

From Civil Rights to Racial Justice: Baseball's Chance to Move the Country Ahead

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If someone asked who was the first black man to play in major league baseball, most people would say Jackie Robinson, right? There were actually others before him, in the 19th century: Moses Fleetwood Walker, a catcher, who played for several seasons, and his younger brother Weldy Wilberforce Walker. The two brothers played for the Toledo team of the American Association, which was a major league in the 1880s. Both Fleet and Weldy had attended college, which was very unusual for athletes (black or white) in the 19th century.

Although Fleet Walker was reportedly well-liked in Toledo, there was a growing undercurrent of racist sentiment in baseball. Some teams declined to play with the Toledo team when Walker was playing. Opposing team players might try to make the black player look bad on the field. Another player refused to sit for a team picture with one of the blacks. Bud Fowler, who never played in the majors, but did play professional baseball, used to cover his shins with wooden slats when he played so that baserunners could not cause injury by sliding their spikes into him. Management was generally supportive of the black players, but only because they knew team owners would want to put their best players on the field.

Then in 1888, a well-known white player who hated blacks, made a concerted effort to codify the exclusion of black players from baseball. Adrian "Cap" Anson was what we would call a white supremacist today. He was a star player, and possessed the clout to bar blacks from baseball. Public sentiment was on Anson's side, so from the late 1880s until 1947, no blacks played in major league baseball. There were still black ballplayers in other leagues, such as the teams in the minor leagues, company

teams, town teams, and barnstorming teams, but for a number of reasons, blacks were barred from the major leagues from 1889-1947.

Just as racism was ripe in the country in general, it showed its ugly face in baseball as well. Many of you have heard of Ty Cobb, the Detroit Tigers hitter whose .367 lifetime batting average is the highest in major league history. He was a great ballplayer, but not such a nice human being. His hatred of blacks was legendary, and he was known to run into the stands on occasion to beat up a black person who taunted him.

But there were others, like the feisty John McGraw, manager of the NY Giants from 1902-1932, who periodically tried to slip black players onto his team by claiming that they were Cuban or Native American. He also hired former black players to help his team. For example, he hired Andrew "Rube" Foster, a crafty black pitcher and founder of the first Negro League, to work with his star pitcher, Christy Mathewson. It is believed that Mathewson's signature pitch, the fadeaway, was developed from techniques he learned from Rube Foster.

Throughout the late 19th century and into the 20th, talented black players could play in organized baseball on all-black teams. Before 1888, they could play on integrated teams, as well. When Rube Foster's pitching days were over, he made a deal to field an all-black team that would play its home games in Comiskey Park, where the major league White Sox played. Rube Foster became a manager and owner of the Chicago American Giants, a black team, and in 1920, he formed the Negro National League with other owners of midwestern black teams. After that, Negro Leagues were formed in the east and south among other black teams. So if a talented black athlete wanted to play competitively, and was good enough, he could play on one of the teams in the Negro Leagues.

Many of these Negro Leagues players never got to play in the majors. Some of the stars were too old by the time the majors were integrated. I was fortunate to have

met several of these Negro Leaguers at SABR conventions (Society for American Baseball Research). In fact, I spent a pleasant afternoon in Chicago in 1986 chatting with one of the stars of the Negro Leagues, Ted "Double Duty" Radcliffe, who was 84 at the time. Newspaperman Damon Runyon gave Radcliffe his nickname because he'd catch one day and then pitch the next. Radcliffe lived to be 103.

So what happened to integrate America's National Pastime? Longtime baseball commissioner, Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who was not a proponent of blacks in major league baseball, died in 1944. The next commissioner of major league baseball was Happy Chandler, who was a US Senator and Democratic governor of Kentucky. He was a breath of fresh air after the long, authoritarian tenure of Landis.

Branch Rickey, who was the new general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, wanted very much to bring a black player to the team. His motivation was his memory of a black player on the college team he coached years earlier whom he'd see being turned away at the team's hotels and restaurants. This inequitable treatment made an impression on Branch Rickey, a deeply religious man, so he was determined to bring the first black player to the majors. He decided on Jack Robinson, who was college-educated, intelligent, and a superb athlete. Jackie made his major league debut on April 15, 1947. Many of you know that he drove that Brooklyn team to win the National League championship. (Though they made it to the World Series, they were beaten by the Yankees.)

Now I don't mean to imply that Major League Baseball was a pioneering, progressive force. It wasn't then, and never has been. But bringing a black man to the majors, at a time when Jim Crow laws flourished, was taking a big chance. And Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson took that chance and prevailed. Each man played a role in this social experiment, and their mutual respect kept them going, against enormous odds. And Jack Robinson was the perfect man to carry this mantle. Many of you also know that Jackie Robinson's early years in the majors were filled with

numerous death threats, and a barrage of taunts from people in the stands and on opposing teams.

Three months after Jack Robinson was signed by Brooklyn, the Cleveland Indians signed Larry Doby, and a third black player was signed to the St. Louis Browns. Integration was slow to take hold; the last team to integrate didn't do so until 1959, a *full 12 years after* Jackie Robinson was signed by the Dodgers.

And what about black managers in major league baseball? The first one was hired in 1975 for Cleveland, Frank Robinson (no relation to Jackie). Throughout major league baseball history, there have been only 16 black managers. Two of those are current managers, Dave Roberts of the LA Dodgers, and Dusty Baker of the Houston Astros.

Jackie Robinson came up to the majors in 1947. The 1950s saw federal legislation to end segregation in the military and in public schools. In 1957, President Eisenhower signed the first substantial piece of civil rights legislation to protect voting rights. Throughout the 1960s a series of civil rights acts were passed: to prevent discrimination in employment, to assure fairness in housing, and to guarantee voting rights. What did these legislative acts accomplish? They changed overt behavior so that the legal rights of black people were protected.

But what does this really mean? We know that legislation for civil rights is a good thing, but how much does it actually change peoples' opinions? Not much.

Last summer, when George Floyd was callously murdered by a cop, the Black Lives Matter movement gained tremendous public sympathy from Americans. Unfortunately, that sentiment didn't last, and as more time has passed, we've continued to separate into our polarized positions along partisan lines. States led by Republicans are already rolling back the advances we made decades ago.

And what of baseball?

As much as I personally want the sport I love to stand for progressive change, it's not there yet, and probably never will be. Though I was very gratified when major league baseball took a stand against the state of Georgia's restrictive and regressive new voting laws by boycotting the state for this year's All-Star game, I don't expect that single act to put major league baseball at the forefront of social justice.

Instead of moving forward, we seem to be going backwards today. Social justice is being crushed under the weight of systemic racism. Lawmakers care more about their own desires than about a healthy democracy. We need the arc of the moral universe to bend further towards true justice.

May it be so. Amen.