Batting Against the Odds

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Who Was Jackie Robinson?

Jackie Robinson was a famous African American athlete. He was the first person to break through the barriers that allowed only Americans with white skin to play baseball in the major leagues during the early to mid-1900s.

Jackie Robinson is admired not only for his great skill as a baseball player but also for the bravery, patience, and self-control he showed when others treated him unfairly and cruelly.

Setting the Scene

U.S.A. Before the 1960s

Although slavery was made illegal in 1863, African Americans were still treated unfairly, especially in the South, where Jackie Robinson was born.

African Americans were forced to ride in separate areas on trains and buses, eat in separate restaurants, and sleep in separate hotels from white people. They went to separate schools and churches and often held the lowest-paying jobs. New laws were passed in the 1960s that made it illegal to treat people differently because of their race.
Westward Bound

Jack Roosevelt Robinson was the youngest of five children. His father, Jerry Robinson, worked on a plantation in Georgia. When Jerry left his wife and children, Mallie Robinson decided to move her family to California. Life had become violent and dangerous for many African Americans living in the South, and Mallie had heard about the promise of a better life in the West.

Mallie Robinson forced herself to remain calm while the policeman checked her train tickets and rudely kicked the suitcases and boxes that were piled at the side of the track.

Her youngest child, Jack, slept in her arms, weary after the long buggy ride from the plantation. The four older children waited nervously. At last, the family was allowed to board the segregated train. They left Georgia and began their long journey west to a new life in California.

Mallie Robinson is shown here with her children (from left): Mack, Jack, Edgar, Willa Mae, and Frank.
The Little Mother

“Come on, Jackie, we’ll be late for school,” Willa Mae said to her baby brother. When Mallie found a job as a maid, she gave each of her older children the responsibility of looking after the next younger child. So Willa Mae bathed, dressed, and fed Jackie almost every day. He even went to school with her and was allowed to play outside in the sandbox while she sat in class and watched him through a window.

Mallie Robinson arrived in California with only three dollars sewn into the lining of her petticoat. She found a job as a maid for a white family in Pasadena and worked long hours.

At first, times were tough, and the children sometimes went hungry. After a while, however, Mallie had saved enough money to buy a house. The family grew their own fruit and vegetables.
The Robinsons were the only African Americans on their street. They were often faced with hatred and prejudice. White people threw stones at them, damaged their property, and tried to drive them away. However, Mallie Robinson taught her children that one way of fighting back was to be proud of who they were and to ignore the bad behavior of others.

"Jackie, take that energy of yours outside and do some chores," Mallie Robinson said gently to her eight-year-old son, who always seemed to be running, jumping, and playing ball.

Jackie began to sweep the sidewalk outside their house on Pepper Street. Suddenly, the little girl across the street screamed at him, "Get out of our neighborhood! We don't want to see your black face around here!"

**prejudice**: a negative opinion based on ignorance
That’s Not Fair!

Jackie didn’t like being called names, and he didn’t like being treated unfairly just because of the color of his skin. He hated the way he and his friends were not allowed to swim in the public pool except on Tuesdays—the day before the water was changed. On hot summer days, they would gather outside the picket fence and watch the white kids splashing around in the water.

As a young teen, Jackie joined some neighborhood kids in forming the Pepper Street Gang. They had decided to form a gang because they were angry at the way African American, Mexican, and Japanese kids were treated unfairly.

However, through his mother’s strong family values and the influence of his coaches, Jackie realized that the Pepper Street Gang was no more than a ticket to trouble. He had the courage to quit the gang and decided to focus his efforts on sports.

Jackie was inspired by his big brother Mack, who was a U.S. Olympic athlete at the 1936 games held in Berlin, Germany.
All-Star Athlete

1939

Jackie was filled with grief. His brother Frank had been killed in an accident. To take his mind off his grief, Jackie concentrated even harder on being the best he could be in sports. He began attending classes at the University of California in Los Angeles (UCLA). Soon, he was UCLA's best-known sports star.

Jackie trained hard, and he learned the importance of discipline and hard work. By focusing on sports, he was able to get through the tough times.

Jackie was a natural-born athlete, and throughout his college years he became a champion in track and field, football, basketball, and baseball.

Whenever Jackie came up against prejudice, he learned to turn the anger he felt into competitive energy.
The Big Break

1945

“I want you to come and play for us.”

Jackie couldn’t believe his ears. Branch Rickey, one of the most important men in baseball, wanted him to play for his team! No major-league club had ever before hired a black ballplayer.

Rickey leaned forward. “At first, you’ll be the only black player in the major league. Many people will be against you because of the color of your skin. Can you take it?”

“Mr. Rickey, do you want a ballplayer who’s afraid to fight back?” Jackie asked.

“I want a player with guts enough not to fight back,” said Rickey.

Like other black ballplayers, Jackie had joined the separate league for African American players. Although there were many talented players in the Negro Leagues, 

racism kept those players from joining the major all-white baseball teams.

Branch Rickey decided it was time that someone was brave enough to change this. He asked Jackie Robinson to play for the Montreal Royals.

Jackie and Branch Rickey shake hands after agreeing on a contract.
Many people dream of what it must be like to play a sport in a huge stadium full of cheering fans. For Jackie, this was a very different experience. Instead of cheers and praise, Jackie received hate mail and death threats. His wife and family were insulted, too. It was the hardest thing of all for Jackie to keep his cool and do nothing to defend himself.

“By giving in to my feelings then, I could have blown the whole major league bit. I swallowed my pride and choked back my anger.” —Jackie R.

Jackie stood tall and strong beneath the bright lights of the stadium as the angry crowd spat and booed. The crowd was full of hatred, and the other team’s players shouted insults at him. Even his own teammates didn’t want him there. It took all the courage and self-control he had not to fight back.

Jackie decided the best way to fight back was to play better than anyone else ever had. He kept his eye on the ball and vowed that no one would make him lose his temper.

Keeping Cool

Jackie withstood the pressure. Here he is congratulated for making a home run.
Jackie was true to his word. He ignored the hateful things people said about him. He simply kept on hitting the ball, stealing bases, and racing home to win, win, win for his team.

In time, people began to respect his courage, perseverance, and talent. They saw how Jackie always did his best, even in a bad situation. They saw past the color of his skin, and slowly began to change the way they thought about African American people.

“\[I had no right to lose my temper and jeopardize the chance of all blacks who would follow me if I could break down the barriers.\]”
—Jackie R.

Jackie won many awards during his time in the big leagues. After his first year, two other African American players were signed to play major-league baseball, along with others in basketball and football.

Jackie had broken down unfair social barriers and opened up opportunities for other athletes of color to play on professional teams. He changed American sports forever.
Fields of the Future

When Jackie Robinson retired from baseball after ten years in the major leagues, he went on to speak up for civil rights everywhere. He worked hard to change the way people thought and to make life better for others, and he did this in a nonviolent way. Because of the courage, dignity, and commitment he showed, Jackie Robinson became much more than a sports champion—he became a hero.

“Jackie Robinson made it possible for me in the first place. Without him, I would never have been able to do what I did.” —Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Many people have worked hard to help change unfair situations and bring about equal rights for all. They often had to stand alone and go against the crowd to fight for what they believed in.

Jackie Robinson helped pave the way for other great leaders in the battle for civil rights. He worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Reverend Jesse Jackson to help change society in a nonviolent way.
What If?

There were many times when Jackie Robinson wanted to fight back against the people who treated him so unfairly, but he didn’t. What if he had given in to his feelings? How might it have affected the fight for fairness and equality?

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