



Branch Rickey: Baseball's Lincoln

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In this detailed historical narrative, Benjamin Verser recounts how religious, social, and personal variables allowed visionary manager Branch Rickey to help breach the color barrier in baseball when he recruited Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers. This essay was written for History Methods with Dr. James Finck.

“**J**IM CROW BASEBALL MUST END,” read a headline in a 1936 issue of the *Daily Worker*.¹ Major League Baseball had long been a segregated institution when Jackie Robinson appeared on the Brooklyn Dodgers’ roster in 1947. As early as 1933, it was becoming obvious that baseball would one day have a black player, but there first had to be an owner willing to make the groundbreaking move. Black newspapers called this man the Abraham Lincoln of baseball: he would set the black athlete free.² There had to be someone with the conviction, demeanor, reputation, and commitment to change such an established institution. That man was Branch Rickey, the general manager and part owner of the Brooklyn

¹ *Daily Worker*, August 16, 1936.

² *Chicago Defender*, August 27, 1933.

Dodgers. He pulled off this move amid criticism from the mainstream press and accusations of communist sympathy. Rickey was able to integrate baseball because he was driven by his religion, his history of innovation in baseball, and his cautious commitment to the process.³

Rickey always had an adamant desire to integrate baseball. Before going to work for the Dodgers in 1943, he was the manager for the St. Louis Browns/Cardinals. In a speech, he expressed his disdain that blacks could not play, or even buy a ticket for the main seating areas of St. Louis's stadium. He told listeners the only reason he never brought in black players was because he was not an owner of the team. Managers do not have the ability to sign players, they only make game-time decisions. Based on this statement from Rickey, his desire to integrate could have gone back to as early as 1913, when he first accepted a position within the St. Louis Brown's organization.⁴

Although a desire to integrate was present early in his career, Rickey would not get a formal opportunity to even explore the possibility until 1945. This was the year a committee was formed to supposedly search for a player to break the color barrier. Tryouts were held, but the players were ultimately all dismissed. Rickey had two players show up at his stadium demanding a tryout without telling him beforehand that they were coming. He did not want to turn down the tryout because he was in favor of integrating, but he was not going to sign just any player. He wanted to bring in the player

³ Chris Lamb, *Blackout: The Untold Story of Jackie Robinson's First Spring Training* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 2004, 47.

⁴ Lee Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 63, 319; Branch Rickey, "One Hundred Percent Wrong Club' Speech" (speech, Atlanta, January 20, 1956), Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/jackie-robinson-baseball/articles-and-essays/baseball-the-color-line-and-jackie-robinson/one-hundred-percent-wrong-club-speech/>.

he chose, only after he had finally looked at enough players to make an informed choice.⁵

The famous manager had experiences with interracial teams before getting to the major leagues. The most famous story of Rickey encountering racial prejudice occurred in 1904. While coaching baseball at Ohio Wesleyan University, his team travelled to Indiana. Rickey had a black player on his team who was not allowed to get his own room in the same hotel as the white players. Rickey decided to put the player in his personal room on a cot rather than send him to another hotel. The whole experience left a strong impression on the young coach. He later recalled that the black athlete broke down and cried while scratching his skin, as if trying to change its color. This was one of the most influential moments in Rickey's growing passion for breaking down baseball's color barrier. He wanted all of his athletes to have an opportunity to succeed not only as players, but as men in the real world.⁶

While experiences like these clearly drove Rickey's desire to integrate, he had an even earlier influence: his religion. He was widely known to be a pious man, most notably for refusing to go to Sunday games as a player, coach, owner, or even spectator. He was almost kicked off of his first major league team only a few days into his career because he refused to show up to play on Sunday games. This religious devotion carried over into his views on race and how it should be treated in the baseball world.⁷

Faith can be one of the greatest influences to persuade men to break tradition and cultural norms. As a devout Christian, he felt one of his responsibilities was to fight for the rights of all men, not just those like himself. He said in a speech that all men are equal in the sight of God, and it was his job as a Christian to make them so in

⁵ Lamb, *Blackout*, 35.

⁶ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 23.

