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Term Paper

College Athletics and Black Baseball: How Robinson and Doby Changed America's Pastime

Two players stand out as pioneers in the integration of major league baseball. While their accomplishments rested on various external decisions and some degree of luck, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby deserve credit as the first two athletes to break professional baseball's color line. Years before the victories of the Civil Rights Movement, "The duo confirmed, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Black men belonged in the major leagues" (O'Toole, 73). Such a feat, especially when carried out by former college athletes, calls for historical investigation. As the first black player in major league baseball, Robinson tends to receive more attention, but his career parallels Larry Doby's to an astonishing degree. This essay contends that both men played key roles in the integration of baseball, and that their prior involvement in college sports paved the way for such unprecedented success.

In 1939, Jackie Robinson enrolled at UCLA [University of California Los Angeles] as a transfer from Pasadena Junior College and quickly became one of their most dominant athletes. By competing in baseball, basketball, football, and track, "he became the first athlete in the university's history to letter in four sports in a single year" (Moffi and Kronstadt, 18). Strangely enough, he excelled at other sports far more than he did at college baseball. For instance, Robinson won the 1940 national long jump title (NCAA, 8), but in his only baseball season at UCLA, he "hit a paltry .097 and made 10 errors" (Bacon, 6D). His determination and athletic versatility helped him close the gap later in his career, but at the time he did not even consider the possibility of playing major league baseball.

Larry Doby was born in 1923, a few years after Robinson, but he actually became a

professional athlete long before Robinson did. Doby grew up in South Carolina and moved to New Jersey for high school, earning letters in those same four sports. Prior to high school graduation, Doby used the alias "Larry Walker" to compete "in his first professional baseball game with the Newark Eagles at Yankee Stadium" (Moffi and Kronstadt, 17). This sort of quiet, fearless excellence became a hallmark of Doby's career.

Thanks to his talent, Doby earned a scholarship to play basketball at Long Island University for their lauded coach, Clair Bee. A true academic, Doby balanced his time between visiting his high school sweetheart, playing basketball, and attending classes. Doby personified the image of the diligent, upstanding student athlete: biographers describe him as "a serious young man," whose main goal "was to get a college degree and return to coach at Paterson High" (Swaine, 27). This image was as important for Robinson's and Doby's addition to major league baseball as it was for early football players seeking institutional acceptance, but neither student knew it before World War II. Robinson left UCLA before graduating, and Doby moved to another school to begin his military career.

Doby transferred to Virginia Union College so he could complete an ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] program in one year and secure a favorable military assignment. Virginia Union also had prominent athletics; they competed against New York powerhouses like Long Island University and were known as "the LIU of black college basketball" (Moore, 24). New York became the epicenter of college basketball when diverse squads like City College competed at the NIT and NCAA tournaments. In Doby's era, however, the basketball promoter at Madison Square Garden "would not invite black college teams to perform there" (Moore, 24). Nonetheless, Virginia Union and its ROTC program brought Doby into the Navy, where he encountered overt segregation for the first time but proved his tenacity to future baseball allies.

When the Navy segregated its trainees by race, Doby felt persecuted. He later described this as his first direct confrontation with institutional racism: "'For the first time I was conscious of discrimination and segregation as never before'" (O'Toole, 56). Although he sensed racism in his college career and childhood, he "never dealt with it overtly, only by 'minding his place'" (Moore, interview). That a black sharecropper's son from South Carolina could live in this era without becoming jaded attests to Doby's resilience and courage. In an email interview, biographer Joseph Moore identified this as one of Doby's key attributes.

As Doby underwent military training, Jackie Robinson also drifted to the Army and experienced similar frustrations in 1944. More than a decade before Rosa Parks' civil disobedience, Robinson "refused a civilian driver's repeated orders to move to the back" (Bacon, 6D). The event escalated into a vocal argument, and Robinson faced court martial for the incident. He escaped with honorable discharge, but he left the military with no meaningful career prospects.

While Robinson left the Army and transitioned into the Negro Leagues, Doby followed his unit to Ulithi, a miniscule Pacific island used as a wartime supply depot. Ulithi gave him an opportunity to prove his potential to members of baseball organizations. He became close friends with Mickey Vernon, an infielder for the Washington Senators and director of recreation on the island. Vernon noticed Doby's talent, "prompting letters to his father and to Clark Griffith, the owner of the Washington Senators, reporting his observations" (Moore, 26). Griffith became an outspoken proponent of Doby joining the American League, telling the press that "'If anybody wants to sign a Negro player, that's fine and dandy. I wish the player and the club good luck'" (Moore, 44). These relationships were as important as athletic skill itself in breaking down barriers to participation.

