

4-13-2007

Jackie and Eddie Robinson

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Jackie and Eddie Robinson" (2007). *On Sport and Society*. 762.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/762>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
Jackie and Eddie Robinson
APRIL 13, 2007

This weekend marks the Sixtieth Anniversary of Jackie Robinson's first appearance in major league baseball. It comes at the end of a week in which another Robinson is being mourned across the nation. The tale of the two Robinsons, Jackie and Eddie, is a tale of courage and struggle and the story of how race shapes lives and society in America. It is also a story of gain and loss across the two Americas.

The Jackie Robinson story is now heavily shrouded in nostalgia and the feel-good congratulations of "how far we have come" history. Indeed the changes that have taken place over sixty years are substantial and significant, even if all are not positive.

Jackie Robinson's significance and the magnitude of his struggle cannot be overstated. In a country that had just fought a major war in which the racial theories of Adolph Hitler were 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 America. In the Black community Jackie Robinson's quest represented the potential expansion of opportunity. It was followed by old and young, baseball fans or not, with great intensity. For many young boys it energized the dream of playing in the major leagues, while for others beyond the playing fields, Robinson's appearance 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 African American players to baseball brought into question the racial myths of their society. 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.

At the same time, Robinson's ordeal was a national disgrace. His treatment in spring training and during the season, in Southern towns and cities, as well as northern towns and cities across the geography of baseball was often harsh to the extreme. His harassment by opposing players, the initial coldness of some of his teammates and the segregation he continued to face was shameful. The racial taunts of fans and players, and the hostility of some sportswriters, produced a rage that he was not allowed to express and that ate at him from within.

At about the same time another Robinson, Eddie, was in the early stages of his coaching career. The man who became one of most successful coaches in intercollegiate football history was toiling out of the sight of the white world. In a land where the football coach had become a major national figure, Eddie Robinson went quietly about his business. He coached football, was his own grounds-keeper, and was the teacher of young men at Grambling University.

Eddie Robinson ultimately took Grambling to national prominence in the white world, long after he had established his national reputation in the black community. Generation after generation of young men found in Eddie Robinson the teacher they were looking for, and the inspiration they needed, as they prepared themselves to enter the hostile white world. This was not just about football and the more than 200 of his players who had careers in the National Football League, it was about the thousands of others who had careers in the professions, became family men, and raised the next generation of Grambling graduates and leaders of the African American community.

Eddie Robinson was buried a few days ago and the tributes to his greatness could be heard across the land from all Americans, white and black. Tributes came from those who had learned directly from Robinson on the gridiron and from those who learned from him at a distance. These tributes to Eddie Robinson were very much like those to Jackie Robinson, and for many of the same reasons.

Both men approached their lives with dignity and class. Both men served as role models to several generations of Americans. And both men suffered under the rules of a racist society that proclaimed its beliefs in democracy and equal opportunity from

the housetops, even as it continued to deny equal opportunity and the fruits of democracy to its African American population.

As I listened to and read the tributes to Coach Robinson I was struck once again by how long it took for white America to discover his greatness. I also wondered how many young men who came before the two Robinsons were ignored by the larger society and how much American society lost in that process.

Finally, we should remind ourselves this weekend that in the changes that followed from the lives of these two great men, some things were lost. The opportunities and pride generated in the Negro Leagues disappeared. The sport that Jackie Robinson opened for African Americans has experienced a loss of fans and players from that community. The great football teams of the Historically Black Colleges are gone as well, and many African American athletes who might have been nurtured in that environment, now toil and sweat on football teams that do not have African American head coaches.

If what has been gained is equality in America, these losses will have been worth it. If equality remains elusive, much remains to be done. In either case the lives of Jackie and Eddie Robinson should be both celebrated and emulated across the land.

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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