⁷ Lamb, *Blackout*, p. 105; Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 25-27.

society. The place he had the most influence on society was in organized professional baseball, so that was where he was most active. Baseball needed Rickey's religious conviction if it was ever going to break the strongholds of segregation and prejudice. Rickey came to this religious devotion by way of his parents. Both his mother and father were pious people, so much so that they named their son "Wesley Branch." The name Wesley was to pay homage to theologian John Wesley. The name Branch was in reference to several biblical scriptures, like John 15:5 when Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches."⁸

Integration was not Rickey's first venture in political activism. He was a strong proponent of prohibition. Rickey was very active politically and was involved in many organizations and movements. This political activism was pushed by his religious conviction, just as his baseball activism was. He didn't separate personal belief, baseball, and politics. Rickey said he could not face God knowing that all His creatures were not equal in baseball. Rickey believed God used this sport to give him purpose and a livelihood, so it would be a disgrace for him not to work to make baseball the way God would want it to be. Baseball needed a man who sought integration out of divine instruction, not only political, or even moral, idealism.⁹

Rickey certainly believed he had received divine instruction. He believed this, first, because he had the ability to push integration in baseball, and he said God doesn't call people who cannot execute his plan. Secondly, his friends had confirmed the call God placed upon him to integrate. Third, he had the opportunity. Rickey felt that his position in baseball was another sign that God wanted him to make this move. These three things combined were what constituted, for

⁸ Rickey, "One Hundred Percent Wrong Club"; Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 15-16.

⁹ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 41-43; Tim Cohane, "A Branch Grows in Brooklyn," *Look*, March 19, 1946, 72.

Rickey, divine revelation. With this realization about his life, nothing was going to stop him from achieving his goal.¹⁰

Although Rickey had the necessary religious conviction, he still needed a conducive culture to bring in a black baseball player. His timing was key to this whole endeavor's success. In the same year Jackie Robinson was introduced by the Dodgers, the *Pittsburgh Courier* released an article saying, "this is a movement that can't be stopped by anyone... They may be able to detain it for a little while, but not for too long. The world is moving on and they will move with it, whether they like it or not."¹¹ The *Pittsburgh Courier*, at the time, had a larger subscription base than any of its competitors. Since they were a leading voice pushing for the integration of baseball and other civil rights, several hundred thousand people were apparently supporting this cause. Despite this, not many major newspapers were supporting integration.¹²

The few newspapers who were vocal about integration undeniably played a major role in preparing the baseball fan-base for colored players. They had been slowly suggesting the idea until they were finally outright demanding progress. This softening of the topic was needed so Rickey's announcement would not be as big of a shock. The newspapers alone could not integrate baseball, however. No matter how many reporters pushed for integration, there still had to be someone willing to make the move. Rickey utilized the growing idea that baseball would one day be a multicolored sport at the professional level. He even used the same reporters who had been covering the topic for decades to start rolling out information.¹³

Newspapers alone were not enough of a base for Rickey to make integration successful. For decades, black athletes had been succeeding in college team sports and individual sports worldwide.

¹⁰ Rickey, "One Hundred Percent Wrong Club."

¹¹ *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945.

¹² Lamb, *Blackout*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

Robinson himself acknowledged that he owed a lot of his success to those black athletes who went before him, especially to those who had tried to break baseball's color line before him. Athletes like Olympic sprinter Jesse Owens in the 1936 Berlin Olympics proved that blacks could compete on a world stage just as well as white athletes could. Joe Louis proved that they could even compete head to head with whites and be world champions when he defeated James Braddock for the heavyweight boxing championship.¹⁴

One could argue that with these breakthroughs, baseball would obviously follow suit. The issue was that these events all took place in individual sports, not organized team sports. In team sports, the player had to not only be a competitive athlete, but also a teammate. This was just another obstacle Rickey tackled carefully and intellectually. The cultural progress, no matter how helpful it was, still left a major hole that Rickey had to fill. He did this by bringing in a player with a history of success in organized sports with white teammates and competitors. Robinson had been a star football, basketball, and—ironically, to a lesser extent—baseball player. Bringing in this accomplished star helped Rickey combat claims that a black player could not be a worthy teammate to whites. He was systematically doing away with objections raised against integration.¹⁵

The political culture of the 1940s was surprisingly helpful to Rickey in the integration process. American politics were certainly not racially equal, but Rickey took what little progress had been made and used it to his advantage. New York, and Brooklyn in particular, was progressive in racial equality compared to most of America. Councilmen in the aforementioned communities had been calling for baseball to integrate for some time. In 1945, the New York legislature passed the New York Fair Employment Practices Com-

¹⁴ *Baltimore Afro-American*, November 3, 1945; Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 355-356.

