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Breaking Baseball's Color Barrier:

The Motives and Lasting Impact of Branch Rickey

in Signing Jackie Robinson to a

Major League Baseball Contract

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Major League Baseball has long been a major part of American culture and continues still to this day to be impactful on American society. One of the many aspects of the game that have impacted American society is the desegregation of Major League Baseball and the first African American to play in the major leagues, Jackie Robinson. Crossing over into Major League Baseball from the Negro Leagues, Robinson was signed to a professional contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers by the team's president and general manager, Branch Rickey, in 1946. What makes the signing of Robinson – at the time already 28 and in his 'prime' by modern baseball standards – so intriguing is that there was never a rule in professional baseball that prevented African Americans from signing a contract with a team. Prior to Robinson's signing, however, it had been considered a "gentlemen's rule" that players of African American descent would not be allowed to compete among the ranks of the major leagues and that they should stick to their own respective leagues. However, this "gentlemen's rule" did not prevent other people of non-white descent, such as those with Hispanic heritage, from playing professionally.

Although Branch Rickey was the first man to sign an African American ballplayer to a professional contract, he surely was not the only one to have had the thought. The first African American baseball leagues were formed around 1880 – just three short years after baseball's first professional league, the National League (which later became Major League Baseball in 1903). Throughout this time, countless African American ballplayers played at the highest level of the Negro Leagues and it is within reason to think that Major League scouts and owners took notice, but were afraid to sign these players because of the negative publicity and the potential financial crisis that came with these players as a result of their skin tone.

The aim of this research is to understand and explain the underlying motives of Branch Rickey and his signing of Jackie Robinson – which paved the way for a new era of Major League

Baseball; the cultural significance of this signing; and the lasting impact that Jackie Robinson's breaking of baseball's color barrier has continually had on America's pastime. The questions that will be used to explore these events are: which particular processes led to the desegregation of Major League Baseball? How did the integration of Major League Baseball change the game and the culture of an entire country? How has publicity been affected by the integration of Major League Baseball? What role did the desegregation play in shaping the culture of modern-day America and the Civil Rights Movement? These questions will not only help to provide adequate background information, but will also allow for a look at societal context of a nation during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The answers to these questions are essential to understanding the motivation behind such a controversial decision on one of the world's largest stages and even more essential to understanding the cultural impact of such a decision. This research is important because civil inequality is a hot-button issue in America right now, and has been for the majority of the last century. Exploring this event and public thought of Americans in the first half of the twentieth century is imperative to understanding race relations and why a decision as challenging as Branch Rickey's has proven to be so influential in shaping American society.

The legend of Branch Rickey is most often remembered as the man who changed the entire landscape of Major League Baseball when he signed Jackie Robinson to a professional contract in 1947. As explained by Lee Lowenfish, Rickey was a conundrum that displayed "a lust for competition and excellence with a genuine warmth, humor, and compassion."¹ It is through this quote that one can truly understand the charismatic Branch Rickey. However, the

¹ Lee Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 9.

brilliance of Branch Rickey would certainly be undermined if his legacy were to end this single contract signing and the undeniably significant impact this one contract and the following career of Jackie Robinson had on the game. Upon deeper research, it is evident that Rickey was a man with a passion for the game of baseball, although his stint as a player on baseball's biggest stage was short-lived, even by the rigorous standards of Major League Baseball, where the average length of a career is only about five and one-half years². Rickey only played sparingly as a result of his moral refusal to play in any games on Sundays and it is for this reason that he was released from several of the teams he played for after such little time with the club. The baseball-playing career of Branch Rickey only lasted three seasons from 1905-1907, before leaving behind his professional hopes for a new path in law school at the University of Michigan. When Rickey officially returned to baseball in 1914, he was hired by the St. Louis Browns to serve in a dual role as an executive and the team's field manager, although he had spent the previous three summers scouting players around Boise, Idaho for St. Louis Browns then-owner Robert Hedges. After two unsuccessful winters as a lawyer in Boise, Rickey began to feel defeated. In the winter of 1913, Hedges summoned Rickey to Salt Lake City to discuss the potential of a full-time position with the Browns³. Despite the Browns ownership changing hands in the winter of 1915, the role of Branch Rickey with the club remained the same, even with new owner Phil Ball's disdain for his actions as a manager-executive. Rickey worked in the Browns' front office until 1917, when the Cardinals – the Browns' St. Louis cross-town rival – new ownership group persuaded Ball to release a chafed Rickey from his contract in order to become the Cardinals'

² W.D. Witnauer, Rogers, R.G. & Saint Onge, J.M., "Major league baseball career length in the 20th century," *Population Research and Policy Review*, Volume 26, Issue 4 (14 June 2007), abstract, <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=49a7474c-7689-4c10-98e6-c295f282e88b%40sessionmgr4010&vid=1&hid=4209> (accessed 22 Nov. 2016).

³ Andy McCue, *The Team That Changed Baseball and America Forever*, Lyle Spatz, ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), *Society for American Baseball Research*, <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/6d0ab8f3> (accessed 13 July 2016).

president. During his tenure with the Browns, Rickey never truly placed the club in a position to continually improve, despite his best scouting efforts and an attention to statistics unlike any other executive of the day. Rickey served the struggling Cardinals as president and general manager until 1925, when he was relieved of his managerial duties. After this position removal, Rickey stayed on as an executive of the Cardinals because of his ability to develop players prior to their being brought into the major leagues. During his tenure as the Cardinals' president, Rickey and then-field manager Miller Huggins repeatedly clashed over Rickey's "theoretical" approach to the game⁴. In 1917, the Cardinals clawed their way to the club's best record since 1891 – winning eighty-two games, though this record proved only good enough for third place in the National League⁵. Huggins was ultimately lured away by the New York Yankees in the winter of 1917 and Rickey replaced his former colleague with Jack Hendricks; a relationship that proved to be more beneficial to both Rickey as well as the Cardinals. In August 1918, Rickey left the Cardinals for a brief stint to serve the United States in the Army Chemical Corps, where he served as a Major to a regiment that included Captains Ty Cobb and Christy Mathewson – both of whom had also been Major League players⁶. Rickey returned to his duties with the Cardinals shortly after, landing stateside on 23 December. His time with the Cardinals after serving in World War I would prove to be almost as tumultuous as his time with the Browns, leading the team to a third-place finish in 1921, before slowing sliding further from the top of the National League in the following years. Despite an immediately clear lack of success as manager of the Cardinals, Rickey was building a foundation with the club that would transform the St. Louis Cardinals into a powerhouse in the coming decades. Critics of Rickey, who were skeptical of his

⁴ McCue.

