

1919-1972

Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson was an African American professional baseball player who broke Major League Baseball's infamous "[color barrier](#)" when he started at first base for the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947. Until that time, professional ballplayers of color suited up for teams only in the [Negro Leagues](#). Today, April 15th is observed as Jackie Robinson Day throughout MLB franchises, with players wearing the former Dodgers' jersey number 42. Robinson's dazzling athletic prowess and grace under pressure effectively led to the integration of the Major Leagues, and his 10-year career with the Dodgers — and his outspoken activism in his later years — helped set the stage for the burgeoning [civil rights movement](#).



When Was Jackie Robinson Born?

Jackie Robinson was born on January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia, to a family of [sharecroppers](#). He was the youngest of five children.

After his father abandoned the family in 1920, they moved to [Pasadena](#), California, where his mother, Mallie, worked a series of odd jobs to support herself and her children. Though Pasadena was a fairly affluent suburb of Los Angeles at the time, the Robinsons were poor, and Jackie and his friends in the city's small black community were often excluded from recreational activities.

That began to change when Jackie enrolled at [John Muir High School](#) in 1935. His older brother Mack, a silver medalist in track and field at the [1936 Olympics in Berlin](#), inspired him to pursue his interest in athletics, and the younger Robinson ultimately earned varsity letters in baseball, basketball, football and track while at Muir.

After graduating high school, Jackie attended [Pasadena Junior College](#) for two years, where he continued to have success in all four sports. Following the death of another older brother, Frank, in a motorcycle accident, Jackie decided to honor his memory by enrolling at [UCLA](#) in 1939.

There, he became the first Bruin to earn varsity letters in four sports — the same four in which he starred in high school — and he won the [NCAA](#) long jump championship in 1940. Jackie also met his future wife, Rachel, while at UCLA.

Jackie Robinson in the U.S. Army

Jackie ultimately left college in the spring of his senior year, just a few credits short of his graduation. He accepted a job as an athletic administrator, but his dreams remained focused on the field of play.

He spent two years playing semi-professional football for integrated teams in leagues in Hawaii and California before being drafted into the [U.S. Army](#) in the spring of 1942, during [World War II](#), although he never saw combat.

He was accepted into Officer Candidate School and was assigned to segregated Army units, first in Kansas and then in Texas. During this time, however, he remained close to Rachel, with whom he became engaged in 1943.

In 1944, Jackie was nearly court-martialed after he boarded a bus at [Fort Hood](#) in Texas and refused the driver's order to sit in the back, as segregationist practices in the United States dictated at the time.

He was acquitted on all the charges at court martial, but it has been said that his experiences during the proceedings likely shaped his response to the racist taunts he received, a few years later, from fans and fellow players at the start of his professional baseball career.

Jackie was honorably discharged from the Army in November 1944, and he took a job coaching basketball at a college in [Austin](#), Texas.

Jackie Robinson's Professional Sports Career

In early 1945, Jackie Robinson was signed by the Negro League team the Kansas City Monarchs, where he starred for one season, hitting .387.

At the time, Brooklyn [Dodgers](#) executive [Branch Rickey](#) was scouting the Negro Leagues, looking for players who not only had the talent but the demeanor to withstand the pressures associated with integrating [Major League Baseball](#). Robinson was one of several players Rickey interviewed in August 1945 for assignment to the Dodgers' farm team in Montreal, the Royals.

It is said that during the interview, Rickey demanded that Robinson not respond when on the receiving end of racial abuse. Robinson reportedly said, "Are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" To which Rickey replied that he was looking for a person "with guts enough not to fight back."

Once Robinson agreed to "turn the other cheek," a Biblical phrase used by the religious baseball executive, he was assigned to the Royals for the 1946 season, where he was embraced by Montreal fans and batted an impressive .349. His performance both on and off the field earned him a call-up to Brooklyn the following season.

Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers

His debut with the Dodgers in 1947 was greeted with a lot of attention — not all of it positive. Although Robinson quickly proved he belonged as a player, the color of his skin was an issue for opposing teams and fans.

Hearing racist taunts from fans and players prior to a game, Dodgers teammate Pee Wee Reese is said to have put his arm around Robinson on the field to indicate that he was accepted by

those wearing a Brooklyn uniform. Still, Robinson endured racist obscenities, hate mail and death threats for much of his career.

It was his play in the field that ultimately silenced his critics. In 1947, his first year with the Dodgers, he earned the inaugural "Rookie of the Year" award. Despite having been signed by the Dodgers at the relatively old age of 28, Robinson would go on to hit .311 over a 10-year career. He became the first black player to win the National League Most Valuable Player Award in 1949, when he led the league in hitting with a .342 average, most stolen bases (37) and achieving career-high 124 RBI. Robinson was an All Star every year from 1949-1954. He led Brooklyn to a World Series championship over the rival [New York Yankees](#) in 1956.

Robinson retired after that season, and thus didn't follow the Dodgers when the club moved to [Los Angeles](#) following the 1957 campaign.

Jackie Robinson Quotes

"I'm not concerned with your liking or disliking me ... all I ask is that you respect me as a human being."

"A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

"Baseball is like a poker game. Nobody wants to quit when he's losing; nobody wants you to quit when you're ahead."

"Life is not a spectator sport. If you're going to spend your whole life in the grandstand just watching what goes on, in my opinion you're wasting your life."

"There's not an American in this country free until every one of us is free."

"As I write these words now, I cannot stand and sing the National Anthem. I have learned that I remain a black in a white world."

"Above anything else, I hate to lose."

Jackie Robinson: Legacy and Death

After retiring from the Dodgers, Robinson acted as a sportscaster, worked as a business executive at [Chock full o'Nuts](#) and was active in the [NAACP](#) and other civil rights groups.

Weakened by heart disease and diabetes, Robinson died in 1972 at the age of 53 from a heart attack suffered at his home in [Stamford](#), Connecticut.

Thousands attended his funeral service, including former teammates and other professional athletes. His eulogy was delivered by the Reverend [Jesse Jackson](#), who declared, "When Jackie took the field, something reminded us of our birthright to be free."

Jackie Robinson Foundation Scholarship

Following his death, his wife Rachel, by then an assistant professor in the [Yale School of](#)

[Nursing](#), established the [Jackie Robinson Foundation](#). In addition to recognizing other trailblazers in sports, the foundation awards the [Jackie Robinson Foundation Scholarship](#) to minority students.

Robinson's jersey number 42 was retired by all big-league teams in 1997, meaning it could no longer be worn by any player. Those players already wearing the number were allowed to keep it.

The gesture was meant to honor Robinson's legacy and the historic impact he had on professional baseball, sports in general and, by extension, American society, and in recognition of the difficulties the athlete faced in breaking Major League Baseball's color barrier.

Jackie Robinson Movies: 'The Jackie Robinson Story' and '42'

In 1950, Robinson played himself in a movie on his life called "[The Jackie Robinson Story](#)." And in 2013, a movie about Robinson's life called "[42](#)" was released to critical acclaim, with his widow involved in the production.

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