¹⁵ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 356

mission. This was meant to ensure that blacks were not discriminated against in hiring simply for their skin color. Rickey never signed a black player to stay compliant with state law, he realized he now had legal support for his decision.¹⁶

The social temperament of blacks in America during the 1940s also helped Rickey justify his move. Blacks who fought in World War II expected to be treated better at home, but they instead returned to the same humiliation and discrimination. They began to push for the equal treatment they were promised in the Constitution because they had just fought and died for that Constitution. Again, the *Pittsburgh Courier* was vocal: “those who were good enough to fight and die by the side of whites are plenty good enough to play by the side of whites.” This sentiment perfectly encapsulates the sentiment of 1940s black America. If they could go to war with whites, they could play a game with them as well.¹⁷

The NAACP had its “Double V” campaign in full force by this time. They were fighting for victory in war and victory at home. The United States was fighting against a white supremacist group in Europe yet displayed many of enemy’s tendencies at home. Rickey was aware of this. He knew that this campaign at its height would help his movement because it would be hard for opponents to fight integration without being hypocritical. Rickey’s choice to introduce his new player so soon after World War II was one reason for its success. He understood that the culture surrounding the war and black veterans would make his decision not necessarily easier to accept, but harder to fight back against. He was able to take a society that was moving toward integration, but would never quite get there, and push it into reality with precise timing.¹⁸

¹⁶ Lamb, *Blackout*, 35; Bill L. Weaver, “The Black Press and the Assault on Professional Baseball’s ‘Color Line,’ October, 1945-April, 1947,” *Phylon* 40, no. 4 (1979): 304.

¹⁷ *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 3, 1945; Lamb, *Blackout*, 6.

¹⁸ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 351; Weaver, “Black Press,” 304.

While most social aspects of culture were beneficial to integration, much of baseball culture was still in opposition. Segregation in baseball goes back to the mid-1880s, when baseball's establishment developed a gentleman's agreement that solidified the color barrier. Over the following sixty years, this agreement became more fortified until it was virtually immovable. Many blacks challenged the barrier over those years and questioned what kept them from playing. There was no official rule in Major League Baseball keeping blacks from playing. The team's owners made the decision of who played for their team. The idea that there was a rule barring blacks came about because managers would shift blame from themselves by erroneously claiming a rule prevented them from signing blacks.¹⁹

Almost everyone in baseball danced around the question of why there were no black players rather than just give the honest answer that they simply did not want them there. Executives sometimes claimed they wanted to sign blacks, but players and managers refused to have colored men on their team. Players and managers claimed they would not be opposed to having blacks by their side, but executives just had not signed any. No one wanted to take blame, but owners appear to have been the main problem. In 1933, a New York Baseball Writers Association meeting brought forward the question. Only one person who was present, New York Yankees manager John McGraw, said he was against integrating baseball. Several prominent players and managers said they had no issue with potentially having colored teammates. Even though they supported the idea, there needed to be an owner brave enough to sign a black player.²⁰

One reason baseball stayed segregated was that many major white newspapers pretended like there was no color line at all. Newspapers like the *Pittsburgh Courier* that opposed baseball's seg-

¹⁹ Lamb, *Blackout*, 26; *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 18, 1933.

²⁰ Lamb, *Blackout*, 17-18, 32-34.

regation were in the minority. Like many in the baseball establishment, the majority of the sports media liked segregation and didn't want to lose it. However, they still tried to portray baseball as representing the American Dream. Baseball was a national unifier, so it became part of the American narrative in postbellum society. The idea that any man could come into the major leagues, no matter their size or background, and be successful perfectly represented the American Dream. The only problem with this was that every man could not succeed. Blacks were not given the opportunity. To cover this exception, the media chose to pretend like the color line didn't exist. Blacks could play in the major leagues if they were good enough, so the reason they weren't there was because they hadn't risen to the Dream. This narrative countered the left's media that was pushing for integration and made their efforts much less productive.²¹

A surprising player in this conversation, mostly from the media aspect, was communism. Communist papers pushed for equality for blacks, including baseball. Because baseball was such a popular pastime, they believed this was a good place to push their message. Instead of helping the cause, in many ways it did more harm than good. Most Americans avoided associating themselves with communism. Branch Rickey was no exception. He was a strong conservative, so, while he wanted as much support as possible from media, he didn't want to associate this movement with communism. For one, he disagreed with the economics and politics, and for another, he feared it would hurt the cause's credibility. He didn't want the integration of baseball to be seen as communist propaganda.²²

The media pretended there was no color line, baseball's establishment shied away from answers, and reporters called Rickey a communist. Along with these problems, Rickey also had to deal with personal problems in the media. Rickey was not a popular man with

²¹ Lamb, *Blackout*, 30-35.

