



## **SPORTS, VALUES, AND SOCIETAL CHANGE**

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It is very rare indeed when Sport drives societal change. Many historians and most sports enthusiasts credit the breaking of the “color barrier” in Major League baseball by Jackie Robinson on April 15th of 1947 with doing exactly that. More precisely they maintain it hastened racial desegregation in America. In fact, celebrated baseball commentator Roger Kahn opines in his most recent book, *Rickey and Robinson*, that Branch Rickey’s promotion of Jackie Robinson to play for the Brooklyn Dodgers represents the single most important event in the story of racial desegregation. While, it may be hyperbolic to rank it above the efforts of Dr. Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, the March on Selma, and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, it was indeed enormously significant.

In addition to preceding--if not unleashing--the other landmark events of the Civil Rights movement, the integration of baseball remains a stellar societal lamppost as it was largely accomplished without violence, military action, executive or judicial branch enforcement, or for that matter, any governmental action at all. Rather it was driven by the overriding courage, faith and character of Jack Roosevelt Robinson and Branch Rickey and their outsized personalities and convictions. The recent motion picture “42” depicting their story provides an uplifting and informative narrative about their legendary efforts. In perhaps the central scene of the movie, which takes place when Robinson first meets Rickey, Rickey tells Robinson he cannot respond to the hateful bigotry he will inevitably encounter in an all-white baseball league. An agitated Robinson asks Rickey if he is looking for a black player who does not have the courage to fight. Rickey quickly and adamantly retorts, “No, I am looking for a player who has the courage NOT to fight!”

While Robinson’s whole career was, in a real sense, a fight ... a fight for racial equality, acceptance, understanding, and, above all, justice, he never let Rickey down by succumbing to the temptation to return hatred with hatred or physical violence with physical violence. In this regard, his success modeled the examples of Dr. King, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus Christ and thus adds a clear ethical and spiritual dimension to the story. As a role model who acquitted himself so well on and the off the field, Jackie Robinson opened the door for hundreds of other black players who were similarly excluded from MLB by the “unwritten color barrier” and in a short five years over 150 other players of color were accepted in professional baseball.

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While it may seem simplistic to paint the desegregation of baseball as a morality tale, its basic elements certainly point in that direction: Rickey, a self-described devout Methodist, believed God (whom he also described as a Methodist) was on his side in the battle to integrate baseball; Pee Wee Reese, the Dodgers all-star shortstop, a Southern baseball player risked his popularity and standing with fans, friends, and family, to publicly put his arm over Robinson's back to show solidarity against the backdrop of vicious racial epithets in Cincinnati; and Robinson risked everything including his very life amidst numerous death threats. All three are enshrined today in Baseball's Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y, for their baseball achievements and for their achievements for baseball.

On the other side of the ledger, hateful opponents such as Philadelphia Phillies Manager Ben Chapman, who mercilessly shouted racial slurs at Robinson from the dugout, have been assigned by history to an ignominious reputation as small-minded bigots who feared giving Robinson a fair opportunity. Even franchises that were slow to integrate paid a hefty price as they missed out on signing a bevy of talented star African American players and fell behind their more enlightened competitors on the field and at the box office. In his classic book, *1964*, historian and baseball scribe David Halberstam ascribes the New York Yankees' continued stubborn refusal to sign African American players as the primary reason for their steep decline. In the view of Halberstam and many others, The Yankees — the gold standard of baseball from the 1920s to early 1960s — unceremoniously fell to the basement of baseball by 1965 in large part due to racism.

Sport has always seemed to be a leader in enlightened race relations. The NFL actually preceded baseball by integrating in 1946 but with much less fanfare or resulting social impact because the relatively fledgling NFL was dwarfed by baseball in popularity at the time. The moving story of true friendship between Chicago Bears teammates Gale Sayers and Brian Piccolo of the 1960s, as told in Sayers autobiography *I Am Third* and the movie *Brian's Song*, depicts teammate camaraderie breaking down the impersonal ignorance that underlies racial prejudice. Because of the widespread distribution of the story through the film, it also made a positive contribution to societal progress on race.