⁵ "1917 Major League Baseball Standings," *MLB.com*, <http://mlb.mlb.com/mlb/standings/#19171004> (accessed 24 Nov. 2016).

⁶ McCue.

ability to lead and motivate his players in a managerial role had their thoughts confirmed in 1926, when the Cardinals reached the pennant and continued on to win the World Series under the leadership of Rogers Hornsby. For every critic of Rickey's managerial ability, there were two advocates of his front office prowess, finding allies in sportswriters across the country. Rickey remained a figure in the Cardinals' front office for another seventeen seasons until his departure for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1942.

When Branch Rickey arrived in Brooklyn in 1942, he brought with him more than a knowledge of how to develop players and continually win baseball games; Rickey brought with him an innovative spirit that would make Brooklyn a landmark for baseball in numerous areas. Rickey's notion of baseball as "a science"⁷ would change the way that the modern fan views the game. This notion – to Rickey – meant that any successful baseball team would require a "scientific approach" in its management⁸. Rickey delivered this approach to the Dodgers after honing his craft while in St. Louis. With Rickey in the front office, the Dodgers began to take baseball to previously unreachable places. Under Rickey, the Brooklyn Dodgers employed the first full-time statistician, giving the club a leg up on the rest of the league simply by enabling an analytical approach to the game rather than simply relying on a player or coach's intuition. Rickey's promotion of the batting helmet also allowed the game to be safer for Major League Baseball players – especially African Americans such as Jackie Robinson after signing on with the Dodgers' developmental system in 1945. Batting helmets were not the only innovation that Rickey advocated for his players to use, however. While with the Dodgers, Rickey also implemented the use of batting cages and pitching machines during practice, with the results

⁷ Puerzer, Richard J., "Engineering Baseball: Branch Rickey's Innovative Approach to Baseball Management," *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Fall 2003), pp. 72.

⁸ Puerzer, 72.

paying dividends for the club during Rickey's reign. These practices gained their footing in the middle of the twentieth century because of Branch Rickey and remain essential to every club across Major League Baseball today. On nearly every developmental front affected by a front-office executive, Branch Rickey led the charge across Major League Baseball. Rickey's implementation of the farm system while with the Cardinals allowed for more advanced player development than ever before and proved to be crucial to the success of the St. Louis Cardinals throughout the middle portion of the twentieth century. Though his utilization of the minor league farm system with the Cardinals and Dodgers has proven to be a critical part of developing Major League players, the creation of a full-time spring training facility – another mechanism crucial to player development – can be attributed to Branch Rickey. It is in the farm system and spring training facility that the genius of Branch Rickey began to take shape. These systems would eventually serve as the assessment program for Major League Baseball's first African American player, Jackie Robinson.

By most accounts, Branch Rickey is considered a “madman,” solely because of the observational abilities of Rickey in relation to the baseball-playing ability of a prospect. If ever there was an eye for talent and a brain to appropriately utilize that talent, it belonged to Branch Rickey. Although his observational fluency is incontestable, the talents of Branch Rickey cannot be limited merely to his uncanny knack for player observation. While Rickey's groundwork was laid while working for the St. Louis Browns, it fine-tuned with the Dodgers upon the hiring of Allen Roth to chart his players' most important statistics. This practice is still used today, although it is now referred to as sabermetrics, rather than statistical analysis. As a result of his eye for talent and the focus on statistical ability, Rickey was eventually driven to sign Jackie Robinson. Although the game had been victim to an unwritten rule, in place since Major League

Baseball's inception, that disavowed African Americans from the game. In the face of this rule, Rickey saw no reason for continuing this controversial practice any longer. Rickey's decision – which was seen by many as nothing more than a publicity stunt to draw a larger audience (although it could not be said if it this decision would generate a positive audience reaction or not) and in turn, create a greater profit for Rickey's Dodgers – was one that changed the entire landscape of Major League Baseball. In 1945, Branch Rickey brought Jackie Robinson to Brooklyn under the guise Rickey was involved in the creation a new "United States League" for African Americans. The premise of the United States League was to create a league that could compete with the much more established and heralded Negro National and American Leagues in similar locations. This league would allow front-office executives to scout teams throughout the league for potential Major League talent without raising any proverbial red flags. The reality of the situation was that Robinson was being summoned to Brooklyn to discuss a contract and career in Major League Baseball. Upon Robinson's arrival in Rickey's Brooklyn office, Rickey outlined the circumstances of this monumental decision to Robinson. After a brief exchange, Robinson penned his name in arguably the most impactful contract signing in the history of sport, let alone the history of baseball. In this meeting between Rickey and a then-twenty-six year-old Robinson, the Mahatma (Rickey's nickname among his peers) stressed to Robinson that there would be criticism from every person and angle, and that he could have chosen any player from the Negro Leagues and he could go out and react negatively towards a crowd screaming obscenities and racial slurs. Rickey told Robinson that he was looking for a player who "had guts enough not to fight back."⁹ In this meeting, Rickey expressed to Robinson that he had been chosen as the player to break the color barrier for more than just his playing ability. The Dodgers

⁹ 42, dir. By Brian Helgeland (2013; Warner Bros Pictures, 2013 DVD).

knew that Robinson could play baseball in the Major Leagues, but Rickey had taken it a step further and analyzed the character of Robinson in order to determine if this was the right person to take on such an enormous challenge. This dynamic move sparked Robinson's illustrious ten-year career and would cement the legacy of Branch Rickey as one of baseball's greatest minds.

