

This Day in History... January 31, 1919

Happy Birthday Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson was born on January 31, 1919, in Cairo, Georgia.

The grandson of a slave, Jack Roosevelt Robinson was the youngest of five children raised by a single mother. He excelled at sports from a young age, playing football, basketball, track, and baseball at Pasadena Junior College. In 1938, he was honored as the region's Most Valuable Player in baseball.

Robinson's older brother Matthew was also an athlete, earning a silver medal at the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. He encouraged his younger brother to follow his love of sports.

Jackie went on to become the first student at the University of California, Los Angeles, to win varsity letters in four sports. However, he didn't graduate, dropping out just months prior. Instead, he moved to Hawaii and played for the semi-professional football team, the Honolulu Bears. His time there was cut short when he was drafted for World War II and was commissioned a second lieutenant. Before he saw combat, he was court-martialed for refusing to move to the back of a military bus while at Fort Hood (now Fort Cavazos) in Texas. Military buses were officially desegregated, but the bus driver wanted to enforce state law. When his commanding officer refused to sign the charges, Robinson was transferred to another tank battalion who's commander signed the papers to prosecute. He was eventually acquitted and granted an honorable discharge.

After leaving the Army in 1944, Robinson committed his energy to professional baseball, which was segregated at that time. In 1945, he played for the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro-American League. Then he met Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, who believed it was time to integrate Major League Baseball. He knew the first black player in the major leagues couldn't be just anyone – he needed someone that could face the harsh criticism of the media and be able to “turn the other cheek.” He found the man for the job – Jackie Robinson.

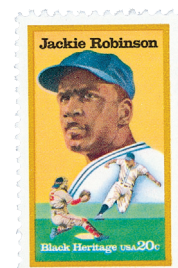
In 1945, history was made when Robinson signed a contract with the Montreal Royals, the Brooklyn Dodgers' best farm team. His debut with the Royals on April 18, 1946, was legendary. In five at-bats, he hit a three-run homer and three singles, stole two bases, and scored four times. Robinson was promoted to the Dodgers the following spring. He played his first major league game on April 15, 1947, a defining moment not only in sports but also in history. Robinson earned respect as a baseball player because of his talents as a fielder, batter, and daring base runner.

Robinson's career was full of great moments. In 1947, he was named Rookie of the Year. One of his best years was 1949, when he batted .342, scored 122 runs, and had 124 runs batted in. He was the National League's Most Valuable Player that year. In 1962, Robinson was the first black player inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

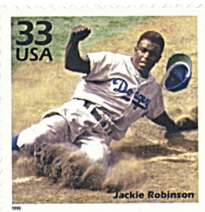
Even under pressure, Robinson performed well. On the last day of the 1951 regular season, the Dodgers were tied with the Philadelphia Phillies in an extra-inning game. With the bases loaded and two out, Robinson dove to grab a hard line drive and was knocked unconscious. Two innings later, he hit a game-winning homer that put the Dodgers into the pennant race.

During his career, Robinson was insulted, sent hate mail, intentionally hit by pitches, and issued death threats. Following his example, many African Americans rejected their “separate but equal” status, and fought for integration. People of all races admired his dignified courage against fierce prejudice.

Robinson spent 10 years in the major leagues and was a six-time All-Star, between 1949 and 1954. He played in six World Series and contributed to the Dodgers' 1955 victory. Robinson retired in 1956 and became president of Chock full o'Nuts. In 1997, his number, 42, was retired from all teams in the major league, an honor which had never been given to an athlete in any sport before. Since 2004, players on every team wear his number on April 15 for Jackie Robinson Day. After his death on October 24, 1972, he was posthumously awarded the Congressional Gold Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom.



Robinson was the 5th honoree in the Black Heritage Series.



US #3186c – Robinson stamp from the 1940s Celebrate the Century sheet



From the 2000 Legends of Baseball sheet

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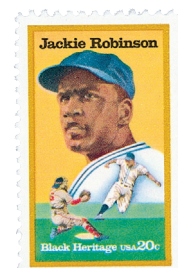
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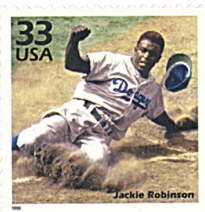
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