The late Congressman Jack Kemp began his political career representing a Congressional district in Buffalo, N.Y., where he had been a star quarterback in football for the Buffalo Bills. Much like the story of Sayers and Piccolo, Kemp's football experience highlighted how the locker room serves as a laboratory for exposure to diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious backgrounds, and thus, for the creation of lasting bonds between ostensibly very different individuals. Perhaps because of his multiracial and multicultural sports experience, Kemp's political positions were marked by a strong emphasis on civil rights and justice. His political credo and personal approach were summarized by his oft-stated, "No one cares what you know, until they know that you care."

Jack Kemp's aphorism provides a clear and cogent explanation of why competitive team sports can be such an effective vehicle to forge life long bonds and to destroy deeply held yet ignorance-based stereotypes that underlie a social evil such as de facto racial segregation. Sport also has the latent ability to do much more. Passion is the life blood of sports. Fans are passionate about their teams and favorite players. The breaking of the color barrier in baseball provides hope and perhaps a map to tap in to this power source. While most media discussion of fan behavior is decidedly negative today, sport's greatest untapped potential for societal change lies in motivating team and player fan bases. To some extent this is being attempted by leagues and players throughout all sports through public service announcements, social media posts, and numerous other methods. The effectiveness of these efforts is subject to question as negative attention continues to be generated by most sports news.

Basketball great Charles Barkley famously said he is not a role model and should not be a role model simply because he can dunk a basketball and role models cannot take the place of parents. He has a point but I prefer the approach of former St. Louis Cardinals baseball player David Eckstein in saying, "I should not be a role model because I am a professional athlete — a role model should be someone you can say hello to in the morning and good night at the end of the day — but I am a role model because kids look at me as a role model so I try to be the best possible witness for good I can."

Athletes have the power to influence many individuals, most of whom they may never know or meet. While it may strike one as odd or even troubling that a fan will follow and respect someone with so attenuated a relationship, it represents a present reality. This reality when combined with the passion inherent to sports can often be the source of violence, rioting and even death as has happened for example at European soccer matches. However, in the instances in which the passion of sports is redirected for good, what great things can happen.

Jackie Robinson was and continues to be a role model for innumerable young boys and girls. Everyone associated with his entry into baseball including Robinson agrees he was not the best player in the Negro leagues in 1947. Yet he was by far the best choice to be the first player of color because of his sterling character traits. With the NFL draft a few weeks away, it is interesting to note the increasing discussion on the role of character as a "measurable" asset for a potential draftee. It is, and always will remain, impossible to quantify "character" as a measurable tool but we should at least note that it has a near term role in player personnel selection. History will always be a fairer evaluator of character and those in sports who truly demonstrated it will transcend their time and sport to inspire others for generations to come.

Another group of athletes currently struggling for greater inclusion are those with disabilities. For far too long they almost entirely ignored. Thankfully in the recent past, athletes with physical limitations have been included in a much more significant way into the Olympics and other competitions. Unfortunately, athletes with intellectual disabilities continue to be largely ignored by the sports world in general. Thankfully, Special Olympics, thanks to the tireless efforts of Eunice Kennedy Shriver and her family, have been there to fill the void. Yet despite the great work of Special Olympics, the sports world itself has not been terribly welcoming to individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Herein lies another opportunity perhaps for sports to lead the way as it did in racial desegregation. The Special Olympics, which I am happy to say I have had the opportunity to partner with in a small way at some recent major sporting events, is promoting a “unified approach” to its sports. That is, it is working to have its athletes participate side by side with those without intellectual disabilities. While the concept may at first blush seem startling or impractical, integrated baseball was once considered impossible to imagine. I was stunned to first observe the high level of athleticism and skill that many special Olympians demonstrate. Now I have come to expect it and see a near-term possibility for Special Olympians to play alongside other highly skilled “non-special” Olympians. No doubt this inclusion will bring about a major societal rethinking of the way we include (or currently exclude) a whole category of individuals from mainstream society.

Sports may not be the best driver or arbiter of social change but the meritocracy of the game often means it is the one of the fairest and most effective. Unquestionably, the most important lesson we can draw from the story of desegregation in baseball to apply across the board is everyone benefits when inclusion replaces exclusion as an operating principle and that society as a whole is the greatest beneficiary.

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