²² *Ibid.*, 30-32; *Daily Worker*, August 16, 1936.

the mainstream media. He had a history of being criticized by the media because he constantly went against baseball tradition and norms. With new reports of Rickey wanting to sign a black player, the criticism came all the more. Of course newspapers didn't want to appear racist, even at this time, so they discredited Rickey's efforts. They questioned whether Rickey really intended to sign a black player. Reporters also questioned his motives, as will be discussed in detail later.²³

As the *Columbia Daily Spectator* said, the Brooklyn Dodgers under Rickey had always broken normal procedure in baseball.²⁴ Dating back to his college coaching days, Rickey liked to use new methods of teaching the fundamentals of the game. Often this was met with harsh criticism, especially once he reached the major league level. His methods were called theoretical and unsuccessful, despite his knack for improving players. No matter how often he was criticized, he knew what made good ball players, and he stuck to those methods. Rickey liked to take young players and develop them into great athletes rather than pay for already developed players. He liked giving players a chance to prove themselves, another reason he wanted to see a black player succeed in baseball. Many of Rickey's innovations are still used in baseball today. Integration would be no different.²⁵

Resistance was something Rickey was never short on, especially when it came to signing Robinson. Members of the media, especially the aforementioned who already disliked Rickey, called the signing a publicity stunt. Rickey had always been a man of flare who sought to promote his teams. This made his decision an easy target. The negative press claimed he knew integration was inevitable, so he rushed to be the first to do it. They made him out to be a man only

²³ Lamb, *Blackout*, 30-35.

²⁴ *Columbia Daily Spectator* (New York), October 26, 1945.

²⁵ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 68-70; Dan W. Dodson, "The Integration of Negroes in Baseball," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 28, no. 2 (1954): 74.

after fame and reputation, not progress for men's equality. Challenges to his morality were probably what bothered Rickey the most. Despite this, he continued with his personal mission at the cost of his reputation.²⁶

The legality of Robinson's signing with the Dodgers was also challenged. Reporters said Robinson was still under contract with a Negro League team when Rickey began paying. This story took over headlines of white newspapers. Rather than covering Robinson's chances of making history, they smeared Rickey again. This was a face-saving way for the media to criticize the signing. Robinson himself actually wrote a letter to Rickey in order to assure him he was not under contract with a Negro League team and everything had been done legally.²⁷

Other papers took a look at the legal system's effect on Rickey's decision. They said he signed Robinson merely because he wanted to stay compliant with the state's new anti-discriminatory laws. He didn't really believe Robinson could succeed, and he didn't care if blacks made their way into baseball. Again the press challenged Rickey's morality and smeared his reputation, but that was not reason enough to break his resolution.²⁸

The media was not the only thorn in Rickey's side throughout this process. Many within baseball also objected to a black joining the league. While most executives and managers at this point refused to comment on the signing or the presence of a color barrier, many Southern ballplayers were vocally against the move. Rogers Hornsby completely objected to integration, saying he didn't think Southern players should be forced to travel with black players. He felt the races should not be mixed, especially against whites' will.

²⁶ Lamb, *Blackout*, 118-121.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 52-53; Jackie Robinson to Branch Rickey, July 13, 1946, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/collections/jackie-robinson-baseball/articles-and-essays/baseball-the-color-line-and-jackie-robinson/transcription-of-letter-from-jackie-robinson-to-branch-rickey/>.

²⁸ Lamb, *Blackout*, 51-52.

