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## Jackie Robinson's First Spring in Daytona

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On March 17, 1946 the Montreal Royals played the Brooklyn Dodgers in a spring training game in Daytona Beach and Jackie Roosevelt Robinson wore the uniform of the Royals. History was made that day as Jackie Robinson broke the color line in organized baseball. Although overshadowed by Robinson's first game as a Brooklyn Dodger a little over a year later, this game in Daytona was an important step on the road to the desegregation of both baseball and America.

This weekend in Daytona, Bethune-Cookman College is sponsoring a gathering of historians, former Robinson teammates, family and fans, who will assess the meaning of this important event of fifty years ago, and celebrate this day which is so significant in the history of both Daytona and America.

The city fathers of Daytona Beach, unlike those of so many other Florida cities in the Spring of 1946, welcomed the social experiment that was being conducted by the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, and Jackie Robinson. Mayor William Perry welcomed Robinson and the Dodgers to his city, and along with City Manager Jim Titus worked diligently to prepare the way. In addition Rickey and his secretary, Bob Finch, spent the winter addressing civic and business groups.

It would not be accurate to say that everything was sweetness and light in Daytona Beach for the Robinsons, but when compared with the incidents in other Florida cities like Sanford, Deland and Jacksonville, or with the reception that Robinson received in International League cities like Syracuse and Baltimore, Daytona Beach conducted itself in exemplary fashion.

Nonetheless there was some anxiety the morning of March 17 as Robinson and John Wright, the forgotten man in the Great Experiment, prepared to become the first Black players to break the color line in baseball. The anxieties fell away when the overflow segregated crowd of 4,000 cheered Robinson's first appearance at the plate. It was altogether a rather uneventful day, but at the same time a very significant one.

For baseball and for America this was the beginning of a series of events of both symbolic and practical importance. In a symbolic sense it represented the breaking of the color line, the rigid lines of segregation, in a basic American institution. Baseball was after all the national pastime.

In a country that had just fought a major war in which the racial theories of Adolph Hitler had been a central issue, the continuation of racial segregation was clearly a national contradiction. A public attack on segregation in a major American institution such as baseball was an extremely important public act. It gave notice that on matters of race in America, major changes were in the wind.

As a practical matter this event had important consequences for both Black and White Americans. In the Black community Jackie Robinson's quest would be of major significance affecting the future of segregation and the opening of opportunity. It was followed by old and young, baseball fans or not, with great intensity. For young Black men and boys who played baseball it opened up new dreams. As Elston Howard later recalled when he heard the news as a boy of sixteen, "I felt like dancing all over the floor. The path was opening up. Maybe I could become a major league player." Willie Mays put it more directly, "Every time I look at my pocket book, I see Jackie Robinson." For many others beyond the playing fields, Robinson joining the Dodger organization was a sign of hope that the days of segregation and discrimination were coming to an end.

For White America the impact of Jackie Robinson was profound. Not so much in its immediate consequences where both the best and worst traits of the society could be seen, but over the longer span of time. For young whites of impressionable age the coming of Robinson and other Blacks to baseball brought into question the racial myths of their society. The superb performances of Robinson, and then Newcombe, Campanella, Mays, and so many more that followed, gave the lie to all those folk myths that filled the air in white America. Questions were raised about accepted truths for the first time, but clearly not the last. When a Black man became a hero for a white child, the days of segregation and racial myth were clearly numbered.

For baseball too there were important consequences. The talent pool for the game was widened significantly as both Black Americans and Black Latin players found opportunity in America's national pastime. Baseball itself was transformed into a game in which the elements of speed and power, previously thought mutually exclusive, were combined, adding new excitement on the field. The years of hypocrisy were finally coming to an end, as the national pastime, was now truly national both on and off the field.

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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