

"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*

HOME

TIME  
OUTS  
LEFT

BALL ON DOV

## An Outside Perspective

What makes  
Robinson a hero?

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."

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Jackie Robinson's best position was second base, but he played all four infield positions and some in the outfield.

From 1949 to 1952 he was one of the two or three best players in baseball. In 1949 he led the National League in batting with a .342 average and in stolen bases with 37. He was third in triples and runs scored. That performance earned him the league's Most Valuable Player award.

Robinson retired from baseball in 1957, the year before the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles. Five years later he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

He became an outspoken leader in the fight for equality for black people. Jackie Robinson proved himself a hero off the baseball field as well as on.

← response notes →

◆ Based on the article, what is your opinion of Jackie Robinson?

◆ Look back at the opinions you underlined in the article. How does Robert Peterson feel about Jackie Robinson?

# Three

## Another Perspective



Do you think it would be difficult to write a biography about someone in your own family? Would you be able to be objective—in other words, could you tell just the facts? Or would your close relationship make you tell only the best things about your family member?

In her autobiography, *Stealing Home*, Jackie Robinson's daughter Sharon tells about her childhood in a famous family. In this excerpt, she recounts a dinner-table conversation. Jackie Robinson is talking about an incident in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. When nine black teenagers began the court-ordered integration of schools, they faced jeers, taunts, and humiliation. Four of the children had spoken with Robinson about the ordeal. As you read this personal account, ask yourself, "What does Sharon Robinson reveal about herself and her father? What makes this account unique?"

from *Stealing Home* by Sharon Robinson

← Response notes →

Without talking down to us, Dad used this opportunity to explain prejudice. Generally, he moved quietly around the house, but it was obvious that this situation had him worked up and he wanted my brothers and me to understand the situation.

"I suppose we all fear the unknown—the strange, the different. The natural fears of parents are made worse by ignorance, and unfortunately they pass them down to their children. In the process, the stories get more and more distorted and eventually become fact in the minds of the storyteller. The sad part for everyone is that prejudice prevents people from sharing talents which could benefit the whole community. The only way racial discrimination can have a hope of being erased is through exposure. The more people understand each other the less they will fear the differences."

"What did you say to the children, Daddy?" I asked, trying to picture their faces.

"Were they boys or girls?" David added.

"How old were they?" Jackie wanted to know.

Dad smiled and continued with the story of his phone conversation. He reminded us that the boys and girls were high school students. I felt somewhat relieved to know that they were much older than we were. I wondered how the children could possibly learn under such tremendous pressure.

I looked questioningly at Jackie, who was ten at the time, trying to picture him as a teenager going to high school. I figured my rebellious brother, Jackie Junior, would arrive at school and when he was told he couldn't go inside, he would