Unlike many of his front-office contemporaries, Rickey set a precedent. Rather than emphasizing a team's success for a season or two, Rickey focused on the long-term goals of each team he worked for as a front-office figure. Upon his arrival in Brooklyn, each individual aspect of Rickey's plan came to fruition. With his newfound autonomy and capital, Rickey could do nearly anything baseball-focused that he desired. With this new front-office power, Rickey's Dodgers would experience a stay near the top of the National League as a result of: the implementation of analytics; the farm development system; the usage of batting helmets, batting cages, and pitching machines; and the most influential of all decisions from the mind of Branch Rickey – the desegregation of Major League Baseball. During the Rickey years, the Dodgers experienced nearly-constant success (with the exclusion of the 1944 season, where the Dodgers faltered and finished seventh in the National League), reaching the World Series in 1947 and again just two years later¹⁰. Despite these two post-season runs, the club often experienced playoff letdown. Within Rickey was a drive to win year-in, year-out and the implementation of these systems and strategies undoubtedly allowed his teams to do so.

Not unlike his eventual boss and confidant, the life of Jackie Robinson can be considered one of trial, tribulation, and triumph. Robinson was born on 31 January 1919, nearly sixty years after slavery was abolished in the United States and was the youngest of five children born to

¹⁰ "Postseason Results," *Dodgers.com*, http://mlb.mlb.com/la/history/postseason_results.jsp (accessed 26 Nov. 2016).

Mallie (McGriff) Robinson and Jerry Robinson. Although President Abraham Lincoln abolished this dated economic practice with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and Congress' passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865, the Robinson family was still feeling the effects of slavery. As Jackie Robinson elaborates in his autobiography, the Robinson family was experiencing a "newer, more sophisticated kind of slavery"¹¹. Jerry Robinson, the paterfamilias of the Robinson family – worked as a share-cropper on a plantation near Cairo, Georgia at the time of Jackie's birth in 1919. Later, Jerry Robinson became a half-cropper on the same plantation in a last-ditch effort from the plantation boss to keep the Robinson family head working on the farm. This compromise came about upon the persistence of Jackie's mother, Mallie, urging Jerry to confront the boss in an attempt to create a more sustainable economic situation for the Robinson family¹², since the family head was working for a meek twelve dollars a month¹³. As a result of this new agreement between the plantation boss and Jerry, the Robinson clan began to experience a larger income and a better standard of living. Only six months after the birth of his youngest child, Jerry Robinson abandoned his infant child and his family after telling Jackie's mother he was temporarily leaving Cairo to visit his brother in Texas. In *I Never Had It Made*, Jackie clarifies this story, explaining that his father had been unhappy with life as a farmer and was spending a majority of his time in nearby Cairo. Due to his increasing time away from the family, Mallie Robinson began to worry that her husband Jerry would never return home – and her fears were later justified, as she later learned her husband left home to elope with a neighbor's wife. As a result of the family head vanishing, Mallie Robinson was faced with a decision – mend a severed relationship with the irate

¹¹ Jackie Robinson as told to Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), 3.

¹² Robinson, 3.

¹³ Robinson, 3.

plantation owner or leave Cairo to return home to her people. After being ordered off of the plantation by the owner because of her refusal to admit fault in Jerry's leaving, Mallie Robinson packed up the remainder of the Robinson family and headed for California. Upon their arrival, the family would live with Jackie's uncle and Mallie's brother, Burton. This is where the Robinson clan would remain and where Jackie would ascend to athletic prowess at John Muir Technical High School, Pasadena Junior College, and the University of California, Los Angeles.

California had possessed no black slaves since the 1820s, over twenty years prior to California's cession to the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War¹⁴. Despite his athletic brilliance, Robinson still fell victim to racial slurs and animosity. In his autobiography, Robinson recounts his first experience with racial animosity, occurring when he was just eight years old. Robinson also notes that prior to this instance, everyone he encountered was kind to him, including the older students and teachers at the school his sister, Willa Mae, attended while she looked after a young Jackie. A strong outside influence on young Jackie came in the form of the family's pastor at the Scott United Methodist Church in Pasadena, the Reverend Karl Downs¹⁵ and a local mechanic, Carl Anderson. As a result of intervention on the part of these men, young Jackie was disconnected from the troublesome road he was heading down as "a member in good standing of the Pepper Street gang"¹⁶. This gang was comprised of a number of children – those of African American, Japanese, and Mexican descent, all of whom were from poor families and presented with ample free time – from Robinson's neighborhood, with the namesake coming from the street the Robinson family lived on¹⁷. Due to the influence of the

¹⁴ D.J. Beasley, "Slavery in California," *The Journal of Negro History*, Volume 3, Number 1 (Jan. 1918), pp. 34.

¹⁵ Chris Lamb, "Jackie Robinson: Faith in Himself – and in God," *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 April 2013, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324105204578385092795588364> (accessed 16 Nov. 2016).

¹⁶ Robinson, 6.

¹⁷ Robinson, 6.

Reverend Downs and Mr. Anderson, Robinson ultimately was stopped short of becoming “full-fledged juvenile delinquent,”¹⁸ though he had already partaken in several of the gang’s activities. Often, Robinson would bond with the Reverend Downs over a shared passion for sports and it is through this relationship that Jack would develop his relationship with God. This relationship with God was the factor that sparked a connection between Branch Rickey and Robinson during their first meeting in 1945; as well as a relationship Robinson would often speak of during his professional career and attested that his faith was what “carried him through the torment and abuse of integrating the major leagues”¹⁹. In his youth, Jackie frequently experienced a sort of alienation, nearly always being the best player on his team or in his class – regardless of the sport. Oftentimes during his youth, Jackie’s peers would single him out athletically for one of two reasons – to beat Robinson in whatever sport or contest they were undertaking, or to get him on their team to give them an undeniable edge. Robinson notes that this experience was so common that, “In grammar school some of my classmates would share their lunches with me if I played on their team”²⁰. For a student from a poor family, this proposal was enormous. Robinson’s athletic dominance among his peers was a characteristic that followed him throughout his life and subsequent athletic career – especially as a professional baseball player on the sport’s biggest stage.

