



The First Victory

When the baseball season opened in Jersey City on the Passaic River, it was always a big deal. Excitement crackled like fireworks in Roosevelt Stadium. Schools were shut down so the children could see the game. City workers got the day off. Today saw a sellout crowd of 25,000 under brilliant spring sunshine. The hometown Jersey City Giants were playing the Montreal Royals.

But this day—April 18, 1946—was even more electric than usual. World War II had just ended, and minor league baseball was being played again. All eyes today would be on a rookie player with the Montreal Royals. Some of the fans were thrilled to see him there, and some hated the very sight of him. But everyone sensed that history was being made today.

Twenty-eight-year-old Jackie Robinson, a tall, handsome man with black skin, was breaking the color barrier of baseball. He would be the first black man in the 20th century to play organized baseball. Up until now, no black athlete could

play, no matter how good he was at the game.

There was a big difference in the baseball crowd that day. The fans were not just from Jersey City. People had come from New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and places even farther away. Some white fans had come to see what would happen when a black man took the field for the first time. The many black fans had come to share in what was a proud moment.

The press box was packed, and there were many photographers around the field. When Robinson and his teammates marched to deep center field for the raising of the Stars and Stripes and the singing of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” black fans sang with more spirit than they had ever sung with before. It was as if the voices rose through their bodies in a great wave.

Jackie Robinson described his feelings at that moment with these words. He said he stood there watching the flag rippling in the sunshine “with a lump in my throat and my heart beating rapidly, my stomach feeling as if it were full of feverish fireflies with claws on their feet.”

Mayor Frank Hague tossed out the first ball. On wobbly legs, Robinson walked to the batter’s box. Robinson was pigeon-toed, and that made his step even shakier. A hundred thoughts rushed through his mind.

What would the crowd do when they saw this black man playing the national pastime of

baseball? Would there be violence? Would there be ugly scenes? The idea of blacks entering major league baseball had been violently opposed by many whites.

Jackie Robinson's wife, Rachel, was there in the stands. Would she be safe? Would some unstable racist take out his frustration on her? Rachel Robinson did not remain seated. She paced through the aisles nervously.

Robinson stood at home plate, forcing himself to focus on the game and not look out at the fans. He feared that the blacks would cheer him and the whites would yell insults or remain coldly silent, freezing him out. The crowd applauded politely, but not warmly.

Robinson's knees shook, and the palms of his hands were so wet with perspiration that he could hardly hold the bat. He did not swing at the first pitches, but then he hit a bouncing ball to the shortstop, who easily threw him out. No matter: the ice had been broken. As Robinson hurried back to the dugout, light applause greeted him. He had made his first appearance, got his bat on the ball, and the world, at least, had not ended.

The first inning was scoreless. Robinson did not bat again until the third inning. With two runners on base, Robinson knew he had to calm down and focus. The Jersey City pitcher was determined not to be the first pitcher to give up a hit to Robinson. But Jackie was more determined.

On the very first pitch, Jackie made contact, and he sent the pitch soaring far over the left field fence 330 feet away—Robinson had hit a three-run homer. Then Robinson loped around the bases, a smile at last breaking the grim look on his face. When he rounded third, he passed close to his team's manager, a Mississippian who had vigorously opposed a black player on the team. The manager had even said, in all seriousness, that black people were not real human beings. But now the manager looked into Robinson's eyes as he ran by. Then he reached out and gave Robinson a pat on the back.

The players in the dugout stood to greet Robinson. Many of Jackie's teammates gathered around him to pat him on the back or shake his hand. From that very first home run, teammates who had not been sure about how they felt about Jackie were won over. A few would remain cold toward Jackie, but most of Jackie's teammates were glad to have him on their team. "This was the day the dam burst between me and my teammates," Jackie later wrote. "Northerners and Southerners alike, they let me know how much they appreciated the way I had come through."

In the fifth inning, the score was 6–0 with the Royals on top. Robinson laid down a perfect bunt and raced to first ahead of the throw. He stole second and went to third on a groundout. The Giants brought in a relief pitcher, Phil Otis.

Robinson teased him by pretending to be racing to home plate, then stopping and running back to third. On Otis's next windup, Robinson again made a move toward home, causing the pitcher to stop his pitch mid-throw. Immediately, the umpire called a balk—an illegal motion by the pitcher—and Robinson was automatically awarded home. It was dramatic trickery, and the fans loved it! They had never seen such daring base-running as this. The stadium now exploded with screaming, laughing fans, clapping and stamping their feet at the show. Even the Giants fans seemed to share in the amazing moment.

In the seventh inning, Robinson singled sharply, stole another base, and scored on a triple. The Royals' lead jumped to 10–1. In the eighth inning, Robinson bunted his way on base, then scrambled from first to third on an infield hit. His base-running brilliance led the Royals to a 14–1 victory. As soon as the game ended, children streamed from the stands, flowing toward Robinson like a river. Black and white youngsters wanted to get his autograph, or just to touch him. “Color didn't matter to fans,” Jackie observed, “if the black man was a winner.”

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, in a front-page headline, said Robinson stole the show in his five trips to the plate. He had gotten four hits, including the three-run home run, scored four times and driven in three runs. He had also stolen two bases.

Joe Bostic, writing in the *Amsterdam News*, said, “Baseball took up the cudgel for democracy and an unassuming, but superlative Negro boy ascended the heights of excellence.”

Jackie Robinson had triumphed in his first outing in regular-season organized baseball. But it was only the beginning. He knew he had won an important victory in the first battle, but the war would not be won for a long time. There were many people in baseball who did not want him there, and he knew it. In the weeks and months and even years ahead, there would be moments of humiliation and danger. There would be pitches aimed at his head and spiked shoes cutting into his ankles and shins. There would be spittle on his shoes and the ugliest of racial slurs in his face. There would even be death threats. Robinson knew he would need every ounce of courage and self-control he had in order to endure. But it was going to be worth it. He had made up his mind to be the trailblazer. He was determined to open baseball to a long line of talented young black men who would come after him, men who had been denied their chance before. And he would be the man at the front of the line.