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Why Jackie Robinson was an even better baseball player than you realize

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David Schoenfield, ESPN



On the 75th anniversary of Robinson's debut with the Dodgers, Robinson's skill as a player is sometimes overlooked -- rightfully -- when honoring his cultural and historical impact. All these years later, we learn and remember what Robinson went through, the abuses he suffered, the pressures he endured.

The meeting that took place in Branch Rickey's office on Montague Street in Brooklyn in late August of 1945 has obtained an almost apocryphal status. Dodgers scout Clyde Sukeforth had met up with Jackie Robinson in Toledo, and the two traveled together to New York to meet the Dodgers' general manager. Sukeforth ushered Robinson into Rickey's office and warned his boss that he had not had a chance to see Robinson throw from the shortstop hole, as Rickey had requested, because Robinson had been nursing a sore shoulder. Rickey and Robinson sized each other up. A long minute of silence passed.

"When Rickey met somebody he was interested in, he studied them in the most profound way," Sukeforth would say. "He just sat and stared. And that's what he did with Robinson -- stared at him as if he were trying to get inside the man."

Robinson stared right back.

At some point during the meeting Rickey would get in Robinson's face, tossing insults like those he would face on the field. He told Robinson he would have beanballs thrown his way, he would be physically attacked, he would be spiked and spat on, that he would have to control his temper. Robinson wrote in his autobiography:

*"Mr. Rickey," I asked, "are you looking for a Negro who is afraid to fight back?" I will never forget the way he exploded.
"Robinson," he said, "I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back."*

That's when Robinson agreed to sign a contract to play for Montreal, Brooklyn's affiliate in the International League, for 1946.

Still, there was no guarantee that Robinson was going to be the first Black player in the majors. To that point, there wasn't much experience on Robinson's baseball résumé to presume he was going to be great -- and, as the first Black player, Robinson had to be great as opposed to merely good.

On the 75th anniversary of Robinson's debut with the Dodgers, Robinson's skill as a player is sometimes overlooked -- rightfully -- when honoring his cultural and historical impact. All these years later, we learn and remember what Robinson went through, the abuses he suffered, the pressures he endured. That meeting in Brooklyn was just the beginning. After the deal was signed, it was time for Robinson to play. And, oh, could Jackie Robinson play baseball.

Robinson himself always expressed surprise that Rickey had selected him. The biggest Negro Leagues stars of the time included future Hall of Famers Josh Gibson, Satchel Paige and Monte Irvin, who was regarded as the best young player. It seemed one of the three would be first, but Gibson and Paige were too old by 1945 and Irvin, after serving in World War II, did not believe himself to be in the right frame of mind to return immediately to baseball.

Robinson, meanwhile, might not have even made it to the Monarchs tryout had it not paid more than his job at the time.

Robinson had starred in baseball at Pasadena City College, but in two years at UCLA he was much better known as a star halfback for the football team and also a letter winner in basketball and track. He played just one season of baseball, one that doesn't even get a mention in his autobiography -- maybe with good reason, because, according to the UCLA website, Robinson hit .097 for the Bruins, a figure apparently drawn from Arnold Rampersad's biography of Robinson (although Rampersad's sourcing is not exactly clear).

It's clear that, at the time, baseball was hardly the young man's best sport. Robinson also won the Pacific Coast intercollegiate golf championship and reached the semifinals of the national tennis tournament for Black players. He also won swimming events for UCLA. So if he really did hit .097, baseball was perhaps his *seventh*-best sport.

After receiving an honorable discharge from the army in 1944, Robinson played pro football for the Los Angeles Bulldogs. He then got a job at Samuel Huston College in Austin, Texas, teaching physical education and coaching basketball at the all-Black school.

In his autobiography, Robinson explains how he found his way to a tryout in March with the Kansas City Monarchs of the Negro Leagues: He had heard the Monarchs paid \$400 per month, and that was more than he was making coaching basketball.

He must have made a quick impression with the Monarchs. In a preseason article in the April edition of Negro Baseball magazine, legendary sportswriter Sam Lacy named Robinson on his list of prospective players who could integrate the majors, calling him the "ideal man to pace the experiment."

Robinson was clearly one of the best players in the league that season. In the 34 league games for which researchers have found stats, Robinson hit .375/.449/.600 with four home runs. Maybe he didn't have the arm to play shortstop, but he had all the other tools Rickey and Sukeforth were looking for: speed, hitting ability and, most obvious of all, as Rickey sensed in his office, an intense competitive drive.

