



Episode 809, Story 1: Jackie Robinson Scorecard

Tukufu Zuberi: Our first case asks what this scorecard reveals about a turning point in baseball's segregated past. Spring, 1947: America's national pastime draws crowds in unprecedented numbers, offering a return to normalcy to millions after years of war. But one thing is about to change forever. On April 15th, 1947, Jack Roosevelt Robinson steps to the plate at Ebbet's Field, crossing a decades-old color line. But had Robinson broken this major league barrier six months earlier? Milwaukeean Jason Mishelow has a scorecard from a game that he thinks may record more than just at-bats and strikeouts.

Jason Mishelow: I wonder if this represents a gateway to a new era in baseball.

Tukufu: I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and I'm excited to see what Jason may have discovered.

Jason: Here's the program. If you turn inside what you see is a scorecard and it lists the two teams. The Robinson All Stars and the Major League All Stars.

Tukufu: Where did you get this?

Jason: I got it on an online auction site. It came from a collection of other programs from 1946.

Tukufu: So what do you know about this scorecard?

Jason: Well what I found really interesting is if you look at the names on Jackie Robinson's team, you see a lot of the black stars from the era. You see Monte Irvin, but they spell his name wrong. You see Larry Doby. But you also see white players listed. So this is a game where white and black players were playing on the same team.

Tukufu: Okay. What questions do you have for me?

Jason: What was the reason for this game? Was this a test for how integration was going to go in the following season?



Tukufu: All right. So I'm going to take the scorecard with me.

Jason: Great. Thank you so much.

Tukufu: Alright, Thank you. Let's see what we got here. Official Pirates scorecard. And here is our scorecard. I used to go to baseball games with my father and uncle when I was a kid and they definitely talked about Jackie Robinson. They talked about Campanella. Oh, here you go. The official team roster. This is for the Pirates. And it's for 1945. Since the stats listed are for the Pittsburgh Pirates' 1945 season, this game was likely played in '46. But what was the reason for this game? I'm headed to the National Baseball Hall of Fame, where Jackie Robinson's achievements are celebrated. His baseball career started in the Negro leagues in 1945. The following year, he was the first player to integrate the minor leagues and then the majors in '47. With the president officially desegregating the Armed Forces in 1948, and the Supreme Court desegregating schools in '54, baseball was ahead of its time. But how does our game fit into that historic change? Freddy Berowski is a hall of fame researcher. Okay. This is the card I mentioned to you. Have you ever seen anything like this?

Freddy Berowski: I have.

Tukufu: Freddy explains that this type of program would have been sold at concession stands in Pittsburgh's Forbes Field.

Freddy: I think we have one in our collection. If you like, I can get that and bring it out here.

Tukufu: Fantastic.

Freddy: Okay. I'm going to put on a pair of gloves--

Freddy: And this is our copy of a 1946 Pittsburgh Pirates program.

Tukufu: These two things look exactly the same. But his details the lineup of a New York Giants and Pittsburgh Pirates game. Ours is for the bout between the Major's and Robinson's teams.



Freddy: What you're looking at here is a set of All Stars which right off the bat indicates to me it's not a regular season game but an exhibition game, and it was quite common in the era before television and the internet, to have these major league players, team up and travel around the country and play in different cities, what they called them was 'barnstorming games.'

Tukufu: With salaries nowhere near what they are today, players would barnstorm in the off-season to make ends meet. Talk to me about the rosters of the two different teams.

Freddy: Starting with the Robinson's All Stars a couple of things really stand out to me. One is that there's four Hall of Famers.

Tukufu: Four?

Freddy: Four.

Tukufu: Okay.

Freddy: Yeah, you have Jackie of course, and then you have Larry Doby who was the first African American ball player in the American League about three months after Jackie.

Tukufu: So we have the first African American in the National League and the first African American in the American League on one team?

Freddy: On one team.

Tukufu: With two other Hall of Famers?

Freddy: That's right. Monte Irvin and Roy Campanella. One other thing I noticed is that you have a couple of players there, Al Campanis and Marvin Rackley, who were white ball players, playing with African- American ball players. Which was not something that was very common then.

Tukufu: Instead, Freddy explains, barnstorming games mostly featured all-white teams of Major leaguers playing against Negro league stars as an attraction in the days of Jim Crow.



Tukufu: So this is pretty unique?

Freddy: Yeah. And I see that in notation in pencil next to it, some of these players -- it says Montreal -- others it says Newark.

Tukufu: Freddy explains that Doby and Irvin were members of the Newark Eagles, a Negro league team. And "Mont." Stands for the Montreal Royals — the Brooklyn Dodgers' farm team, where players such as Jackie were seasoned for a possible move to the majors. Can you describe the Majors All Stars?

Freddy: Definitely some stars on the team. But there were no Hall of Famers.

Tukufu: The owner of this card believes that this game may have been put together in order to test the waters for the ultimate integration of major league baseball.

Freddy: I'm not really sure about that. For one, they were already integrated in '46, in the minor leagues. The Brooklyn Dodgers were already signing players like Robinson and Campanella and assigning them to their minor league system.

Tukufu: Now do you know much about this particular game? When it was played and all of that?

Freddy: I don't.

Tukufu: Freddy recommends I check local Pittsburgh papers to see if our game made any noise in 1946. I'm headed to the Carnegie Library to dig through the archives of Pittsburgh's black weekly — "The Courier". Here's our game. Jackie Robinson made his Pittsburgh debut in an impressive manner Tuesday afternoon at Forbes Field by leading his All Stars to a 6-4 triumph. So we know that our game was played 8, October, 1946. Let's see what else we can find. Robinson's All-Stars win 3 out of 5 games. So they played apparently in more than one city. But was the purpose of this tour to test the waters for the integration of Major League Baseball? Gerald Early is a professor and essayist who's written about race and baseball. Okay. This is the scorecard I was telling you about. What strikes you when you look at this card?



