

His Courage Taught Baseball to Be Color-Blind

For most Americans, there's the iconic image of Jackie Robinson running full throttle toward third base, his legs pumping in rhythm, the letters of his Brooklyn Dodgers uniform but a blur as he dashes to home plate and slides in safely.

Robinson, the man who broke the color barrier to become the first Black major league baseball player, was running with purpose, notching a run for the beloved Lords of Flatbush.

Yet the greatness of Jackie Robinson is reflected in his decision not to run at all, to stand tall and face the ugly specters of prejudice and racism at a time when they were paramount in our country – so much so that not even the skills so glorified in modern society like being able to hit a baseball could mask them.

Jackie Robinson was placed on this earth not for his extraordinary ability to play our national pastime, but to teach us the power of determination, courage, conviction and integrity. He was taunted for his color by players in the opposing dugout, subject to death threats on and off the field. He was even tested by Branch Rickey, the legendary Dodgers general manager, hurling insults at the young man before hiring him to see if he could take it.

Robinson didn't back down. He held his temper and showed restraint. He understood on some level what his playing major league baseball represented. He couldn't possibly have comprehended the enormity of what he was about to face or what it would mean for future generations. His behavior and actions opened doors for so many.

It's easy to be skeptical of society's infatuation with someone who can throw a ball far, run faster than others, shoot a ball through a hoop, or slap a puck into a net. Sports figures are often labeled as heroes, more celebrated than doctors, teachers or fire fighters. Right or wrong, their physical skills place them in a position of influence, their personalities scrutinized, their actions and opinions magnified. They can become leaders, trendsetters, role models, pioneers – for better or worse.

Some non-sports people might question our country's obsession with these competitive games that teach us so much about life and who we are. How can 100,000 college students, they wonder, fill a football stadium on a fall Saturday, paint their faces with school colors, and seemingly live or die if someone wearing those colors catches a pass or eludes a defender? Imagine where this places that athlete on the stage of life, given the spotlight to perform on the field if that is his or her sole intention but also allowing him or

her an audience not available to other wise scholars to express ideas and messages. This puts these influencers in precarious, at times unfair, but monumental positions to shape the lives of others.

Jackie Robinson was in such a position. He had to walk the fine line that had not been walked before. He had to compartmentalize his beliefs and his feelings – but not sacrifice his convictions to them -- to remind the world that the color of one's skin is not a prerequisite for opportunity.

Plenty of fans cheered Jackie Robinson for his on-the-field achievements, but his legacy carried far beyond his baseball accomplishments.

The Jackie Robinson Museum notes that Robinson spread his influence in corporate and governmental settings, citing him as the first African American to hold an officer-level position at a major corporation. He also served as an advisor to politicians, actively promoted economic empowerment by co-founding a bank and a housing development company and was integral in advancing equal justice and first-class citizenship for more than two decades.

Jackie Robinson taught America that we are better off as a society when we are color-blind to what we see externally and are more informed by appreciating and honoring one's spirit, soul and achievement. While the impact of Jackie Robinson's legacy was huge, it was not the panacea in our country's ongoing crusade for equality and civil rights. We're bombarded with this reality daily just by scanning our newspapers and hearing words of the misguided who somehow have been given a forum.

Others have carried the torch that Jackie Robinson lit many years ago. To this day, he serves as a shining example of how one man can lead and influence our culture, but also as a stark reminder that it takes more than one person to move a mountain.