During his years John Muir Technical High School, an adolescent Jackie lettered in four sports – basketball, baseball, football, and track. This athletic prowess followed him after leaving John Muir for Pasadena Junior College – where Robinson would break his brother Mack’s school record in the broad-jump. Robinson also excelled on the gridiron, leading Pasadena’s

¹⁸ Robinson, 7.

¹⁹ Lamb.

²⁰ Robinson, 9.

football team to glory in his two seasons there, winning sixteen consecutive games²¹. However, it was apparent at this time that Robinson would remain a force in the athletic world for some time yet. In his stint as a Pasadena Lancer, Robinson received numerous college scholarship offers from universities across the country. In a bid to remain close to his family in Pasadena – specifically to keep close to his brother Frank’s undying support – Robinson chose to attend the University of California, Los Angeles²². In a traumatic turn shortly after Jackie arrived at UCLA, Frank was killed in a motorcycle accident and Jackie’s primary support system died with him. In his career at UCLA, Jackie would go on to become the first four-letter varsity athlete in the university’s history – mirroring his days at John Muir Technical High School, with letters in baseball, basketball, football and track. Despite his athletic success at UCLA, Robinson would likely contest that the greatest part of his experience as a Bruin was meeting his future wife, Rachel Isum, a peer three years his junior who was introduced to Robinson by a mutual friend, Ray Bartlett. After two years as a Bruin, much to the dismay of Rachel and the university, Robinson used the remainder of his collegiate eligibility and left UCLA just shy of graduation. Shortly after his departure from Los Angeles in 1941, Robinson began his career as a professional athlete after finding himself in Hawai’i, playing football for the Honolulu Bears. Robinson worked in construction through the week and on the gridiron on Sundays. His stay in Hawai’i was short-lived, however, and Robinson left Honolulu on 5 December 1941, two days before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Just five short months after leaving Hawai’i, Robinson was drafted in the United States Army, where he served as a second lieutenant and saw his civil rights battle begin to take shape.

²¹ Robinson, 9.

²² Robinson, 10.

After being honorably discharged from the Army in November of 1944, the twenty-five-year-old Robinson wrote to the Kansas City Monarchs asking for a chance to join the team²³. Upon the team's acceptance, Robinson restarted his athletic career and became a professional baseball player – though it was the Negro Leagues, an organization with nowhere near the prestige of Major League Baseball. The spirit of civil rights is expressed by Robinson in *I Never Had It Made*, saying that even during his earliest days in the Negro Leagues, players and organizations were holding “spirited campaigns to break down the racial barriers,”²⁴ though it was evident to everyone that it would still be some time before the color line was eliminated in Major League Baseball.

In his autobiography, Robinson speaks of the development of a relationship with Branch Rickey during Jackie's days with the Kansas City Monarchs. Similar to almost every other athlete stuck in the Negro Leagues at the time, Jackie had never met Branch Rickey, but had heard of and read the lore of one of baseball's tycoons. Based on what little knowledge Robinson had of Rickey, he made the assumption that Branch was one of the traditionalists campaigning for baseball's “gentleman's rule” – that no negroes would ever be featured in Major League Baseball²⁵. As we now know – and that Robinson would soon find out – this notion could not be further from the truth.

Branch Rickey's push to integrate Major League Baseball is founded largely on moral grounds, although there is clearly a motivation to enable the Dodgers to win more baseball games. The Mahatma possessed a deep Christian faith, as evidenced by his refusal to play in games held on Sundays. While Rickey was managing the Ohio Wesleyan baseball program in

²³ Robinson, 23-24.

²⁴ Robinson, 24.

²⁵ Robinson, 25.

1910, his team had a single black athlete, Charley Thomas. When the team visited South Bend, Indiana, Rickey faced his biggest moral obstacle to date – a challenge that most historians claim to be the driving force in Rickey’s elimination of baseball’s color barrier. The owner of the hotel the Ohio Wesleyan team was staying at refused to allow Thomas to stay in one of the hotel’s rooms. After a heated argument, Rickey expressed to the owner that should Thomas not be permitted to stay, the team would stay elsewhere. Not willing to lose such a big piece of business, the owner compromised with Rickey and Thomas was permitted a cot in Rickey’s room. After reaching this agreement and settling into Rickey’s room, the young Thomas confided in his coach about the troubles of being not only a black athlete – but a black person in Jim Crow America. This incident stayed with Rickey throughout his life and career in baseball, and can be seen in most of the practices Rickey advocated for. During his time in the St. Louis front office, Rickey continually battled behind the scenes for the abolishment of Jim Crow rules in baseball – including the “gentleman’s rule” that barred African Americans from making a career in Major League Baseball. When Rickey took over the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1943, this practice changed mightily. No longer was Rickey silently advocating for the inclusion of African Americans, instead he brought the unfair and traditional practices of professional sports to the center of America’s attention.

Knowing his battle for equality in baseball would be a tumultuous one, Rickey sought guidance within himself and his faith, ultimately coming to the conclusion that he was doing the morally correct thing, provided he was swimming against baseball’s traditionalist current. Rickey’s first task in his road to crossing baseball’s color line was to gain the support of the rest of the Brooklyn Dodgers’ front office in the belief that their franchise should be the pinnacle of class and the first to bring African Americans into Major League Baseball. Despite the arduous

task of winning his directors' approval, what lay ahead of Branch Rickey would prove even more difficult – starting with keeping his new idea a secret, especially from the overbearing Brooklyn press. In order to accomplish this, Rickey and his cohorts would have to work with sheer anonymity to scout the new African American talent the Dodgers would put on the field in the near future. Under the guise of forming the United States League – a new league for African Americans that would be run by the Brooklyn Dodgers. This ploy seemed mirrored Rickey's farm system and similar developmental leagues, meaning that nothing seemed suspicious to the media. The only true skepticism to his plan came from critics who believed that Rickey was only going to use the talent of African Americans for his own personal financial benefit and for the financial benefit of the Brooklyn Dodgers. Using these tactics, Branch Rickey and his staff completed their searching and scouting of the Negro Leagues and similar leagues in foreign countries without the media becoming any the wiser.