During this period, Branch Rickey starting searching for black athletes to join the major leagues. Rickey identified himself as a political conservative, but his religious and moral beliefs compelled him to treat athletes as equal human beings. Fortunately for Robinson, "when Rickey sent his scouts to scour the nation for the best black player, [Monte] Irvin and Doby weren't even in the country, being otherwise occupied with World War II" (Swaine, 17). Rickey thus turned to Negro League rosters, where Jackie Robinson played for the Kansas City Monarchs.

College experience emerged as a major factor in Rickey's search. Instead of a pure baseball star, Rickey sought someone "educated, sober, and accustomed to competing with and against white athletes. Robinson met those conditions" (Swaine, 17). Without his college credentials, Robinson would not have stood out as a promising candidate, especially given his unfavorable dismissal from the military and hot temper.

Before Rickey made his decision in 1945, he brought Robinson to his office to test his discipline. He sensed Robinson's potential but appreciated the high stakes of his decision. He knew that skeptical white Americans would "judge the Negro race by everything he does" (Moffi and Kronstadt, 19). If Robinson failed, Rickey would inadvertently damage the case for integration and ruin his credibility as an advocate. Rickey sat with his recruit and simulated stressful scenarios Robinson might face as a Dodger to hammer home the importance of self-restraint. Eventually, "Jackie said, 'I've got two cheeks, is that it?' This scene over forty-five years ago assured Branch Rickey's success in this 'bold' move" (Rust, 58). Again, the college-cultivated ideals of intelligence and self-control proved central to the decision.

News of Rickey's decision reached Doby on Ulithi, though Jackie Robinson did not make his official debut until 1947. In the meantime, another baseball manager searched for black talent and recognized the importance of college. Bill Veeck, President of the Cleveland Indians,

worked with Abe Saperstein (famous for promoting the Harlem Globetrotters) and Wendell Smith to scout for candidates. Just like Rickey, Veeck emphasized character and intelligence: "'I had informed the scouts that I wasn't necessarily looking for the best player in the Negro Leagues, but the player with the best long term potential'" (O'Toole, 57). Doby played for a Negro League team called the Newark Eagles after the war and happened to fit the bill.

Just as Fielding Yost legitimized football by spotlighting sober, educated young men, the scouts sold Veeck on Doby as a candidate by pointing to his college career and sound character. They even "had the transcript of his grades" (Moore, 40) and confirmed that "Doby did not smoke, drink, or swear. He did not even drink coffee!" (Moore, 40). Most importantly, Veeck discovered that he could trust Doby in stressful situations. As Doby recalls in an oral history of his career, "Veeck was just as important to me as Branch Rickey was to Jackie Robinson. Veeck told me to curb my temper and to turn the other check" (Rust, 73). Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby thus share remarkably similar career trajectories, both set in motion by college athletics.

What happened next profoundly changed baseball and race relations. In a society with few integrated institutions, these players became future Hall of Fame members, with Robinson winning Rookie of the Year his debut season. Franchises observed the success of black athletes and opened the floodgates for dominant players like Satchel Paige and Monte Irvin. The two pioneers signaled to black athletes that they could succeed in such organizations. Yet as much as they inspired their peers, they also forced society "to focus their attention on the inequities of a system in which lily-white baseball was only one small symptom" (Moffi and Kronstadt, 22). White observers could no longer boast inherent superiority, and they could no longer ignore society's double standards.

Even as they settled into professional careers, Robinson and Doby promoted college

education. Robinson in particular "spoke of the necessity of education, of a day when many more ballplayers would have a college education" (Moffi and Kronstadt, 20). He saw education of all races as crucial to genuine understanding and reconciliation. Doby, on the other hand, finally achieved his original college goal of coaching a sports team. In fact, "Only a tiny percentage of the fans who know that Frank Robinson was the first black manager realize that Doby was the second . . . he ascended to that top management level with the White Sox" (Freedman, 110). Thanks to these two trailblazers and allies like Rickey and Veeck, baseball desegregated and became a stronger cultural institution.

Today, more than 60 years after Robinson's debut, racial equality remains a challenge for baseball. For instance, major league baseball continues to face criticism for its minority hiring practices. Commissioner Bud Selig claims "that he was content with the progress made under his leadership," (O'Toole, 149) yet the league only "has three minority GMs" (Rosenthal). Selig does require a minority consideration policy similar to the NFL's Rooney Rule, but critics call for stronger enforcement and concrete minority hires. Perhaps the league's struggles reflect prevailing racial disparities throughout the sport.

If the MLB [Major League Baseball] ultimately reflects society's divisions, then college remains a key battleground. Unfortunately, college baseball today lags behind its potential. College baseball currently has no black head coaches in Division 1. According to Gene Sapakoff, "Only 5 percent of NCAA college baseball players are black," (Sapakoff) and black participation has declined. For America's pastime to continue what started in 1947, all races need competitive opportunities, especially at the college level. Until then, Jackie Robinson and Larry Doby represent the best examples of athletes conquering racial barriers, in large part thanks to their involvement in college sports.

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