Jackie Robinson's accomplishment reached beyond the seats

by Michael Kinsman

The rejuvenation of Jackie Robinson's spirit on the 60th anniversary of breaking the color barrier in baseball sadly shortchanged an important aspect of his achievement.

What Robinson accomplished wasn't so much a baseball feat as it was a crucial civil rights breakthrough for all Americans.

He was a great baseball player, yet none of his accomplishments on the diamond can compare with what he did for society.

Robinson showed us in definitive terms that blacks were the equal of whites in every aspect. He showed exemplary character and courage as a knockout punch to racism.

It seems rather miraculous today that our society would have even questioned that six decades ago. But it clearly did.

What Robinson did took courage, compassion, vision, confidence and perseverance to prove a point that should have already been accepted by everyone.

And, probably no one could have done this the way Robinson did.

A black player who wanted to play in the all-white national pastime put his every move on display. Everyone was a witness to this history.

Robinson could have had the same character attributes, but had he been a plumber, a teacher, an insurance salesman or a Wall Street broker, the impact he made would have been obscured.

Instead, he was a baseball player, playing in front of tens of thousands of people each day who saw an eyewitness account of his talent. Millions of others read about his exploits on the baseball field in newspapers and magazines, or listened to radio broadcasts.

He was a living and breathing monument to U.S. civil rights.

Consider that when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers on the field in 1947, it would still be seven years before the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed separate schools for whites and blacks; eight years before Rosa Parks sat in the white section of a Montgomery, Ala., school bus; 16 years before Martin Luther King Jr. made his "I Have a Dream" speech; and, 17 years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Robinson used his workplace - a baseball diamond - to leverage social change. He was successful in showing everyday Americans how unfairly blacks had been treated and why they deserved fair treatment.

Robinson's favorite saying was "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives."

Try on that phrase today. Take it with you everywhere you go. Take it to work and play. Take it home with you at night.

Jackie Robinson didn't impact a few hundred white guys who played baseball. He had an impact of every American of his generation and every American since. His life had immense importance, and now the lives of each of us needs to carry that forward by fighting racism anyway we can.

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