Before Branch Rickey got to Jackie Robinson and ultimately broke baseball's "gentleman's rule," however, the wheels were beginning to turn elsewhere for the integration of Major League Baseball. A sports editor from the Pittsburgh *Courier* – a newspaper produced by and for African Americans – named Wendell Smith worked a deal to permit Robinson and two other Negro League players a tryout with the Boston Red Sox²⁶. As it turned out, the Red Sox tryout was nothing more than a publicity stunt. Boston had no real interest in signing talent from the Negro Leagues, but opened the tryout to these three players after the threats from Boston city councilman Isadore Muchneck to eliminate Sunday baseball unless the Red Sox hired African-American talent to round out and add diversity to the Red Sox roster²⁷. Although the three

²⁶ Robinson, 29.

²⁷ Robinson, 29.

players recommended by Smith attended the tryout and performed to the best of their capabilities, ultimately this tryout proved to be no more than a show for the city councilman in order to stray his attention from the Red Sox.

Prominently featured in both Robinson's autobiography and in the 2013 film, *42*, Wendell Smith proved to be pivotal in Branch Rickey's signing of Jackie Robinson to a Major League contract and in Robinson's own life – primarily at the beginning of his career in Major League Baseball. Smith, like nearly all of America at this time, possessed a complete lack of faith in Rickey's new United States League – and Smith let Rickey know personally. The first conversation between Smith and Rickey occurred shortly after the tryout publicity stunt in Boston – an event that nearly every front-office figure throughout Major League Baseball was aware of prior to the actual event. During this exchange, an inquisitive Rickey questioned Smith, asking if any of the players from the tryout were truly worthy of a Major League contract instead of simply being a sideshow to draw African American fans and increased publicity.

Unbeknownst to Robinson, Wendell Smith told Rickey that Jackie was the only talent at the tryout who could actually have potential as a Major League ballplayer²⁸. In *I Never Had It Made*, Robinson notes that as a result of this short conversation between Wendell Smith and Branch Rickey; he will be forever indebted to Wendell Smith²⁹. This gratitude is expressed due to the fact that although Robinson was none the wiser, Wendell Smith gave Rickey the recommendation that was, in part, responsible for the Major League Baseball career of Jackie Robinson and aided the process to Jackie Robinson's contract signing, which is arguably the most influential in the history of sport.

²⁸ Robinson, 29.

²⁹ Robinson, 29.

The first meeting between Rickey and Robinson occurred on 28 August 1945, under the guise that Rickey had chosen Robinson to become a member of the new United States League's Brooklyn Brown Dodgers. When he arrived in Brooklyn to meet with Rickey, Robinson was informed that this was not the case, but rather that he was wanted to become a member of the actual Brooklyn Dodgers and was the man that Branch Rickey had personally sought to aide him in breaking baseball's color barrier. It was during this meeting that Rickey outlined what would happen to Robinson as a result of this contract signing. Rickey expressed to Robinson that he would experience new levels of hatred and racial animosity, especially when one considers that African American players played in the Negro Leagues and were not subjected to this kind of animosity during their games, only during their lives in public away from the game. Rickey warned there would be racial slurs, physical attacks, baseballs thrown at him, and anything else that he could imagine on a baseball field. Though it had been expected, the effects away from the baseball field took their biggest toll on Robinson and his now-wife, Rachel. Robinson received numerous death threats and threats aimed at his growing family. With nobody on his side – save for a select few within the Dodgers organization – Robinson posed the question how he could succeed and why Rickey chose him to undertake such a monstrosity of a task. In response to the question of why Robinson was chosen instead of other successful Negro League players – such as Satchel Paige or Willie Wells, who were both great players in their own right, but were well past their primes in 1945 – Branch Rickey told Jackie Robinson that he was, “looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back,”³⁰ another quality that was not often seen among players from the Negro Leagues. This ability to restrain himself is a characteristic that stayed

³⁰ Robinson, 33.

with Robinson throughout his life and proved imperative to his work during the Civil Rights Movement.

After careful consideration, Robinson understood that as preposterous as the idea of refraining from lashing out at his critics sounded, he would have to be able to prevent himself from doing so during his pursuit of a career as a Major Leaguer. An advocate for civil rights from his early days, Robinson became aware of the notion that breaking baseball's color barrier may be the way to finally gain equality amongst the races. If Mr. Rickey's "Noble Experiment" proved not to be the way to gain equality among the races, it would surely be a step in the right direction. Robinson knew that in order for society to develop an understanding and compassion for one another, we must be able to turn the other cheek to racism, hatred and ignorance. Though he was unsure of his personal ability to do so, Robinson knew that someone must begin to break down these walls, "For black youth, for my mother, for Rae, for myself. I had already begun to feel I had to do it for Branch Rickey."³¹ This quote allows a look at the character of a young Jackie Robinson in 1945; the character that developed during Robinson's youth in Pasadena, California and would follow him for the rest of his life.

