



Baseball was leader in integration

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By Justice B. Hill / MLB.com

The ballfields and arenas of the early 1940s were places where blacks and whites had no choice but to follow the U.S. Supreme Court edict of "separate but equal."

But the summer of '47 ushered in a change that would soon sweep away nearly a half-century of segregation in professional sports.

According to Negro Leagues Baseball Museum marketing director Bob Kendrick, Major League Baseball was at the epicenter of that socio-political revolution. Baseball, thanks to Jackie Robinson, laid the groundwork for the progress that led to professional sports emerging as a force for equal rights in America.

"I don't think you can help but feel that if the Robinson experiment failed, it would have pushed the notion of integrating sports -- but also integrating other aspects of business life in our society -- probably back," Kendrick said. "That's why this thing is so relevant, because failure was not an option."

Major League Baseball will remember those early days of integration when it honors some of the ballplayers from "black baseball" who didn't get a chance to follow Robinson's and Larry Doby's paths to the bigs and play alongside whites.



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At the First-Year Player Draft on June 5 in Orlando, Fla., each team will make a special selection of one of those former players whose professional careers began and ended in the Negro Leagues.

The Draft will be a symbolic link between baseball's past and its present -- a present that speaks to a sport with a global perspective that might be second to none. And even if other pro sports might boast a more diverse workforce today, they must still acknowledge baseball's contribution to their diversity.

For where would that diversity be without Robinson's and baseball's help?

"If integration of baseball had failed, it would not have put pressure on any other sport to pursue it," said Adrian Burgos, a history professor at the University of Illinois and an authority on baseball. "It relaxed society's resistance to integration as a cause, because people would have had to reflect, 'Why didn't it succeed in Brooklyn?'"

That's a question that history doesn't have to answer, said Ron Thomas, a former sportswriter and director of the Morehouse College Journalism and Sports Program.

Thomas pointed out that baseball, despite its trend-setting in the '40s, had played the lead role in first putting up barriers to integration when it banned ballplayers of color in the 1890s. For periods throughout U.S. history, sports and entertainment had proved the two races could mix, Thomas said.

In the first half of the 20th century, some of the greats in sports, arts and entertainment found acceptance across the races. Boxers Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson and Henry Armstrong, and Olympians Jesse Owens and Harrison Dillard all played to integrated audiences and stood as heroic figures to black and white Americans.

On the music scene, Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald and Duke Ellington wooed jazz lovers -- black and white -- from Harlem to Hollywood.

Yet American society remained steadfast in its hard-headed opposition to integration of team sports until '47. Integration there led to integration elsewhere in society, Thomas said.

"My theory is that Jackie Robinson opened as many doors for black people in society in general as any civil rights organization," he said. "He became a very important political figure in this country and a symbolic figure in this country."

Thomas, who's written extensively about race and professional basketball, argued that had Robinson not succeeded, the National Basketball Association would not have explored signing Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, Chuck Cooper and Earl Lloyd in 1950.

The NBA, which integrated before the National Football League did, watched closely what kind of reception black and Latino players like Robinson, Doby, Willard Brown, Don Newcombe, Satchel Paige and Minnie Minoso got from white fans and white teammates, Thomas said.

White fans slowly warmed to them, and other ballplayers of color began a steady stream of talent into the Majors.

None of these players proved more influential than Robinson in disproving the notion that whites wouldn't root for a black ballplayer.

"In terms of white people's ability to emphasize and respect a black person, I think Jackie Robinson was incredibly important," Thomas said.

Burgos agreed. He said the public pronouncement of Robinson's signing put integration under the kind of scrutiny it had never faced. The entire country was wired into what Major League Baseball and Robinson were doing.

But baseball was playing a chancy game that, if integration backfired, threatened to retard racial progress inside and outside the sport, Kendrick and Burgos said.

"Baseball was very much seen as a barometer for social relations and race relations in the United States," said Burgos, a SABR member who has written extensively about the Negro Leagues and Latinos in baseball. "Robinson's success was so instrumental in the changes that embraced our society that you have to believe that, had he failed, this thing would probably have been delayed at least another decade."

And what would that failure in baseball have done for society as a whole?

According to Burgos, it would have delayed integration across the spectrum.

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