

BYLINE: JANUS ADAMS

An Open Letter to African-American students and all young people who dare great things

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In the afterglow of 50th anniversary celebrations of Jackie Robinson desegregating major league baseball and Tiger Woods' unprecedented performance at last week's Masters' Tournament, forgive me if I don't feel inspired. You may not either.

The idea that fifty years after Jackie Robinson shattered the image of pro baseball as an all-White institution, Tiger Woods has had to do the same for golf as an African, Asian, and young American, says little about sports and a lot about life—the life others may plan for and expect from you.

I feel a bit preachy writing this letter, but I'm sure you'll understand. I was one of four children who desegregated New York City's elementary schools. Just as fifty years between Robinson and Tiger Woods is too long, so is the forty years between my ordeal and its strategic descendants—"tracking," "special education," and the fallout from Connecticut's *Sheff v. O'Neill* school desegregation case—with which too many of you are now faced. Five years after Lawrence Otis Graham's exposé of golf course racism right here at the Greenwich Country Club ("Member of the Club"), Fuzzy Zoeller's racist response to Woods' triumph should come as a surprise to no one—especially those who coddled Zoeller's refusal to "get it" on what he'd done. The issue is this—does one support racism or does one take action to stop it?

Last week, I thought of Jackie Robinson's words "A life is not important, except in the impact it has on other lives" and I was grateful to both Jackie Robinson and Tiger Woods for their sacrifices and their impact on me. I also thought of you. I feared that, as teenagers, you might question your own life's potential when our country prides itself on progress measured in increments of fifty years.

You know and I know that last week's lead story is no cause for celebration; it's a national disgrace. Fifty years ago, a man was publicly tormented by people whose disgusting behavior went totally unchecked by manners (who raised these folks?) and the police (what about law and order?) because he was playing baseball with mostly White "major" leaguers instead of the mostly Black "Negro Leaguers" he'd played with before. Not only was he playing the game, he was doing so brilliantly. Some say he even "reinvented" it.

What they don't say is that he played baseball the way Negro Leaguers played it—as though his life depended on it, and it did. How many other jobs allowed Black men of his time to shine? Negro Leaguers learned to give people a good show—a show that said African-Americans could play to win—even in the face of lynchings and death threats.

Now Tiger Woods is also playing the game of his life. He is a stellar young man off the green and on. He carries himself with grace even among those who so arrogantly manifest the lack of it. He won the Masters Golf Tournament, he did it with his top competitors so far behind him that "masters" became a singular noun, and he did it at the age of twenty-one.

If superstardom is the only way for a young Black man to be accepted into a golf game, what does that say about America's other fields of green? The issue isn't athleticism, baseball diamond or putting green. The issue is the terms upon which Blacks are asked to demonstrate prowess. For when the rules include fair play, we win.

But for too many—by race, by gender, by quirk of birthplace—the rules do not include fair play. Knowing that, how do you keep yourself growing and going? And you must do that. If you don't, you will have helped your opposition more than you have helped yourself.

As I try to maintain a positive life's journey, two ideas help me that I'd like to share with you.

First: *Never let others define the terms of your success.*

Playing in the predominantly White "major" leagues is only important if you accept the notion that the Negro Leagues are "minor" and unimportant. But, with annual all-star games attended by more than 50,000 fans, there was nothing minor about the Negro Leagues. (The same is true of women's baseball. It was conveniently forgotten until the film *A League of Their Own* resurrected this episode in herstory and gave women athletes credit long-overdue. Having "forgotten," fifty years after the women's leagues, people question support for women's sports as though it's a new thing.) But, if Blacks had continued support for the Negro Leagues; if women continued to attend women's baseball, those games would be alive today. By feeling minor to someone else's major, Blacks and women helped those negative others more than they helped themselves. Surely, integrated baseball is a good thing; segregated baseball is an unnatural thing. But a sense of self-worth is everything.

Second: *Let no one contaminate your mind.*

That was my grandfather's phrase. As a boy he was prevented from learning to read and misled to believe his mother had abandoned him. Yet, he lived to reunite with his mother, have a family of his own, send his three daughters to college, and inspire others. His phrase is a legacy he'd love you to have.

Go well. Do well.

Yours in the spirit,
Janus Adams.

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