After leading the International League in batting average (.349) and runs (113) and finishing second in stolen bases (40) for Montreal in 1946, Robinson joined

Brooklyn in 1947 and won the Rookie of the Year Award and finished fifth in the MVP voting.

He won National League MVP honors in 1949, leading the league with a .342 average and 37 steals while scoring 122 runs and driving in 124. Over his first seven seasons, he scored 773 runs, more than any player in baseball except Stan Musial. Only Musial had more hits. Only Musial, Ted Williams and George Kell hit for a higher average than Robinson's .319. Nobody stole more bases. Only Musial had more WAR, and there was a bigger gap from Robinson to the No. 3 player than from Musial to Robinson.

What made Robinson such a great player? It's almost too easy to attribute his success just to an overwhelming conviction that failure was not an option. No doubt, that was an important part of his career with the Dodgers, but it also undersells his ability.

As a hitter

Although his swing isn't necessarily one you would teach or see today, Robinson adapted quickly to major league pitching (despite Bob Feller's declaration that Robinson "couldn't hit an inside pitch to save his neck"). He had a little hitch as he brought his bat back to begin his swing, his bat starting almost parallel to the ground, a style seen more often back then. Still, you can sense why some might have thought Robinson would have trouble pulling his hands in to handle anything inside. Clearly, however, Robinson had the bat speed and hand-eye coordination to do damage on those pitches.

In highlights, you also see Robinson hitting off his front foot a lot, another style that was more popular in those days, when most players weren't selling out for power on every swing. (Roberto Clemente was another famous front-foot hitter.) As his .311 career average with the Dodgers attests, Robinson was a line-drive hitter. He topped out at 19 home runs in one season, although he reached double digits in nine of his 10 seasons with Brooklyn.

"He is as good a hitter as I have ever seen with two strikes," Rickey would say in 1950. "Most hitters do not swing the same after they get two strikes. They do not have the same power. Robinson swings with the same power, regardless of the count. And so good are his reflexes that he can lay off the pitch at the last second, even after one might think that he has committed himself."

More than anything, though, it's Robinson's plate discipline that stands out. He drew 740 walks with the Dodgers while striking out just 291 times. Even in that lower-strikeout era, those numbers were outstanding. Look at where he ranked among all major leaguers in strikeout-to-walk ratio each season:

1947: 22nd

1948: 42nd

1949: 10th

1950: 8th

1951: 8th

1952: 8th

1953: 9th

1954: 5th

1955: 2nd

1956: 11th

He wasn't about to give the pitcher any advantage by swinging at pitches out of the strike zone. Plus, he could beat you in so many ways. Back then, bunting was a big part of the game, and Robinson was regarded as perhaps the best bunter around. He led the National League in sacrifice hits in 1947 with 28 and in 1949 with 17. In his excellent book "Opening Day" on Robinson's first season with the Dodgers, Jonathan Eig reports that Robinson had 14 bunt singles during his rookie season, a skill he would continue to use throughout his career.

On the base paths

His speed was famously a big part of his game, but he wasn't a graceful runner, with his arms angled away from his body, flailing about to propel him forward. He was all coiled-up energy, indeed, a football running back tearing around the bases. He used his speed to intimidate opponents as well, bouncing off the bases and threatening to steal on any pitch. My late father-in-law grew up in Brooklyn and would tell me, "There was nothing as exciting as watching Jackie Robinson dance around on the bases."

Another reason that Robinson's daringness on the base paths seemed to take opponents by surprise: There wasn't much base-stealing in those days. The year before Robinson joined the Dodgers, Brooklyn's Pete Reiser led the NL with 34 steals, while George Case led the AL with 28. Only two other players were even over 20. It was very much station-to-station baseball. Then comes

Robinson, a force of nature -- whether or not he was running all the time, he was certainly *threatening* to run at any time. He led the NL with 29 steals in his rookie season and with 37 in 1949. His big leads off the base were legendary. "It's been a long time since we've had one man in the league who has an upsetting effect on every infield whenever he gets on base," Cubs manager Charlie Grimm said during Robinson's rookie season. "Robinson makes 'em all squirm. After all, he takes such a good lead that you got to make a play for him. You've got to try and pick him off. He sets up the play himself, and there's no choice but to make him take back a step or two."

In the field

The most underrated aspect of Robinson's game was his fielding. When Bill James published his "New Historical Baseball Abstract" in 2001, his analysis at the time showed Robinson to be one of the best defensive second basemen of all time -- to a degree that might even surprise Robinson's most ardent supporters, as he wrote.

