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## Jackie Robinson

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE  
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On Tuesday, April 15, President Clinton will go to New York and Shea Stadium for ceremonies commemorating the Fiftieth Anniversary of Jackie Robinson's breaking of the color line in major league baseball. On that date in 1947 Robinson played for the Brooklyn Dodgers in their opening day game against the Boston Braves at Ebbets Field in Brooklyn.

President Clinton will present Rachael Robinson with second base even though Jackie played first-base on that historic day.

It was the major league opening of what has been called Baseball's Great Experiment. Over the past several weeks there have been innumerable commemorations of this event including several television specials, a multitude of newspaper and magazine pieces, and numerous public celebrations of the man and the event.

Major League Baseball will not only mark the day with special ceremonies at Shea Stadium, but this season has been dedicated to the memory of Jackie Robinson. Each player will wear an official patch on his uniform in commemoration of the anniversary. Last weekend I spent three days at Long Island University-Brooklyn where a symposium was held to mark the event and examine its significance.

Many of Jackie's former teammates were there to talk about the first day and the first season, to relate the trials and tribulations facing Jackie Robinson, and to discuss the ballplayer and person who was their teammate.

Others came to rewrite history. Enos Slaughter was intent upon clearing his name. Slaughter, an outfielder with the Cardinals, in what has become one of the best known incidents in that first year, viciously spiked Jackie on the back of the ankle in a play at first-base. Slaughter now insists that Jackie was off-balance and stumbled off the bag and into the base path where Slaughter was unable to avoid spiking Jackie. Few accepted Slaughter's rendition of these events, but perhaps it is significant that the old Cardinal outfielder thought it necessary to offer this public denial.

Bob Feller, whose quotes about the short-comings of black players and Jackie Robinson are well-known, also sought to

correct history. Apparently some of Feller's best friends were black, and he and Jackie were great pals.

Bobby Bragan, a teammate on the Dodgers, was more forthcoming, as he admitted his hostility to a black player on his team and his desire to be traded. He also allowed as to how he was wrong.

Perhaps the most interesting discussions involved the ongoing problems of race that plague baseball and America. New York columnist Jimmy Breslin talked eloquently about the decline of the Brooklyn neighborhood that had once been the site of Ebbets Field. According to Breslin when the Dodgers left Brooklyn the politicians didn't care, when the neighborhood slipped into decline they didn't care, and today no one cares as a generation is being lost.

In the worst moments of the weekend those who came only to get autographs from Hall of Fame players threatened to crush their heroes in a stampede toward the dais as sessions came to a close. This was a reminder of the commercialization of sport and the trivialization of history which haunts our commercial culture.

Frank Robinson talked about the trials of being the first black manager, and the failure of baseball to progress in the area of on-field and off-field black management personnel. There is one black general manager today, and two in the history of the game. There are no black presidents or owners and never were. There are very few black writers covering major league baseball as beat reporters. In all facets of the game Jackie's legacy remains quite limited.

So, we celebrate the event. Those black players and writers who participated in the symposium repeatedly talked of how much things have changed. Others have asked if the young black baseball millionaires know who Robinson was, while David Justice asks if the white players know. Both questions are important, and the answer is no to both, symptomatic of a general ignorance of history that one encounters every day.

Much of this celebration has a decidedly white cast to it. The people of Brooklyn remember their role in history with pride and self-congratulations. The liberal and radical press recount their catalytic role in the process. White America pats itself on the back for having achieved desegregation in one small area of American life without violence and death, but not without the threat of both.

I myself remain ambivalent about this moment in history. I do know that Jackie Robinson made a difference and that what he accomplished can not be reversed. The question is, can the process be moved forward any further than it has been moved thus far?

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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