

# Nurturing urban players best Robinson tribute

By George E. Curry  
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This week kicks off what is to be an annual event: Every April 15 – the day Jackie Robinson is credited with breaking the color barrier in major league baseball – will be observed as Jackie Robinson Day Across the country, from Boston to San Diego, pre-game ceremonies will salute the late Brooklyn Dodgers star.

One of the 13 ballpark ceremonies was scheduled for Shea Stadium in New York, where Robinson's daughter, Sharon, was expected to participate.

"I have often stated that baseball's proudest moment and the most powerful social statement came on April 15, 1947 when Robinson first set foot on a Major League Baseball field," Baseball Commissioner Allan H. (Bud) Selig said in announcing the decision to honor Robinson each year.

The observance of Jackie Robinson Day every April 15 follows Major League Baseball's decision to retire his number (42) on the 50th anniversary of his entry into the league. Much of today's hoopla overlooks the indignities Robinson endured in order to open the doors for other African-Americans to follow him. And the indignities did not begin or end with Jack Roosevelt Robinson.

Actually, Robinson, who spent all 10 years with the Dodgers, was not the first African-American to play in the major leagues. In 1884, the Toledo Blue Stockings used two brothers – Fleet and Wellday Walker – in some games but it was met by stiff resistance.

Because of resistance from fans and some of the White players, the Walker brothers were released at the end of the season. However, Blacks continued to play in the minor leagues until 1898, the post-Reconstruction era in which every Southern state revised its state constitution to restore White supremacy.

Robinson ushered in a new era. And he was able to do that, in part, because he had been hand-picked to challenge America's all-White national pastime. He wasn't the best player from the old Negro League – Leroy "Satchell" Paige and Gosh Gibson were more powerful but were past their prime. And Don Newcombe and Roy Campanella, who entered shortly after Robinson, also had the talent to enter profes-

sional baseball in 1947.

Branch Rickey, the Brooklyn Dodgers official who had arranged the interracial experiment, wanted the spotlight to be on just one person for the challenge and felt that one person should be Robinson, a former football and track star at UCLA. Robinson paid off handsomely, winning the 1947 Rookie of the Year award and the 1949 National

League's Most Valuable Player.

Robinson died in 1972 of a heart attack. If he were alive today, he wouldn't recognize major league baseball. The most obvious difference, of course, is there are more Latinos than Blacks. There have always been great players over the years from Latin America – Roberto Clemente, Juan Marichal, Orlando Cepeda and Minnie Minoso.

But the number of Blacks in baseball has shrunk.

An article in Sports Illustrated last season traced the fading presence of Blacks:

• At one point, African-Americans were about 25 percent of major league players. By 2003, that had slipped to approximately 10 percent.

• In 1972, there were 15 African-Americans named to the All-Star team. By 2002, that figure has decreased to

seven – less than half;

• The Boston Red Sox did not have a Black starting pitcher or every day player for the first time since 1961, two years after they became the last professional baseball team to integrate.

"The decline of the Black ballplayer has coincided and most notably with the rise of the Latino player," the magazine reported.

The reason there is such a

growing influence among Latinos, is that Major League Baseball has a farm club. It spends \$600 million in scouting and development.

If baseball wants to find the future Jackie Robinsons, it needs to invest in urban areas like it does south of the border. That's the best way to honor his memory.

George E. Curry is editor-in-chief of the NNPA News Service.



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