

## RESOURCES

### Activity 1 Developing Self-Control

#### THE KEY TO THE GAME

Baseball Hall-of-Famer Jackie Robinson may not be the greatest player ever, but no one has had a more profound impact on our national sport. Robinson broke “the color barrier” and was the first African American athlete to play in the major leagues. He accomplished this feat not simply by his outstanding athletic skills, but also by going against his natural instincts. This proud and highly competitive man did it through self-control.

Jackie Robinson was born in 1919 in rural Georgia, the son of a sharecropper and the grandson of a slave. His father abandoned his family when Jackie was 1 year old. Seeking a new and different life, Jackie’s mother took Jackie and her other four young children across the country to Pasadena, California. As the first black family on a previously all-white street, the Robinsons had firsthand experience with racial prejudice.

While playing games in a nearby park, Jackie discovered a love for sport and developed into an aggressive competitor. Every game he took up—basketball, football, golf, track, and baseball—he excelled in. He played all these games with a full-throttle, all-out style. After high school, he went to a local junior college and then to UCLA, where he was the first student ever to letter in four sports and where his excellence gained him national attention. He also earned a reputation as a hothead, ready to fight any white man who insulted him or failed to give him his due. His aggressiveness and temper were moderated by two people: a young minister, Karl Downs, who brought him close to the church, and another UCLA student, Rachel Isum, who became his wife and lifelong partner.

After leaving college before completing his degree, the highly acclaimed athlete could find few outlets for his talents. However, his life and those of millions of other young men were changed by Japan’s bombing of Pearl Harbor and our nation’s entry into World War II. Jackie enlisted in the U.S. Army and was given a commission as an officer. He soon discovered that being a black officer was somehow inferior to being a white officer. Racial incidents began to plague him. Finally, on an Army base in Kansas, things came to a head. Having hurt his ankle on the baseball field, Robinson boarded a bus to the military hospital. The bus driver, contrary to Army procedures, ordered Robinson to move to the back of the bus. Robinson refused, and the driver called the military police, claiming Robinson was drunk and disorderly. He was subjected to a military court-martial, which gained wide attention. Once the facts came to light, Robinson was judged to have been completely innocent. In addition, his ankle injury was found to be bone chips, and Robinson was given an honorable discharge.

Somewhat at loose ends, Robinson accepted an offer to play in the Negro Leagues. While he starred on the field, the off-the-field life of finding hotels and restaurants that served African Americans frustrated and angered him. In the meantime, the war had ended, and many forms of racial prejudice—including baseball’s color barrier—were being attacked. Several baseball teams were cautiously looking for just the right black player, but were also afraid of the reaction of their white fans. One man, Branch Rickey, owner of the Brooklyn Dodgers, had the courage and the decency to take on the challenge that other teams shied away from.

Rickey was convinced of one thing, however: The first black player to integrate the major leagues had to be not only an outstanding ballplayer but also an outstanding human being. Whoever it was would be the target of taunts, racial slurs, and physical abuse, both on and off the field. He needed a superb athlete, but even more, a man of true character. He focused on Jackie Robinson and invited him to be part of what he called his “Noble Experiment.” Both spoke openly of what was in store for the first black man to break into the majors. Both spoke openly of Jackie’s past fights and racial conflicts. Rickey told Jackie that he would have to be under wraps for three years, absorbing the insults and injuries, but under no circumstances—either on the field or off the field—could he fight back with fists or words.

Jackie Robinson accepted the challenge, and there began one of the most noble chapters in the history of sports. Before a watchful nation, this handsome, dazzling athlete was the target of bean balls, flying spikes, threats, and a barrage of racial taunts. He quietly and with great dignity absorbed it all. He also starred at the plate, batting .297, and on the base paths, stealing 29 bases, and he won the Major League Baseball Rookie of the Year Award. Three years later he batted .346, had an incredible 124 RBIs (runs batted in), and stole 37 bases. That year Robinson led his team to the World Series and won the league’s Most Valuable Player award. The “Noble Experiment” was an overwhelming success, and Branch Rickey was certain that the major contributor was Jackie Robinson’s incredible self-control. And as they had planned three years earlier, Jackie was then free to let his aggressive style of play come to the surface. He was free to speak his mind and fight back when provoked. However, by this time much of baseball’s battle was over, and racial tensions had relaxed. A flood of talented black athletes came into the majors. By 1953, Rickey himself recruited three more black players, who all went on to become National League Rookies of the Year.

Jackie Robinson’s ability to control his temper, even in the face of blatant prejudice, led directly to his stellar baseball career. It also contributed to organized baseball’s acceptance of players of all races and nationalities. More than that, Robinson’s dignity and self-control in the face of injustice did much to end America’s shameful racial attitudes. All Americans owe a debt to one man’s self-control.