It is a widely accepted belief that America in the first half of the twentieth century was not an accepting environment for African Americans. This notion is only aided by the few African Americans who found themselves ascending into stardom at this time. Men like Jackie Robinson were perceived by the majority of citizens – chiefly white citizens – as second-class citizens for no reason other than the color of their skin and excelling in baseball or any other sport meant nothing as far as equality was concerned. Robinson had been warned in his first

³¹ Robinson, 34.

meeting with Branch Rickey of the dangers of becoming the first black player in Major League Baseball and was immediately cognizant of what lay ahead of him should he choose to pursue a career in Major League Baseball. Branch Rickey famously told Robinson that he was, “looking for a player with guts enough to not fight back,”³² this challenge would prove to be more than the young Robinson had previously envisioned. As a result of his attention to detail, Rickey was aware of Robinson’s past as a “troublemaker” – the title given to him during his years at UCLA. Even though this reputation followed Robinson around after leaving UCLA, Rickey believed the hype to be nothing more than a cover-up for Robinson’s strong stance on issues of civil equality between races. After some consideration, Rickey knew that he had found his man. The Brooklyn boss believed that a strong-willed Robinson would be the perfect subject for this “Noble Experiment.” Rickey had no doubts that Robinson would be able to tackle to this enormous challenge and pave the way for his fellow black athlete in all professional sports across the United States.

When Robinson reported to spring training in 1946 in Daytona Beach, he was not received well by the majority of the Dodgers organization or the Daytona Beach community. Accompanied by Wendell Smith, Robinson was faced with constant scrutiny. In Brian Helgeland’s 42, an interaction is shown between Smith, Robinson and a white man from the Daytona Beach community. In the scene, the white man warns Robinson’s family and Smith to leave by sun-down or else they would face the consequences³³. Across the country, similar reactions to Robinson became apparent and were typically not approving of an African American in a white man’s game. Robinson was an African American professional athlete in Jim Crow

³² Robinson, 33.

³³ 42, Helgeland.

America, and the majority of the population responded to this signing with hatred and animosity – insisting that there was no place for a colored man in professional sports. To most, the thought of a negro in professional sports was perturbing enough, but the idea that African Americans were tarnishing America's game of baseball set many over the edge. Contrary to the negativity received across the Southern United States, Robinson and the Dodgers received an overwhelming approval from the liberal media, who had been advocating for integration across the country in all aspects of life for quite some time. Although the liberal media gave Rickey and Robinson their undying approval, traditional media still refused to budge on their opposition to this new contract. Accusations of Rickey exploiting the Negro Leagues and the United States League in order to help his own cause came rolling in from everywhere. Several media outlets and even more civilians believed that Branch Rickey was not to blame. Rather, he had been a victim of outside pressure to sign a black player, similar to the trials faced by the Boston Red Sox – although this is clearly not the case. Since the 1910 incident with Charley Thomas at a South Bend hotel, Rickey had longed for the day when racial tensions were relieved in America and he saw this contract with Jackie Robinson as the beginning of the alleviation of those tensions.

As much criticism and hatred as Robinson received away from baseball, it could not begin to compare to what he faced on the field. Robinson and the Dodgers were met with an overwhelming amount of friction from all angles – fans, opposing players and coaches, even his own teammates. Jackie was not unprepared for this, as it was exactly the type of situation that Rickey had warned Robinson he would find himself in during their first meeting in 1945. This was quickly becoming a harsh reality faced by Jackie and Rachel every day. During Jackie's 1946 debut season with the Montréal Royals, the on-field discrimination began and would follow

Robinson to his career with the Brooklyn Dodgers. In order to maintain his promise to Mr. Rickey, Jackie did his best to stay level-headed and soon realized the most effective course of action. Robinson chose to silence his critics with his on-field play. Since his promise to Mr. Rickey prevented him from verbal and physical reactions, Robinson began to respond by playing at levels far beyond his competition. As a result of his work to silence his critics, Jackie Robinson was awarded the inaugural Major League Baseball Rookie of the Year Award in 1947³⁴. United States media had exploded immediately following the signing of Robinson in 1945 and again in 1947 when Rickey purchased Robinson's contract from the Montréal Royals, thereby promoting him to the Major Leagues. Despite this, the same media remained largely silent in Robinson's first few games with the Dodgers. Lyle Spatz notes that, "it would be easy, and fashionable, to attribute the writers' casual treatment of this history-making game to racism."³⁵ In that, Spatz means that it is common for one to associate the media's lack of attention on Robinson with hatred for African Americans. However, when analyzing media from around the time of Robinson's Dodger debut, one must remember that the context of 1947 is vastly different from that of 2016. In 1947, baseball writers were simply that – baseball writers. These writers were not concerned with the political rhetoric or racial ramifications of the game or those who appear in it. Rather, their focus would have been on the events of the game itself. When looking at statistics from Robinson's first few games in a Dodger uniform, it is clear that these games were largely uneventful for Robinson himself, and therefore would not have been a featured subject in articles about the Dodgers following those games – these writers may have held differing personal opinions, however, statistics do not care about the color of one's skin.

³⁴ "MLB Awards – Rookie of the Year," *ESPN.com*, http://www.espn.com/mlb/history/awards/_id/8 (accessed 25 Nov. 2016).

³⁵ McCue.

Some of the most interesting reactions to Major League Baseball's first African American player, however, come from those closest to Robinson – his teammates and coaches within the Dodgers organization. While Jackie was undoubtedly ecstatic about his opportunity to play with the Dodgers, several of his new teammates had “expressed themselves unhappy at the possibility of having to play with Jackie.”³⁶ Though it was clear that team chemistry and morale was suffering as a result of Robinson joining the team, Branch Rickey kept his team in the proper state of mind, assuring that, “We are all agreed that Jackie is ready for the chance.”³⁷ This frame of mind was brought by Rickey despite the Dodgers' temporary lack of a manager due to the suspension of Leo Durocher during the 1947 season. Although he had been temporarily banned from baseball, Durocher was one of Robinson's biggest advocates. While most of Robinson's Dodger teammates agreed with the stance taken by Rickey and Durocher, not everyone was so quick to partake in the “Noble Experiment.” During spring training in 1947, several players – historically rumored to have been led by right-fielder Dixie Walker – from the Dodgers signed a petition refusing to play on the same team with Robinson. Durocher responded to the petition and the pessimistic attitudes of Dodgers players by saying,

“I don't care if the guy is yellow or black, or if he has stripes like a fucking zebra. I'm the manager of this team and I say he plays. What's more, I say he can make us all rich. And if any of you cannot use the money, I will see that you are all traded.”³⁸

Another of Robinson's Dodger teammates, Pee Wee Reese, had done his own bid of soul-searching after Robinson's promotion and chose to take the high moral road in regards to his new

³⁶ Louis Effrat, “Dodgers Purchase Robinson, First Negro in Modern Major League Baseball,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1947, <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0410.html#article> (accessed 22 Oct. 2016).