"I would not rule out the possibility that Jackie may have been a far better defensive second baseman than even the people who watched him regularly realized. Jackie, I would suggest, was such a controversial figure, such a polarizing figure, that it must have been extremely difficult to see him for exactly what he was, even when he was right in front of you," James wrote. "Also, Jackie was, according to all accounts, unusually intelligent. Is it not possible, I wonder, that Jackie's intelligence created benefits for his team that *only* show up in the statistics?"

James goes on to point out Robinson's versatility. He played about 2,000 innings at third base later in his career -- and, according to James' win shares method, Robinson's defensive stats are off the charts. He played nearly 1,100 innings in left field -- his metrics are outstanding. The defensive estimations used at Baseball-Reference credit Robinson with 81 runs saved over his career. All this, and keep in mind that defense usually peaks early in a player's career, while Robinson was 28 during his rookie season.

It's perhaps understandable why observers at the time might have underestimated Robinson's defense. There was nothing elegant about his game in the field. I picture him playing defense the same way; not the smooth, gliding nature of a classic second baseman, like Roberto Alomar, but chewing up ground as he chased after ground balls. But keep in mind what his Hall of

Fame contemporary Ralph Kiner said: "Jackie Robinson was the best athlete ever to play major league baseball." Robinson, no doubt, made routine plays look easy; he didn't have to dive for balls because he was already there.

When you add it all together

Robinson's greatest season might have been 1949, his MVP season, which Baseball-Reference values at 9.3 WAR -- best among all National League players. Or maybe it was 1951, when he hit .338/.429/.527 and again led the NL in WAR, at 9.7. Or maybe it was 1952, when he hit .308/.440/.465 and led NL position players with 8.4 WAR.

When looking at the best seasons via WAR by a second baseman since integration, Robinson's top three rank second, tied for fifth and tied for 14th. Joe Morgan has five of the top 11 and is regarded as the best second baseman since World War II and the greatest ever alongside Rogers Hornsby and Eddie Collins. Of course, Morgan enjoyed a full career. Robinson had many of his prime seasons cut off by the war and the color barrier.

As it is, Robinson's 61.8 career WAR still ranks 15th among second basemen. What could that total have been? Let's work backward and put Robinson in the major leagues at 21, like Morgan. We'll give him an average age-21 season, transplant his age-28 rookie season with the Dodgers to age 22 and his age-29 season to age 23 and then assume he reaches peak performance level in his fourth season. We get something like this:

Age 21: 2.5 WAR

Age 22: 4.1

Age 23: 5.3

Age 24: 7.5

Age 25: 8.5

Age 26: 9.0

Age 27: 10.0

Age 28: 8.5

Age 29: 9.5

Then his actual totals the rest of the way:

Age 30: 9.3

Age 31: 7.4

Age 32: 9.7

Age 33: 8.4

Age 34: 6.9

Age 35: 3.6

Age 36: 2.6

Age 37: 4.5

Our theoretical Jackie Robinson ends up with 117.3 career WAR, which would place him seventh among position players who played at least part of their careers after integration: Barry Bonds (162.8), Willie Mays (156.1), Henry Aaron (143.0), Stan Musial (128.6), Ted Williams (122.0, not including his own missing seasons) and Alex Rodriguez (117.6).

Maybe that's an optimistic projection; it's impossible to know, of course. Morgan, for instance, had his peak years from 28 to 32. But the general point holds true: Robinson, at his best, was one of the all-time greats, and in many cases was better than is even generally acknowledged.

We love to put different players in different eras or imagine what-if scenarios. What would Babe Ruth do today? What if Mickey Mantle's knees hadn't gone bad? But maybe we don't have to do that with Robinson. The Jackie Robinson legacy isn't about what he could have done. It lives on today, 75 years after that first game at Ebbets Field, precisely because of what he did do.

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<https://www.tsn.ca/why-jackie-robinson-was-an-even-better-baseball-player-than-you-realize-19.30270>

Jackie was ferocious on the baseball diamond, brave as could be off it. Any White player who “gave” it to Jackie “got it back” worse from him, but not, as Branch Rickey worried, from Jackie’s fists.

The sad irony is that Black boys are not playing baseball anymore. Almost all the dark-skins are Latin, from the Caribbean and Central America. It is a real distinction in clubhouses and contemporary baseball culture. TJB