York Times*, "and he ain't talkin'."

On April 10, days before the start of the 1947 season, Robinson got the call: He was now a Brooklyn Dodger.

A few of the Dodgers, especially shortstop Pee Wee Reese, supported and befriended Robinson. But many gave him the cold shoulder at first, prompting a sportswriter at the *New York Post* to call Robinson "the loneliest man I have ever seen in sports."

A few weeks into the season, the Philadelphia Phillies came to Brooklyn. The Phillies and their manager, Ben Chapman, taunted Robinson with racial epithets. "Chapman did more than anybody to unite the Dodgers," Rickey later said. "When he poured out that stream of unconscionable abuse, he solidified and unified 30 men."

Robinson faced other hardships. On the road, he was often barred from staying in the same hotel as the rest of the team or eating in the same restaurants. He roomed with a black sportswriter who traveled with the team. Pitchers threw at his head, and runners hit him with spikes. He received hate mail, even death threats.

Some of these problems subsided as Robinson gained acceptance and other black players joined the majors. Eleven weeks after Robinson became a Dodger, the Cleveland Indians signed Larry Doby, who became the second black major leaguer. (By 1951, there were 14 black players, and the color barrier was being broken in other sports as well.)

Integration of Major Sports in the U.S.

SPORT	YEAR INTEGRATED
Football	1946
Baseball	1947
Basketball	1950
Tennis	1950
Hockey	1958
Golf	1961

SOURCES: NFL; MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL; NBA; UNITED STATES TENNIS ASSOCIATION; NHL; PGA

Robinson went on to win the Rookie of the Year award in 1947. In 1949, as the Dodgers' second baseman, he led the National League in batting (with a .342 average) and stolen bases and was voted the league's Most Valuable Player.

He would lead the Dodgers to six pennants and a World Series before retiring from baseball in 1957. In 1962, he was elected to the Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.

Robinson became a business executive and continued to champion the cause of civil rights, participating in voter-registration drives in the South, and working with Martin Luther King Jr. to raise money for rebuilding black churches that had been burned in Georgia.

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives," Robinson wrote in his autobiography. "I cannot possibly believe I have it made while so many of my black brothers and sisters are hungry, inadequately housed, insufficiently clothed, denied their dignity as they live in slums or barely exist on welfare."

'WHAT A GIFT'

Robinson's last public appearance was at the 1972 World Series in Cincinnati. Diabetes had taken its toll on his health; he walked with a cane and was nearly blind. He died that October of a heart attack. He was 53.

In 1997, baseball retired Robinson's number, 42, at a ceremony at Shea Stadium in New York. Jeff Merron of ESPN.com wrote that the event "brought back memories of seeing photos of Robinson, and maybe some TV appearances, after his playing days had ended. His hair had turned prematurely gray, long before his early death.

"He had turned the other cheek. He had absorbed enormous abuse. It had, in the long run, cost him. But what a gift he gave us all."

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