³⁷ Effrat.

³⁸ 42, Helgeland.

teammate and eventual lifelong friend. Unveiled in 2005 outside of Brooklyn's KeySpan Park, home of the minor-league Brooklyn Cyclones, a statue shows the historic moment of a shared embrace between Reese and Robinson – showing solidarity between two teammates. When Reese approached Branch Rickey with a letter threatening his life should he choose to play alongside Robinson, Rickey presented Reese with the hundreds addressed to Robinson. Upon realizing the weight of the burden Jackie was carrying, Reese began to see differently. In an interview fifty years after his on-field embrace of Robinson, in 1997, Reese spoke about the courage it must have taken to be Jackie Robinson in 1947, saying “What he had to endure, the criticism, the catcalls – I wouldn't have had the courage.”³⁹ When assessing the reactions of Robinson's Dodger teammates, fellow Major Leaguers, the media and the general public, reactions from Robinson's peers within the Dodgers organization are arguably some of the most intriguing reactions to the signing, especially when one considers the statement Branch Rickey issued in regards to team-wide acceptance of Robinson.

Outside of the comforts of Brooklyn, however, reactions were not as predictable or comforting for Robinson and the rest of the Dodgers. Regardless of where the Dodgers travelled, Jim Crow Laws often forced Robinson and his Dodger teammates to stay in different hotels and forced the team to eat at separate restaurants. This constant separation dramatically affected the Dodgers during Robinson's career, since camaraderie is a critical part of any successful team and if players are forced to constantly be separated, the team's chemistry suffers. Similar to the effects that Jim Crow Laws had on the Dodgers' dining and travel accommodations, racism also was prevalent on-field during Dodger games. During Robinson's first season, the Dodgers were

³⁹ Dave Kindred, “Better Than Fiction,” 25 Apr. 2013, *Sports on Earth*, <http://www.sportsonearth.com/article/45688384/pee-wee-reeses-famous-on-field-embrace-of-jackie-robinson-never-really-happened> (accessed 19 Oct. 2016).

hosting Philadelphia in Brooklyn when Ben Chapman, the Phillies' manager, attacked Robinson with a barrage of racial remarks. Chapman, an avowed Southerner, kept at Robinson for the duration of the series with the remarks, recalls Ralph Branca – a pitcher for the Dodgers and a teammate of Robinson's during Jackie's rookie campaign in 1947⁴⁰. By the time the Dodgers travelled to Philadelphia for another series later that season, Chapman had grudgingly changed his tune as a result of heavy outside pressure. Reluctantly, Chapman posed for a picture with an even-more reluctant Robinson to symbolize the breaking down of a racial divide. Despite the memory of Chapman's verbal assault on Robinson, the Phillies were not the only club to confront Robinson with racial animosity. A pair of players from the St. Louis Cardinals, Enos Slaughter and Terry Moore, tried to persuade the St. Louis Cardinals to go on strike in May 1947 to protest Robinson's joining the Major Leagues⁴¹. Like Chapman, Moore and Slaughter were also avowed Southerners and were hard-wired in their hatred of African Americans. Although the strike proved to be an empty promise, Slaughter made his opinion known after "unintentionally" spiking Robinson during a game in Brooklyn. During the game, Slaughter and Robinson were involved in a play which resulted in a collision at first base, injuring Robinson's ankle. Although he had already been attacked on-field on several occasions, the rest of Major League Baseball still expressed their distaste for Robinson throughout the 1947 campaign, hitting Robinson with pitches nine different times – when put in context, one will speculate that nearly all of these pitches came as a result of the color of Robinson's skin, though there is no factual evidence for this.

⁴⁰ Erik Ofgang, "Brooklyn Dodger Ralph Branca Recalls Friendship with Jackie Robinson and Baseball's History of Racism," *Westchester Magazine*, 13 April 2014, <http://www.westchestermagazine.com/Westchester-Magazine/April-2014/Brooklyn-Dodgers-Ralph-Branca-Jackie-Robinson-Baseball-History-Of-Racism/> (accessed 24 October 2016).

⁴¹ Joseph Wancho, "Enos Slaughter," Society for American Baseball Research, <http://sabr.org/bioproj/person/fd6550d9> (accessed 24 October 2016).

Though these attacks on Robinson and other African American Major Leaguers would never truly end, Robinson's play in 1947 – along with other teams signing black players; the support of Mr. Rickey and the mental fortitude of Robinson helped to silence the critics and progress the storyline of Branch Rickey's "Noble Experiment." It was quickly becoming apparent across Major League Baseball that one of the primary reasons for Branch Rickey's undertaking of such challenge – there was talent in the Negro Leagues and with this talent came a chance to win more games which meant increased profit for the owners of Major League Baseball clubs.

The by-product of Jackie Robinson's remarkable career in Major League Baseball has been the lasting impact on not only Major League Baseball, but American society as well. As a result of this extravagant career, the conclusion can be reached that none of this would have been possible had Branch Rickey not brought Jackie into the majors in 1947. Certainly, the most impactful part of the entire ordeal was the breaking down of baseball's color barrier and revoking the "gentlemen's rule" among Major League owners. Although it is worth noting that the effects of Robinson joining the Dodgers were felt far beyond Brooklyn's Ebbets Field and even outside of the reaches of Major League Baseball. Robinson joining the Dodgers was an event that changed the culture of the United States. With Robinson now in the league, other owners had the freedom to pursue talent from the Negro Leagues and utilize these new players in order to win more games, which was the primary baseball goal of Rickey's "Noble Experiment." For Robinson, his admittance to Major League Baseball allowed him to gain new teammates that would become lifetime friends and to experience the competition across Major League Baseball as the league grew stronger and more racially diverse.

