

# Historica Canada Education Portal

## Jackie Robinson

### Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the [Heritage Minute, "Jackie Robinson."](#) Robinson was one of the great athletes of the century, and in 1946 he made history by becoming the first African-American player with the Montréal Royals. This marked the beginning of the end of the colour barrier in major-league baseball.

### Aims

The main focus of this lesson is for students to discuss the nature of Robinson's courage, and write about someone who has shown similar courage or taken personal risks. Students will also consider the relationship between sports and social change.

Students will write short biographies of athletes focusing on one incident in their lives, and essays that discuss the role of sports in society.

### Activities

#### A Matter of Courage:

The Minutes tell the stories of many courageous people. Jackie Robinson faced hatred, ridicule, and threats of violence to help make a significant change in his society. Students sometimes doubt that an individual can make a significant difference, but the Jackie Robinson Minute, like others in the series, claims that they can.

Before you watch the Minute, ask students to name people they consider to be brave. (The people may be characters in movies or books, as well as historical figures.) Can the students explain why they think of them as brave? Ask your students to consider the question: "What do the people risk by their actions?" Do they risk losing their lives? Do they risk embarrassment or shame? Do they take the risk for a good reason?

- Watch the Minute, reminding the students of the discussion about bravery.
- Discuss Jackie Robinson and the Minute. You may need to fill in some of the ballplayer's story, particularly the taunts, threats, and racial slurs he endured. Students may be interested that Branch Rickey (the Dodgers' General Manager) made Robinson promise not to react to any of the abuse he received. Rickey believed that the first black player in the Major Leagues would have to be a model of restraint as well as an outstanding athlete. Robinson agreed. Once, Rickey even used the most hateful, racist language in a private meeting with Robinson to see if Robinson could hold his temper.
- What risks did Jackie Robinson face? What was his purpose in taking the risk? With what other heroes could you compare him?
- Have students write about someone they think showed bravery. Use the concepts of risk and purpose in the short paper.
- Open discussion topics: Sports as vehicle for social change. Robinson as part of American civil rights movement. Any Canadian

examples? Does it really work? Are there special conditions (like Robinson's) that make it effective? What other ways can minorities change prejudices about them, publicly win admiration and respect? Is there a risk of feeding the stereotypes (entertainment, etc.)

### **A Biography in Brief:**

The Jackie Robinson Minute takes one incident in the life of the athlete and civil rights champion to demonstrate his character and contribution.

- After viewing the Jackie Robinson Minute, discuss Jackie Robinson's role in desegregating baseball, facing criticism and hatred with courage and dignity.
- Discuss the way the Heritage Minute focuses on one brief section of the athlete's life to present a coherent story.
- Have students research the lives of other athletes or historical figures. Concentrate the research on short biographical sketches. Tell the students to find one incident in the life to retell.

In writing their account of one event in their subject's life, instruct them to:

- set the scene and establish the situation;
- describe the character physically with pertinent details;
- reveal the character's personality through his or her actions;
- use descriptive language to vividly present the action;
- establish a coherent beginning, middle, and end.

### **How important are sports?**

The story of Jackie Robinson is often cited as an example of sports taking a lead role in promoting social change. Robinson broke the baseball colour barrier in 1946 in Montréal (1947 in the Major Leagues). Critical developments in the US civil rights movement occurred in the early 1950's. Since those days, professional sport has become multiracial. It has also become very big business. Sports form a large part of the enormous entertainment industry. Individual athletes earn incredible salaries, and the elite stars make much more in product endorsements.

Poll the class to see how many students would consider themselves "sports fans." Informally, discuss what sports they follow, which teams they like, and who their favourite players are.

A much-discussed topic about sports is whether players deserve the huge salaries they are making. How do members of the class feel about the topic? Are the salaries justified by the big revenues that owners make? Do students understand professional sports as a commercial industry like any other?

If they have not already watched it, view the Jackie Robinson Minute, noting the time (1946) and place (Montréal), and the situation of the first African American player to compete in "white" professional baseball. After viewing the Minute and discussing the action, ask students whether professional sports as it exists today can still be an agent of positive social change. (Students may mention the opportunities that sports offer young black and Latino athletes. Others may counter that professional models actually focus aspirations too tightly and unrealistically. Some may cite the charitable work athletes and leagues provide. Others may claim that these are only promotional devices. Students may criticize the

