

GUEST COLUMN: Robinson led off in fight against racial intolerance

Published: Wednesday, April 24, 2013

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The new movie “42” has inspired a renewed interest in the career of Jackie Robinson and his historic role in breaking down the racial barriers that had blocked African Americans from playing Major League Baseball.

Some 66 years after it happened, Robinson’s first year as a big league player and the abuse to which he was subjected by a sport that had rejected the integration of its rosters is dramatically portrayed in this landmark movie. With an outstanding cast and scenes that ably duplicate those of long ago, the movie leaves little doubt that Robinson was a true hero in the fight against bigotry and intolerance.

While other players were considered, Robinson was the perfect choice for the job. He was a superb all-around athlete, a college graduate, intelligent, and a family man. Although involved in a controversial issue, he was also a former officer in the military. He had the ability to control his sometimes fiery temper, even in the face of relentless tormenting from his opponents. Most importantly, he was an outstanding baseball player whose actions often spoke louder than words.

If Robinson hadn’t been in possession of all of these characteristics, his efforts in 1947 might not have been successful. As it was, though, the results of Robinson’s commitment changed the face of baseball forever.

Even today, former and present players celebrate Robinson’s pioneering effort.

Fellow Hall of Fame outfielder Monte Irvin told me recently that now, more than six decades later, he will never forget the difference Robinson made in his and others’ lives. “I will always be grateful to him for what he did,” Irvin said. “He made it better for all of us.”

Indeed, Robinson did not just erase segregation in baseball, he also changed the way the game was played. For several decades before his arrival, baseball had been a slow-moving game filled with home run hitters who were considered the main source of runs. Robinson returned swift running to the game and made speed on the basepaths a vital part of the offense.

Robinson's role in the "great experiment," as some called it, did not benefit just African-American players. Prior to 1947, only a few light-skinned Latin American players had performed in the big leagues. The Brooklyn Dodgers' infielder also opened the gates much wider for them and their dark-skinned brothers.

Often overlooked amid the celebration of Robinson's accomplishments is the effect they had on other sports. Robinson's integration of baseball was soon followed by the entrance for the first time of black players in the NFL, the NBA, and the PGA with names such as Tank Younger, Earl Lloyd, and Charlie Sifford joining the ranks of players in those sports.

Robinson helped to break down racial barriers in many other areas of society, including towns and cities across the country. Those, especially the ones where minor league teams were located or where teams held spring training, shunned clubs with black players. After 1947, their numbers began to dwindle.

Clearly, Robinson opened the doors for athletes, but he helped to bring about social changes everywhere while serving as an inspiration to African-American people throughout the land. It was not easy. Storms of abuse rained down on Robinson in his early years in baseball. He was badly mistreated not only by some members of the Phillies, but by others, especially the St. Louis Cardinals and Cincinnati Reds, and even a handful of players from his own team.

Although "42" focuses primarily on baseball without detailed mention of some of the other aspects of race relations, it leaves little doubt that Robinson helped to lay the groundwork for the civil rights movement. He came along many years before Rosa Parks and James Meredith and Martin Luther King, but his work provided a valuable cornerstone for their efforts.

Rich Westcott is a baseball writer and historian, and the author of 23 books, including the recently released Philadelphia's Top 50 Baseball Players. He once wrote sports for the Daily Times.