Although Robinson is the most notable of early African Americans in Major League Baseball, he certainly was not alone. Despite racial tension within both the Brooklyn Dodgers' clubhouse and the rest of the league, Robinson nearly always found himself gaining supporters and confidants throughout the league and in the press. The Cleveland Indians joined the integration movement shortly after the Dodgers, and in the summer of 1947, signed the first African American in the American League, Larry Doby. Doby would become one of Robinson's closest friends during his career – finding comfort with one another during the pair's 1947 rookie campaign. However, Robinson's support system did not limit itself strictly to people of color; both Pee Wee Reese and Hank Greenberg were major influencers in Robinson's professional career. Like Robinson, Greenberg had faced racial animosity similar as a result of his status as a Jewish American Major Leaguer and provided Robinson with encouragement because of his understanding for what Robinson was experiencing. Like Branch Rickey, these men saw Robinson as a ballplayer, not as a black man in a white man's world.

When considering the motivations of Branch Rickey to sign Jackie Robinson to a professional contract, it is likely that Rickey considered the impact that such a controversial move would have; but it is unlikely that he could have conceived just how enormous that impact would be. When Jackie Robinson broke into the major leagues, thousands of African Americans saw the chance to reach their full potential on the biggest stages of sport. Similarly, baseball's Hall of Fame is now teeming with African Americans, several of whom are all-time record holders within Major League Baseball. Were Branch Rickey not so motivated to right the wronging of Charley Thomas, his former catcher at Ohio Wesleyan, these are faces that may have never been seen and stories that may have never been told. The argument can also be made that Branch Rickey was determined to lead the best team in Major League Baseball and to win

the most games. The nature of Rickey was extremely competitive, and being competitive at any level of sport – especially the professional level – requires the most talent and in several cases, African Americans could provide the talent that owners so desperately sought. It is because of this integration and a competitive drive to win that Branch Rickey is remembered in circles other than Cooperstown's Baseball Hall of Fame and that the legacy of Jackie Robinson continues to live on. Within baseball, Robinson's legacy is cemented, though many often forget about the man that brought Robinson to the league. In his honor, Jackie Robinson Day is celebrated across Major League Baseball every year on 15 April – Major League Baseball's Opening Day in 1947 and Robinson's Major League debut. Despite history's tendency to forget those who work among the shadows, such as Branch Rickey, the impact of their work is not soon forgotten. On 15 April, nearly all of the Major League Baseball community neglects to remember Branch Rickey's role in Jackie Robinson's career. Though Rickey is oft-forgotten, it is remarkable to note just how influential one man could be. On Jackie Robinson Day, every player across Major League Baseball dons Robinson's number forty-two jersey, even though the number is now retired by every team in the Major Leagues. Bases are adorned with special tags commemorating the occasion, several players wear customized cleats or other accessories, and numerous tributes are held across the league.

Outside of Robinson's remarkable career in Major League Baseball, his legacy is remembered as a Civil Rights activist. From the first incident outside of his family's Pasadena home in 1927 when Jackie was just eight years old, to his correspondence with the White House just months before his death – Robinson fought for moral fortitude and civil equality for all United States citizens. In June of 1963, Robinson sent a telegram to President Kennedy at the White House, warning the president of the dangers that lay ahead should violent reactions

continually occur to peaceful protests in the name of civil justice⁴². In his series of correspondence with the White House, Robinson clearly displays his compassion for his fellow man and his desire for equal civil rights among all United States citizens. Despite his passion for civil equality, Robinson feared the worst for the Civil Rights movement. In a letter written to White House officials shortly before his death in 1972, an aged Robinson voices the growing displeasure of African American youth as a result of a lack of action from the president towards the black community in America. In his letter, Robinson says,

“Black America has asked so little, but if you can’t see the anger that comes from rejection, you are treading a dangerous course. We older blacks, unfortunately, were willing to wait. Today’s young blacks are ready to explode! We had better take some definitive action or I am afraid the consequences could be nation shattering.”⁴³

In this letter to the White House, Robinson voices a displeasure that represents a large portion of African Americans, and fears the worst for the United States should the proper course of action be taken in a joint effort by the White House and American public. With the platform afforded to him by Major League Baseball, Robinson gave a voice to millions of Americans during the Civil Rights Movement in America. Robinson’s practice of political rhetoric in the public eye has allowed numerous athletes to do the same in the time since Robinson’s political activism.

The lives of Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson can be described as larger-than-life, although both men saw themselves as doing nothing more than fulfilling their own moral

⁴² Jackie Robinson, telegram to President John F. Kennedy, 15 June 1963, pp. 2, <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/jackie-robinson/telegram-1963.html> (accessed 13 July 2016).

⁴³ Jackie Robinson, letter to Roland L. Elliot, 20 April 1972, <https://www.archives.gov/files/education/lessons/jackie-robinson/images/letter-1972.jpg> (accessed 13 July 2016).

obligations. The legacy of Branch Rickey can largely be attributed to a pair of motives for nearly all of his actions in Major League Baseball. The motives of Branch Rickey in changing baseball's landscape are: the moral righteousness attained by breaking a societal norm in order to promote civil equality; and the competitive desire to have the winningest team in Major League Baseball. It is in Rickey's deep Christian faith and his internal conflict over the alienation of Charley Thomas that one can see Rickey's desire for moral fortitude. Through his implementation of now-commonplace practices such as: batting helmets, batting cages, pitching machines, spring training facilities, statistical analysis, and the use of a farm system; one can see and understand the competitive drive that fueled Branch Rickey. The practice of giving his teams whatever competitive advantages afforded to him shows that competition had deep roots in the Mahatma. However, I would argue that the primary reason for Branch Rickey signing Jackie Robinson to a Major League contract in 1947 is the internal moral conflict that had plagued Rickey since 1910. For a man to have as deep and strong of a faith as Rickey, it is hard to argue against the notion of morality.

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