Gerald: The fact that this team is integrated is interesting. Particularly at this time when integration in the major leagues is a big issue. This moment is fraught with significance.

Tukufu: Gerald says one man in particular was a catalyst for integration — Brooklyn Dodgers president Branch Rickey, who saw the game changing potential of the Negro league players.

Gerald: His idea was, whoever could tap this first and get these talented players could get yourself a pennant winning team. The other thing about Branch Rickey was he felt it was wrong that black ball players were not permitted to play, so he was looking around for the right kind of person to do this and he happened upon Jackie Robinson in his scouting.

Tukufu: Can you talk about Jackie Robinson and what made him the person to integrate major league baseball?

Gerald: He had gone to college. He had played with whites before. He was a star athlete. He wasn't totally unknown to the American sporting public. The other interesting thing about Robinson was that Robinson had served in the military and had been court-martialed.

Tukufu: While stationed at Fort Hood, Texas, in 1944, Jackie refused to give up his seat and move to the back of a segregated bus. He was court-martialed for insubordination. So Jackie Robinson did basically what Rosa Parks would do later on for the Civil Right's movement.

Gerald: Branch Rickey wanted someone who had demonstrable race pride. The idea I think that Branch Rickey went into this with is that Robinson could, if he read his personality right, be a hero. And that's sort of what he was looking for. Was someone who could be a hero.

Tukufu: So how does Major League Baseball respond to Branch Rickey?

Gerald: When talk came about at the end of the 1946 season about promoting Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947 the owners voted 15-1 against him. The only person that was in favor was Branch Rickey. The other problem that Branch Rickey had was to get the other white players to be willing to accept this.



Tukufu: So was this scorecard used in a game that was testing the waters for the integration of Major League Baseball?

Gerald: Possibly. Possibly. It's not insignificant that you're going to have an integrated team playing this barnstorming game in Pittsburgh. You're talking about a very significant city.

Tukufu: Gerald explains that Pittsburgh's steel mills had produced jobs for African-Americans during both World Wars, and helped forge a center of black culture.

Gerald: It produced one of the major newspapers, Pittsburgh Courier. It produced not one, but two important Negro league teams. But also it's major because it's a Major League Baseball team here, the Pirates. So this is a good a place as any if you're going to, you know test out an integrated team to do it.

Tukufu: Tim Gay has written about barnstorming tours from this period. I meet him at PNC Park where the Pittsburg Pirates now play. This is the scorecard I was talking about. Have you ever seen anything like that?

Tim: I haven't. Not for an interracial exhibition game. This is very unusual.

Tukufu: Did the Dodgers organize this team?

Tim: It looks to me like Jackie himself organized it. It's clear from the way the group is kind of put together that Jackie did a better job approaching his fellow black players, and a less effective job in recruiting the best white ball players.

Tukufu: Why do you think that is? I mean didn't the Dodger organization have a vested interest in Jackie's future?

Tim: Yeah, they sure did. But I think they backed away from this because they felt that Jackie's Tour could not compete with the Feller-Paige Tour which was so much better financed and so much better promoted.



Tukufu: Tim explains that the “Bob Feller / Satchel Paige Tour” was a more traditional spectacle with white players on one side and black players on the other.

Tim: Bob Feller had been organizing and promoting his tour literally all season, for many months. Had the likes of Bert Hawkins, *Washington Evening Star* reporter, handling public relations and handing out special financial incentives to columnists both white and black. And Jackie just couldn't compete with that.

Tukufu: So more people came to the Feller-Paige game than came to the Majors-Robinson's game?

Tim: They were seasoned barnstormers. Jackie did not have that kind of barnstorming experience. And in fact one of the unfortunate facts about Jackie's tour in '46 is that he had to dip into his own money, the Dodger bonus money, to make payroll. It didn't work out quite as well as Jackie had hoped, and the other Negro leaguers had wanted it to be.

Tukufu: So what's important about our game?

Tim: I think Fay Young, the columnist for the *Chicago Defender*, explained to his readers back in '46 what made Jackie's tour so remarkable.

Tukufu: What Tim shares next gives Jason's scorecard its place in history. The game that your card records took place on the 8th of October, 1946. I tell Jason that the wheels of desegregation were already in motion before Jackie's all star team was up to bat. But the tour he organized in the fall of '46 would break new ground.

Tim: It's the first time that a racially integrated club had played in a Big League ball park, Chicago's Comiskey. That same thing is true, Forbes Field at Pittsburgh. It's literally unheard of for a racially mixed team.

Tukufu: Tim says Jackie's All Stars set the stage for his major league debut the following year at Ebbets Field.



Tim: It was also a very welcome stage for the likes of Irvin, Doby they both make the Major Leagues in the late '40's. They both become All Stars. They both become Hall of Famers. So the Robinson exhibition tour in '46 gave them an extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate just how brilliant they were to Major League scouts.

Jason: I think it just makes it so much more special for me to have, you know, this program played a very small role in breaking down a barrier. Thank you so much for doing this work

Tukufu: This is what we do and it's always a pleasure to do it. Thank you very much.

Jason: Thank you.

Tukufu: The slow decline of barnstorming started soon after integrated baseball made black and white bouts less of a novelty. Televised games brought superstars into the home and took fans out of the stands. By the 1960s, the increase in player salaries made the need for extra income obsolete, turning barnstorming tours into a thing of the past.