

Monday, February 28, 2005: Dick Stratton, *English Teacher*

In the summer of 1945 when I was 9 years old, I had already been an avid Major League baseball fan for at least 3 years. I devoured baseball statistics, rode with my father on the Maine Central RR from Portland, Maine to Boston 7 or 8 times a summer to see the Red Sox or the old Boston Braves play, and listened on the radio to as many Red Sox, Braves, N.Y. Giants, and Brooklyn Dodgers games as I could. Late in that summer came some electrifying news. Branch Ricky, the brilliant General Manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers announced the signing of the first black player to a Major League contract. His name was Jackie Robinson.

I recall that I was both fascinated and bewildered by this news. I was vaguely aware that Major League baseball was a lily-white sport, but had never really thought about why there were no black players. Growing up in a state with a black population of 27, I had not been exposed to the racism that has pervaded American society from its origins. It was not a problem that had come to my 9-year old attention. But now it did. I knew instinctively that the absence of black players was not due to lack of ability; I wasn't stupid. No, my favorite sport had practiced gross injustice for over 75 years. I felt bitter and betrayed. And simultaneously, I developed a passionate interest in Jackie Robinson. I wanted him to succeed. Overnight he had become my hero.

Well, the world knows he succeeded brilliantly. 29 years old before he was able to play a big league game, he still averaged .312 over a 10 year career, electrified fans and drove pitchers crazy with the daring athleticism of his base-running, played first and third base, and left field, in addition to his natural position of second base, led the National League in various years in Batting Average, Runs, Runs Batted In, and Stolen Bases, batted clean-up on Dodger championship teams which contained three different players – Roy Campanella, Gil Hodges, and Duke Snider-who hit 40 or more home runs in a season more than once without the aid of steroid-enhanced biceps. Jackie was a line-drive hitter who averaged 15 home runs a year, but his game was never about numbers; it was about winning. Prior to Jackie's arrival, the Brooklyn Dodgers had won 3 pennants in 46 years during the 20th century; during Jackie Robinson's ten years with them they won 7. Moreover, his League, the National League became dominant for the next 3 decades after his arrival, winning all one stretch, 20 out of 24 All-Star games, and 12 out of 18 World Series. Why? Because they were so much quicker than the American League to tap the new source of talent, black baseball players – MVP's galore – Campanella and Don Newcombe and Maury Wills of the Dodgers, Willie Mays, Willie McCovey, and Orlando Cepeda of the Giants, Frank Robinson and Joe Morgan of the Reds, Hank Aaron of the Braves, Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell of the Pirates, Ernie Banks of the Cubs, all Hall of Famers, for whom Jackie Robinson's "Boys of Summer" in the 50's to Joe Morgan's "Big Red Machine" in the 70's characterized the era.

I consider myself fortunate to have watched Jackie Robinson play in person against the old Boston Braves once a year between 1947 and 1952, when the Braves departed for Milwaukee. Jackie Robinson was an electrifying performer, and when he got on base, the fun began; you could not take your eyes off him. No player in his era or any other could beat you in so many ways – with his bat, with his glove, with his feet and with his intelligence. No other player, not even Babe Ruth, contributed more to the game of baseball or to sports in general, and no other human being, aside from Dr. Martin Luther King, contributed more to racial progress in 20th century America. Jackie Robinson, a very great athlete, and a very great man, deserves to be remembered in Black History Month. Thank you.