

42

Robinson's legacy enduring and has lessons for today's youth

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Jackie Robinson's crossing of baseball's color line in 1947 was earth-shattering for his time, elevating the Brooklyn Dodgers Hall of Famer to status as the second most famous man in America after President Harry S Truman in that booming post-war year.

Those who appreciate history never tire of Robinson's story being told and dissected, as it was expertly by White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf and executive vice president Kenny Williams, along with Dr. Carol Adams, CEO of the DuSable Museum of African-American History.



The Jackie Robinson program panel includes (from left) moderator Richard Steele, Dr. Carol Adams of the DuSable Museum, White Sox chairman Jerry Reinsdorf and Sox executive VP Kenny Williams.

The program, "Jackie Robinson: A Catalyst for Change in American Society," was held at the U.S. Cellular Field's conference center on April 15, the 67th anniversary of Robinson's debut in the majors and a day declared in his honor throughout Major League Baseball. The Reinsdorf-Williams-Adams panel, moderated by veteran Chicago broadcaster Richard Steele, was witnessed by a capacity throng, the majority of whom were student-athletes from Kenwood Academy, King College Prep, Leo High School, Seton Academy and Simeon Career Academy.

Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, a Sox fan, gave introductory remarks after greeting many of the students. Sox royalty was represented by Minnie Minoso, who broke the Chicago baseball color line at Comiskey Park in 1951, and Sox assistant hitting coach Harold Baines. Sox infielder Marcus Semien and then-reliever Donnie Veal (designated for assignment two days later) were joined by first-base coach Daryl Boston.

But while all in attendance time-tripped to 1947, Robinson's debut and the atmosphere of our still-rigidly segregated country at the time, concurrent lessons for navigating a different society and economy were put forth to the high schoolers on hand by the panel.

Over the past few years, the Sox have had regular programs on history, including Dick Allen's 2012 return to Chicago, co-sponsored by the Chicago Baseball Museum, in the conference center. This session, however, was the first with a living witness to Robinson's career – Reinsdorf, 11 years old and debating the merits of Robinson the rookie with his Brooklyn buddies in '47.

Quinn opened the program with some perspective. He cited the wisdom of Hall of Famer Sandy Koufax, a Robinson Brooklyn teammate in 1955-56.

"He was a great ballplayer, but he was a better human being," Quinn said of Koufax's memoir.

The audience then witnessed a pivotal scene from the well-received Robinson biopic "42" in which Kentuckian Pee Wee Reese, knowing his Louisville relatives and their Southern attitudes were among the witnesses, puts his arm around Robinson at first base at Crosley Field in Cincinnati to show his acceptance of his teammate amid racial epithets hurled from the stands.

Jackie dealt with prejudice in Pasadena

Watching the movie scene, student-of-history Williams told the audience Robinson's trial-by-fire in '47, dodging the verbal brickbats, wasn't his first experience with racial taunts by any stretch. Even though Robinson's family had moved away from their origins in Jim Crow Georgia when he was young to Pasadena, Calif., he still experienced virulent racism in the intolerant society of pre-World War II/Depression years.

"In Pasadena, there were signs on the side of doors and windows saying we don't want any nigger patrons here," Williams said. "So he had those words that he heard coming from the stands...that was not the first time. He was prepared."

Williams told the story of Robinson almost walking off the football team at Pasadena Junior College after six Oklahoma recruits made racist comments at non-star African American teammates.



Impassioned about young athletes using their minds first to get ahead in life, Kenny Williams makes a point while Jerry Reinsdorf looks on.

“Jackie stood up for them at that time,” he said. “Those players ultimately changed their whole way of acting.”

Robinson was further toughened by going through a court martial as a U.S. Army second lieutenant (college graduates were typically given officers’ commissions in World War II) after refusing to step to the back of the bus at his Southern base.

Robinson would get a huge break from inbred racism after signing with the Dodgers in 1945. Integration impresario Branch Rickey purposely assigned him to multi-cultural Montreal of the International League. Robinson was treated as a hero in the Canadian metropolis. Then he broke into the majors in Brooklyn, a New York City borough with more than 2 million residents equal to one of the largest cities in the country. Brooklyn, immortalized in countless movies and literary works thanks to its artistic natives, was a real melting pot where different ethnic groups more easily socialized with one another than in most parts of the country.

Reinsdorf recalled witnessing Robinson don a Dodgers uniform for the first time in New York in a preseason game against the Yankees several days prior to his April 15 debut at Ebbets Field.

“The Dodgers had tied for the pennant the year before and lost in a playoff series to the Cardinals,” he said. “We were all hungry for a pennant. We had two rookies on the team – Jackie Robinson and a third baseman named Spider Jorgensen. I remember all we ever talked about is are these guys are any good and will they help us win the pennant?”



Sox legend Minnie Minoso (left) greets Sox infielder Marcus Semien (center) and pitcher Donnie Veal, who was designated for assignment two days after the Jackie Robinson event.

“Brooklyn was the perfect place for Jackie Robinson to come up. Race wasn’t an issue. My friends were all types of people. At 11 years old, it never dawned on me at the time. It first hit me when later in the year when I said to my friend Lester Davis, who was black, ‘Who was your favorite player?’ He looked at me like I was an idiot: ‘Well, Jackie Robinson, of course.’” That’s when it first hit me that Jackie was the only one (player of color).”

