

Chapter 5

Jackie Robinson

Jackie Robinson was Grandpa's hero and so he was my hero, too.

"Sure, Jackie Robinson was a great player, a Hall of Famer, but he was an even greater man," Grandpa told me once during one of our long walks. Our walks weren't long, distance-wise, but Grandpa walked so slowly that they were long, time-wise.

Until Jackie Robinson came along, professional sports, baseball included, moved slowly too. The leagues were segregated. The best white ballplayers played in the Major Leagues for teams like the Boston Red Sox and the New York Yankees. The best black ballplayers, Satchel Paige, Josh Gibson, Cool Papa Bell, and Jackie Robinson, played in the Negro Leagues for teams like the Atlanta Black Crackers, the New York Cubans and Homestead Grays.

Grandpa said, "I saw a game right after the War, in 1946, between all-stars from the old Negro League and the Major Leagues. What a game it was! And what a shame too, to see such great stars, black and white, and to know that they could only play against each other on special occasions, to know that they couldn't play together on the same teams. What a crying shame!"

That all changed when Branch Rickey, the president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, chose Jackie Robinson to break the color barrier and desegregate major league baseball in 1947.

"That was even a whole year before the U.S. Army was desegregated," Grandpa told me. "And Jackie Robinson, he had served in that segregated army during the war. He was a lieutenant in a black unit. One time a white officer ordered him to the back of the bus. The back of the bus was where blacks were supposed to sit, but Jackie said 'no'. He just wouldn't do it. And so he was court-martialed. Jackie defended himself and all the charges were dropped. Later when he was discharged from the service, he joined the Kansas City Monarchs in the Negro League and played shortstop. What a player he was!"

Jackie Robinson had graduated from UCLA where he played four sports, football, basketball, track, and, of course, baseball.

"Yes, Branch Rickey picked Jackie Robinson because he was a terrific athlete," Grandpa said to me. "But he also picked him because he was educated, because he

was 28 years old, and because he'd seen the world and experienced racism. Mr. Rickey figured that Jackie could learn to not fight back when people called him names, and that Jackie could stand up to the ugliness and the hatred. Pitchers threw at Jackie's head. Catchers spit on his shoes. People in the stands called him awful things. He even got death threats. But Jackie Robinson answered all of the insults and violence and the injustice by playing baseball. It took awhile but he earned the respect of his teammates and his opponents, too. Sure he helped the Dodgers win six pennants in his ten seasons but what he really did was even better, he helped the country learn that blacks and whites could work together, play together. Yes, he changed baseball. But he helped us all change. That's not an easy thing. He helped us change."

"Hey there, Jackie Robinson," Grandpa said, startling me. "How's the math homework going?" It was a Wednesday afternoon and I almost never saw my grandparents on a school day.

Grandpa and Grandma lived in downtown Holyoke. We lived in West Holyoke just three miles away, although it seemed more like three light years away. My grandparents lived in an apartment block on Walnut Street. All of the streets around Walnut were named for trees - Oak, Pine, Elm, Maple, Locust and Chestnut. It was rather strange since the heart of Holyoke was mostly apartment buildings and storefronts. My grandparents didn't drive and my dad was working traffic duty so I knew that Grandpa had taken a city bus out to the woods of West Holyoke. Something was up.

"Do you have some time for a catch with your grandpa?" Catch with Grandpa wasn't really catch. My grandfather grew up in Ireland where he claimed that the only sport he played was running away from the nuns who ran the orphanage. Grandpa could catch the ball okay if I lobbed it to him but all of his throws were underhanded tosses. Still, I could never say no to Grandpa.

"That was some game Billy Rohr pitched the other day against the Yankees, kiddo," he said after one of his looping throws. Bill Rohr was a rookie hurler for the Red Sox. He took a no-hitter into the ninth inning at Yankee Stadium before Elston Howard, the first black ballplayer for the Yankees, lined a two out, 3-2 pitch to right field for a single. "And that was a spectacular catch by Yaz to keep the no-hitter going in the ninth." Yaz was Carl Yastrezemski, the left-handed hitting left fielder for the Sox. I knew that Grandpa didn't come out to Morris Heights just to talk about the Red Sox, even though he and I loved to talk baseball.

"Joey Mitchell says the Sox are just getting our hopes up, Grandpa. He bets we'll be in last place by the all-star break."

“Your friend Joey’s a Yankee fan, right?”

“Yup. Joey says that the only way he’d ever root for the Sox would be if he were unlucky enough to play for them someday.”

“Speaking of playing someday, are you still serious about playing little league baseball with the boys?” Grandpa asked.

“I don’t think Dad’s going to let me,” I said. “He got pretty mad the other night.”

“Well, kiddo, if you can get him to change his mind, there might just be a way for you to play.”

“Really?”

“Yesterday your Mighty Midget League president Dick Ford was in the Turn Hall. And your grandfather decided to work some of his Irish magic on him.”

“You bought him some drinks, right Grandpa?”

“Shh, kiddo, don’t let your mother hear you. Sometimes she acts like she’s my mother, too. Let’s just say the strength of the argument and your grandfather’s endless charm proved to be most persuasive. Now this Dick Ford fellow, he’s not generally what you’d call overly open minded, but he did promise that he would take it up with the league’s board of directors at their next meeting in two weeks.”

“But Grandpa, The Gas has try-outs the next two weekends. The team will be picked by then.”

“Yes, yes I know and since that’s the case, he said that you could go to the try-outs in the mean time, go out for the team, as long as we accept the final decision of the board of directors. He said he’d phone that Yankee lover Joey Mitchell’s father and explain the situation, clear the way for you to try out for The Gas.”

“That’s great,” I said. I dropped my glove and hugged my grandpa. “That’s terrific!”

“Well, I do have to tell you, kiddo, Dick Ford doesn’t think the board of directors will even have to make the decision.”

“Why’s that, Grandpa?”

“Because he doesn’t think any girl is good enough to make a team in the Mighty Midget League. Ah, but he doesn’t know my granddaughter. He doesn’t know our little Miss Jackie Robinson.”