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Stealing Home:

Jackie Robinson, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and Integration through Baseball

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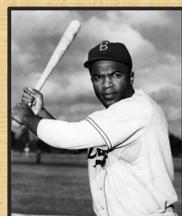
Introduction

On April 15, 1947, when Jackie Robinson stepped onto Ebbets Field for the first time as a Brooklyn Dodger, he took his place in a plan that had been a long time in the making. For almost sixty years, an unspoken rule had barred African American players from the major leagues. By the 1930s, however, a growing consciousness about civil rights collided with the segregated and highly exposed world of baseball, the most popular sport in America in the first half of the twentieth century. Beginning in February of 1933, the activist editors of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest weekly paper at the time with a primarily African American readership, began a systematic campaign for the integration of baseball. Later, Wendell Smith, an editor who joined the *Courier* in 1939, tied the paper even more tightly to questions of race and baseball and, eventually, to the now-famous persona of Jackie Robinson.

Thesis

Over the course of Robinson's quest for the major leagues, the writers of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, including Smith and Robinson himself, forged a direct relationship between Robinson's actions on the diamond and the fight for racial equality. The *Courier* used Robinson's gameplay as a crucial tool in the paper's civil rights activism.

Key Players



Jackie Robinson



Wendell Smith,
Editor,
Pittsburgh Courier

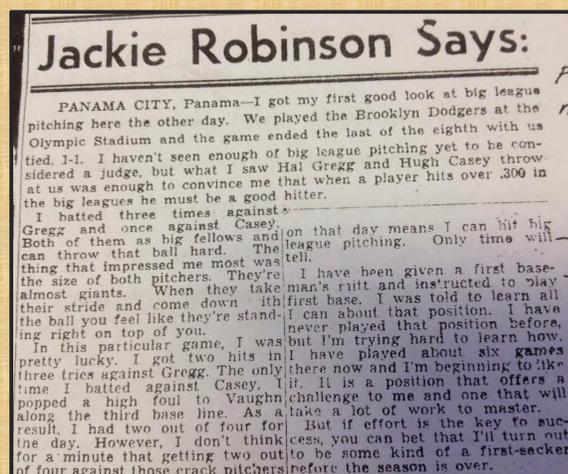


Branch Rickey,
Brooklyn Dodgers
president



The Capability Criterion

Branch Rickey's high standards meant that the man who would break the color barrier would need to be genuinely capable of playing in the majors. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, led by sports editor Wendell Smith, echoed this position when it arranged tryouts for various players, including Jackie Robinson. Later, Smith pressured Rickey behind the scenes to sign Robinson, who though inconsistent was a dynamic player. When Rickey did sign Robinson to a minor league contract in 1945, his interviews with the *Courier* insisted that it was Robinson's gameplay, not his race, that mattered. According to Rickey, Robinson would "go as far as he [was] capable of going." The *Courier* and other papers spoke of Robinson's need to "make good" on the promise of integration by playing his way into the majors. Once he did reach the majors, the capability criterion dictated that Robinson prove, through his success on the field, that his signing to the Dodgers had not been a fluke.



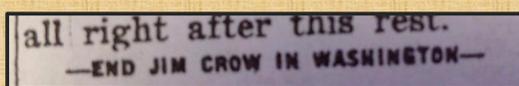
Civil Rights Rhetoric

Although the *Courier* largely avoided outright discussion of the implications of Robinson's success on the Civil Rights Movement, it nevertheless made it clear that its discussion of Robinson's success of the field had everything to do with the greater movement for integration. Sometimes the *Courier* wove subtle references to the greater mission directly into its descriptions of Robinson's gameplay. Other times, it tagged the mantra "End Jim Crow in Washington" onto the end of articles which otherwise discussed purely baseball. Additionally, because the *Courier* was a well-known activist paper, articles on Robinson did not need to mention civil rights explicitly in order to remind its readers of the broader implications of the infielder's gameplay. Due to all these factors combined, positive reports on Jackie Robinson's gameplay meant positive reports on the progression of integration.



Sensationalism v. Normalization

As Jackie Robinson rose from the minors to the majors, the *Courier* aimed to boost public view of his success on the field by reporting sensationally on his gameplay. The paper reported even the smallest of on-field contributions with vibrant language and weighed Robinson's success over the overall success of his team. Once Robinson reached the majors, however, the *Courier* also tried to normalize his presence there. Efforts at normalization included statements that Robinson was "just another baseball player performing his duties," and appeals to African American spectators to conduct themselves reasonably and treat Robinson like any other player. Meanwhile, the *Courier* challenged its own claims of the star player's normalcy by continuing to feature him more than any other player.



The Big Picture

By the last half of the summer of 1947, the purpose of Robinson's gameplay became much more long-term. Now, Robinson needed to accomplish impressive overall statistics by the end of the year, thereby proving that he could truly hold his own over an extended period of time. Midway through the season, the *Courier* began to publish a weekly box score containing the details of Robinson's season statistics, offering cold factual proof that African Americans were capable of playing in the big leagues.

The Robinson Box Score
BATTING AVERAGE .300
(Games up to and including Sunday, Sept. 21)

Against	G.	AB.	R.	H.	W.	2b.	3b.	HR.	RBI.
Boston	20	76	12	16	4	5	0	0	5
New York	19	65	16	23	6	4	0	1	6
Chicago	21	77	15	20	7	3	0	1	8
Pittsburgh	21	86	19	35	7	6	2	3	10
Philadelphia	21	84	17	28	4	1	0	2	6
St. Louis	24	79	20	27	6	1	1	3	8
Cincinnati	21	79	16	25	5	4	2	1	6
Totals	148	581	124	174	40	30	5	12	57

Stolen bases—25.

By the end of the 1947 season, Jackie Robinson had established himself as a piece of Americana, and the *Pittsburgh Courier* had established him as a capable and successful victor over the evils of segregation. Now, it was time for others in the world of baseball and beyond to finish the work that Robinson, Smith, and the *Courier* had begun in the movement for civil rights.



Selected Bibliography

- Pittsburgh Courier*, 1945-1947.
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