



An Outside Perspective

A biography is an account of someone's life, told from an outside point of view. Some biographers try to be impartial—they don't take a "side" and, instead, they just focus on the facts about the person. Other biographers clearly show their feelings about a subject. They might slant the facts (or omit some of them) to make their subjects look better or worse than they really are or were. A writer might even choose to portray only the incidents from a person's life that illustrate a certain point about him or her. As you read "Hero on the Ball Field," look for Robert Peterson's perspective on Jackie Robinson. Underline any opinions that you find. How does Peterson portray Robinson?

"Hero on the Ball Field" by Robert Peterson

Response Notes

As a baseball player, Jackie Robinson won over the fans, his teammates—and his own hot temper.

Robinson was a line-drive hitter, an acrobatic fielder and the best base runner of his time. He was also the first African-American player in the big leagues in this century.

In Robinson's rookie year, 1947, baseball topped the sports world. Pro football and basketball were far less popular 50 years ago.

It was a tough time to be black, and not just for baseball players. In Southern states, black kids went to separate schools. Black people had to ride in the backs of buses. There were even separate drinking fountains for blacks and whites. In the North, things were a little better, but not much. There had not been a black player in the major leagues in more than 60 years.

Blacks—even those good enough to play major-league baseball—had their own teams and leagues.

Jackie Robinson was a fiery competitor. "This guy didn't just come to play," an old baseball man once said. "He came to beat you!"

When the Brooklyn Dodgers signed Robinson, the club president, Branch Rickey, told Robinson he would have to curb his temper if he was abused or taunted by white players or fans. Rickey worried that if Robinson answered back, people who did not want blacks in baseball would say, "See, we told you blacks and whites should not compete."

Robinson asked, "Mr. Rickey, do you want a player who's afraid to fight back?"

"I want a player with guts enough *not* to fight back," Rickey said. "You've got to do this job with base hits and stolen bases and fielding ground balls, Jackie. Nothing else."

"Hero on the Ball Field" by Robert Peterson /

Jackie Robinson was the loneliest man in baseball in 1947. During spring training a half-dozen Dodgers players said they would not play if he joined the team. Branch Rickey put down that mutiny with stern words. Soon most Dodgers warmed up to Robinson. They saw he was helping them win games.

Opponents were not so friendly. Some made it as tough as they could for the black pioneer. A few tried to spike Robinson as they crossed first base, Robinson's position that year, on a close play. He was hit by pitches nine times. Once he was kicked as he slid into second base.

Many players and fans screamed racial taunts at him.

"Plenty of times I wanted to haul off when somebody insulted me for the color of my skin," he said later.

Robinson was not even safe from hate at home. The mail brought letters threatening his life. Some letter writers said they would kidnap his infant son, Jackie Jr., or attack his wife.

Despite the great pressure on him, Robinson had a fine season. He batted .297, led the Dodgers in runs scored with 125 and hit 12 home runs. He led the league with 29 stolen bases. That may not seem like a lot today, but baseball was not a running game in 1947.

As a base runner, Robinson was constantly in motion. Pitchers worried more about him than the batter. Often the batter got a fat pitch to hit because the dancing Robinson distracted the pitcher.

Robinson sometimes "stole" bases after the ball was hit. He would race from first to third when the safe thing to do was stop at second.

But here is a fact that tells you how daring the muscular, pigeon-toed Robinson was on the bases: He stole home 19 times in his career, more than anyone since the early years of this century.

Fans—black and white—flocked to see Jackie Robinson play. In his first year, the Dodgers and four other National League teams set attendance records. He became a hero in black communities.

That year the Dodgers won the National League pennant but lost the World Series to the New York Yankees. Robinson was named National League Rookie of the Year.

Even before the 1947 season ended, Robinson's success paved the way for other black players. In July the Cleveland Indians signed Larry Doby, a slugging young outfielder, who became the first black player in the American League. A month later, pitcher Dan Bankhead, who had been with the Memphis Red Sox in the Negro American League, joined Robinson on the Dodgers.

© response notes
 Robinson

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HOME

TIME
OUTS
LEFT