

Jackie Robinson's Inner Struggle

By Jon Meacham The New York Times July 20, 2020



Jackie Robinson, 1952. Credit...Carl T. Gossett Jr./The New York Times

It was Tuesday, Sept. 30, 1947 — Game 1 of the World Series between the New York Yankees and the Brooklyn Dodgers — and Jack Roosevelt “Jackie” Robinson was making history. The Dodger first baseman was standing in a packed Yankee Stadium about to hear the national anthem. From a distance, the tableau can seem an inspiring inflection point: the first Black major leaguer in the 20th century playing in the first televised World Series. “There I was,” Robinson recalled in his 1972 memoir [“I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography.”](#) “the Black grandson of a slave, the son of a Black sharecropper, part of a historic occasion, a symbolic hero to my people.” So far, so good: The safe narrative of Robinson-as-stoic-hero is intact. “The band struck up the national anthem,” he wrote. “It should have been a glorious moment for me as the stirring words ... poured from the stands.” Yet if we see the scene through Robinson’s eyes — and hear the anthem through his ears — we encounter an altogether different story. Writing a quarter of a century after the 1947 World Series, Robinson

observed, “I cannot stand and sing the anthem. I cannot salute the flag; I know that I am a Black man in a white world. In 1972, in 1947, at my birth in 1919, I know that I never had it made.”

To many white fans of the game, the tale of Jackie Robinson is redemptive and transporting. The number 42 is retired across the major leagues; Robinson is a secular saint, revered for his skill and his bravery in making what was known as the noble experiment of desegregating baseball before *Brown v. Board of Education*, before the Montgomery bus boycott, before the March on Washington, before Selma. The truth, as Robinson told it in his affecting and candid autobiography, is vastly more complicated, and the book repays attention as the nation grapples anew with race. “I Never Had It Made” offers compelling testimony about the realities of being Black in America from an author who long ago became more a monument than a man, and his memoir is an illuminating meditation on racism not only in the national pastime but in the nation itself.

Robinson’s journey to the majors started in the back of a bus. He had been signed to a contract with the Brooklyn Dodgers’ minor-league Montreal club. Ordered to spring training in Sanford, Fla. — and this being 1946, Jim Crow was very much in force — Robinson, a veteran of World War II and a former U.C.L.A. athletic star, had been forced to ride in the segregated section of a bus on the way to camp. He and Johnny Wright, a pitcher in the Negro leagues who’d also been signed as a prospect by the Dodger owner [Branch Rickey](#), were anxious about the reception that might be awaiting them. “We had to feel our way in this entire matter,” Robinson recalled in an earlier book, [“Jackie Robinson: My Own Story,”](#) published in 1948. In the clubhouse, a Dodger organization man, Babe Hamburger, offered some counsel. “Well, fellows,” Hamburger said, “I’m not exactly what you’d call a part of this great experiment, but I’m gonna give you some advice anyway. Just go out there and do your best. Don’t get tense. Just be yourselves.”

Robinson was underwhelmed. “Be ourselves?” he asked himself. “Here in the heart of the race-conscious South? ... Johnny and I both realized that this was hostile territory — that anything could happen any time to a Negro who thought he could play ball with white men on an equal basis. It was going to be difficult to relax and behave naturally. But we assured Babe we’d try.”

Try they did — and Robinson succeeded mightily, becoming a pioneering major leaguer, a Hall of Famer and, in that most tired but still accurate of phrases, an American icon. Moments after Hamburger shared his words of wisdom, reporters asked Robinson what he’d do if a pitcher threw at his head. “Duck,” Robinson replied. He’d wind up doing a great deal of that.

One day in Robinson’s inaugural big-league season in 1947, the Philadelphia Phillies, led by their manager, Ben Chapman, were assaulting the Dodger first baseman with especially virulent racist taunts and epithets. “For one wild and rage-crazed minute I thought, ‘To hell with Mr. Rickey’s noble experiment,’” Robinson recalled. “It’s clear it won’t succeed. ... I thought what a glorious, cleansing thing it would be to let go. To hell with the image of the patient Black freak I was supposed to create. I could throw down my bat, stride over to that Phillies dugout, grab one of those white sons of bitches and smash his teeth in with my despised Black fist. Then I could walk away from it all.”

A subsequent photo op with Chapman to show that all was copacetic hit Robinson hard. “There were times, after I had bowed to humiliations like shaking hands with Chapman, when deep depression and speculation as to whether it was all worthwhile would seize me.” He recalled that he carried on, because there were just enough rays of light in the gloom. Rumor had it that the St. Louis Cardinals might boycott a game against the Dodgers in what Robinson feared could create “a chain reaction throughout the baseball world — with other players agreeing to unite in a strong bid to keep baseball white.” [Ford Frick](#), the president of the National League, stepped in on Robinson’s side, warning that

he'd suspend any boycotters. "I don't care if it wrecks the National League for five years," Frick said. "This is the United States of America."

Robinson and Rickey are understandably at the center of the traditional narrative about desegregation and baseball, but they were part of a larger drama that's detailed in books like Jules Tygiel's "Baseball's Great Experiment: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy" and Chris Lamb's "Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball." And for excellent histories of the Negro leagues, see, for instance, Robert Peterson's "Only the Ball Was White: A History of Legendary Black Players and All-Black Professional Teams," as well as Jim Reisler's edited volume "Black Writers/Black Baseball," an anthology of Black sportswriters.

The power of Robinson's "I Never Had It Made" lies more in his reflections on the broader culture than it does in his war stories about the game. A Republican who campaigned for Richard Nixon in 1960, Robinson, who was close to the New York governor Nelson Rockefeller, gradually began to cool on Vice President Nixon during his race against John F. Kennedy and finally fell out with the party when forces loyal to Barry Goldwater, who opposed the Civil Rights Act, triumphed in 1964. "A Barry Goldwater victory would insure that the G.O.P. would become completely the white man's party," Robinson argued in a piece he wrote for *The Saturday Evening Post* in early 1964. At the Republican National Convention at the Cow Palace in San Francisco, Robinson watched in horror as the right-wing delegates roared their disapproval of Rockefeller, a supporter of civil rights. "It embodied a revulsion for all he stood for," Robinson recalled, "including his enlightened attitude toward Black people." To Robinson, the party of Lincoln was no more. After San Francisco, he wrote, "I had a better understanding of how it must have felt to be a Jew in Hitler's Germany."

The ur-text of high-minded thinking on the game is [A. Bartlett Giamatti's](#) "Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games." A scholar of Renaissance literature, president of Yale and baseball commissioner, Giamatti wrote: "Baseball fulfills the promise America made itself to cherish the individual while recognizing the overarching claims of the group. It sends its players out in order to return again, allowing all the freedom to accomplish great things in a dangerous world. So baseball restates a version of America's promises every time it is played."

The lesson of Jackie Robinson's powerful memoir is that Giamatti's vision of the game, and of the country, was far more romantic than real. To Robinson, there was one irreducible truth about his own life, a truth that transcended Cooperstown. "I was a Black man in a white world," Robinson wrote. "*I never had it made.*"