Athlete Biographies: Jackie Robinson

b. 1919, d. 1972.

Grandson of slaves, Jackie Robinson was born in Georgia and moved to Pasadena, California as a baby. At high school and at the University of California (UCLA) he lettered in football, basketball, baseball and track. In the army during World War II, he trained soldiers to drive army tanks but found that he encountered racism, which he actively resisted. When the war was over in 1945, Jackie decided to play pro baseball. Because at that time blacks were not allowed to play in the major leagues, he played with the Negro leagues. On long trips by bus, they often found that restaurants did not serve food to blacks and they had to eat outside. Then Branch Rickey, who ran the major league Brooklyn Dodgers, came up with a plan to integrate the major leagues. Mr. Rickey wanted someone who could stand up to taunts from bullies and racists and not lose his temper. Mr. Rickey said, "I'm looking for a ballplayer with guts enough not to fight back." When he started playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947, Jackie faced many tests and he passed them all, even when there were insults, name calling, balls pitched at his head and death threats.

With support from his wife Rachel, African American fans and eventually some of his fellow Dodgers, he was able to withstand the pressure and achieve great heights. In 1947, he was the National League MVP. His breakthrough into major league sports helped many Americans change their thinking and paved the way for many black athletes to come after him.

Jackie Robinson retired after the 1956 season and by that time, nearly every team in baseball had African American players and most pro teams in other sports also had black players. When he retired from baseball, he became active in the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) as a main speaker at fundraisers. He received the NAACP's Spingarn Medal for meritorious service to Black America. He also served as chairman of the Freedom Fund Drive, which aimed to raise $1 million for Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

In 1957 he wrote a letter to President Eisenhower encouraging the president to take action against Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who was trying to prevent integration of the Little Rock schools. He became active in politics at the national level supporting various presidential candidates. He also traveled with Reverend Martin Luther King to Birmingham, Alabama to work on civil rights issues.