Robinson the nation’s sensation in ‘47

The panel did not go into the details of Robinson the positive cultural sensation, counter-balancing the negative comments, threats and discrimination as the Dodgers traveled the NL circuit. *The Sporting News* made sure their reporter got into Robinson’s

apartment the night of this debut for a one-on-one interview as print outlets clamored for profiles of the groundbreaker. The Dodgers set their Brooklyn attendance record of 1.8 million fans in '47. Robinson's first game coming through Wrigley Field drew a record paid crowd of more than 47,000, including tens of thousands of African Americans journeying to the North Side for the first time. Rickey reported some 3,000 offers of personal appearance and endorsements for Robinson deluging the Dodgers offices, and the fact he'd cut them off to avoid tiring out his prized rookie.

Reinsdorf wanted history to be portrayed accurately. Hollywood, of course, took liberties with the facts in "42." One scene had Robinson belting a pennant-clinching homer in Pittsburgh, and letting the cheers wash all over him. In reality, the homer was early in the game in Forbes Field and hardly dramatic. Another depiction of Robinson "Boswell" Wendell Smith first meeting the player in Florida as he traveled to spring training in 1947 was incorrect. Reinsdorf said he was "annoyed" by the detour from the facts.



Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn (left), a Sox fan, shares some small talk with Minnie Minoso.

"Wendell took Jackie and Sam Jethroe to the tryout in Boston in 1945," he said of the future groundbreaking sportswriter with Chicago's American and WGN-TV sportscaster. "Wendell had a lot to do with Rickey picking Jackie (as his first African-American signee)."

The African-American community, stirred to new standards of pride after hundreds of thousands had returned from wartime service, embraced Robinson and gained even more confidence, according to Adams in her role as historian.

"You had black men who had been around the world fighting for freedom, and still not experiencing freedoms at all (at home), the Jim Crow environment," she said. "The year before Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, six African-Americans were lynched.

"The community had so much pride in Jackie Robinson being able to make this step and be the first one. People would gather around to listen to these games much like they had been with a Joe Louis fight (a decade previously). It meant a lot to say, 'Hey, we are not just good in one arena. We step into a large arena, we are still good, we are still able to compete.' He provided a source of great pride. The way he carried himself also made that point he was stronger.

"He was no accidental figure. If you think about our history and the era of the Jackie Robinsons and Rosa Parks, they're no accidents. They're rarely the very first. They're

the ones who were elected to take that mantle of being the first because they could withstand the pressure. They could stand up and hear the things they heard, and still maintain their composure. Still focus, still have discipline and still move on. That is his lesson to us, to say the situation is now going to be equal. The situation is going to be careful, but you have to carry on. You have to carry on with dignity.”

Robinson’s story provides so many enduring lessons, not the least of which is the necessity of minority youths to possess both education and experience to handle opportunities when they are available.

Be prepared for when barriers fall

“You could prepare in any way you wanted to,” she said of the atmosphere of 1947. “No matter how much you prepared yourself, sometimes the opportunity wasn’t there. But people who really understood social change knew you had to be prepared for when it did change. You had to be prepared to walk through that door. You couldn’t decide well now I’ll go back and get education. You have to have it. You have to stay ready to get ready.”

Such a philosophy has been advocated by Williams for years, in many public appearances and through the Sox’s ACE program that combines both educational advocacy and monitoring with enhanced competition for high school baseball players. Williams will always encourage a kid’s baseball ambitions so long as they go hand-in-hand with a commitment to education.

“You’ve got to dream about it...as long as you’re (also) developing your mind to have options,” he said, reminding the youths in attendance of the long, long odds of making it in the entertainment and sports worlds.

“If you fail seven out of 10 times, you become an All-Star,” Williams said. “If you fail eight out of 10 times (Williams’ lifetime average in 451 games was .218), you become a young executive.”

When the floor was opened to questions, most were directed at Williams due to his long tenure as an acquirer of talent for the Sox. He heard the aspirations of some of the questioners, including Christian Medley, a King College Prep student. Medley’s strategy was to use his tennis abilities to get into Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he said he’ll likely major in finance. Williams liked what he heard, and left the panel for a second to bound up several steps to shake Medley’s hand. Medley has a 3.00 grade-point average and scored a 24 on his ACT test.



Christian Medley of King College Prep received an enthusiastic handshake from Kenny Williams. Medley plans to leverage his tennis skills for a business education in college.

Williams did not get a chance to meet Sirlaurence King, a junior at Leo High School. One of 18 Leo students attending with school president Dan McGrath, former sports editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, King also is doing it the Williams' way – using athletics as leverage to get an education. He has long-term goals of attending law school, after perhaps an undergrad degree in sports management. Athletically, King is running track and cross-country at Leo. He qualified for the state meet in cross country.

“That’s why I’m trying to keep my grades up, so I can hopefully get a scholarship,” King said. “Right now my GPA is 3.6, so I’m hoping to build that up by my senior year. I’m not satisfied ‘till I get the 4.0.”

If Medley and King study history even more closely, they’ll discover Robinson was prepared for even more opportunities after his 10-season Dodgers career ended. He became a business executive with the Chock Full ‘O Nuts company, was active in politics and the civil rights movement, and even broke a second color line – the first African-American network baseball announcer on ABC’s Saturday Game of the Week in 1965. The Chicago Baseball Museum possesses an extremely rare audio tape of Robinson’s work in the booth with Leo Durocher and Chris Schenkel from Sept. 6, 1965, and has made a duplicate copy for Robinson’s widow, Rachel Robinson.

Robinson’s legacy will stand the test of time. But will his style be adopted by young people who won’t chase the glamor of big-time sports in an era of barriers falling?

More changes and the destruction of prejudices are hopefully in the offing in upcoming decades.

“I wish I could come back in 100 years,” said Reinsdorf.



Sirlaurence King (left) of Leo High School, with Leo president Dan McGrath, will use his track and cross-country ability to book an education eventually leading to law school.