Other players like Dixie Walker were content with Robinson playing, but only if he played for Montreal. Walker didn't want a black player on his team or a team he played against. Fans actually booed Walker when he came to bat against the Dodgers after making those comments. Players often gave more opposition than fans. When Rickey was asked about player's objections, he said he pays players only to play, and he will handle choosing *who* will play.²⁹

While most managers were silent on the issue, some were vocal in their opposition. Those who did speak out were very strong in their criticism of Rickey. At a Baseball Writers Association meeting, one manager gave a speech that attacked Rickey and claimed he ruined the sport. Owners also attacked Rickey, but not as openly. They instead caused him problems with scheduling and policy-making affairs. Even Rickey's co-owner in Brooklyn, Tom Baird, considered blocking the signing of Robinson, but he soon backed off. At another Baseball Writers Association meeting, a racist skit was performed that mocked Robinson. The skit portrayed Rickey as a carpetbagger who was taking advantage of Robinson and baseball for his own benefit.³⁰

There had to be a very dedicated man to endure all this opposition, criticism, and slander on the way to equality in baseball. Rickey said he did not sign Robinson because of outside pressure, but in spite of all the outside pressure he was under. Baseball needed a man whose commitment to integration went above and beyond to make a breakthrough. That's exactly what they had in Wesley Branch Rickey. In Rickey's first meeting with Robinson he was so animated and passionate that he acted out his discussion. While he was warning Robinson about the problems he would face, he shouted out taunts that Robinson would hear. He laid his coat out

²⁹ Lamb, *Blackout*, 44-46; *New York Times*, April 21, 1947; Weaver, "Black Press," 308.

³⁰ Dodson, "Integration of Negroes," 75-76; Lamb, *Blackout*, 52, 72.

and got down on the floor to act out a dirty slide, illustrating how a player may try to hurt him.³¹

Rickey's resolve was challenged early and often. During Robinson's first week at Spring Training in Daytona Beach, Florida, Rickey was run out of town. He did not let this ruin the experiment, though. Rickey kept the whole incident quiet so as not to endanger the integration process. He didn't even tell Robinson why he had to leave town until he was already gone. Rickey was prepared to go to any length to make this signing successful. He never allowed Robinson to miss a game or day of practice, because he feared it would make blacks appear as too weak to compete with white athletes. Rickey did make him be careful, however, so his potential as a player would not be endangered by injury. When Robinson had to move to first base because he hurt his arm and could not throw, Rickey gave him private lessons on how to play the position.³²

Rickey refused to keep Robinson off the field because of his color. With segregation in full effect in cities across the nation, many baseball stadiums didn't want to allow Robinson on the field or even in the clubhouse. Rickey said if Robinson and Johnny Wright, another black player who was signed with Robinson in the minor leagues, were not allowed to take the field, the team as a whole would not play. He claimed to be prepared to not play another game if that was necessary. Even Rickey's minor league manager didn't want a black player on the field with his team. He asked Rickey to assign him to another team. Rickey told him if he wanted to be the manager, he would play Robinson and incorporate him as he would any other player. Rickey was prepared to remove opposition before he would remove Robinson.³³

Rickey knew that removing obstacles in order to keep Robinson would cost his team and himself short-term. At the press conference

³¹ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 375; Lamb, *Blackout*, 46.

³² Lamb, *Blackout*, 88-95.

³³ *Washington Afro-American*, April 6, 1946; Lamb, *Blackout*, p. 66.

announcing the signing, Hector Racine, the president of Brooklyn's minor league team in Montreal, said he and Rickey understood signing a black player may keep future players from signing. They were also prepared for current players to leave. The former proved to be more true than the latter. Rickey estimated that he lost \$500,000 in potential player talent because his scouts could not work effectively. Other teams' scouts were warning players not to sign with Brooklyn because they would have to play with blacks.³⁴

There seemed to be nothing Rickey would not do to successfully integrate baseball. He claimed to start a Negro League team of his own, although this never happened. This gave him an excuse to scout black players. He spent \$30,000 supposedly scouting for this new team, while in reality he was seeking only one player. Money was not the only thing Rickey sacrificed in his pursuit. He gave a great deal of his health to integration. The stress from planning and carrying out his plans left Rickey in poor health. He got so bad at one point he had a seizure. After working for weeks straight without rest he began getting dizzy and almost fainted. He was soon diagnosed with Meniere's disease, which is characterized by dizziness, deafness, and vertigo. Doctors advised him to slow down, but of course he refused. He never gave an inch in this fight.³⁵

Baseball didn't just need to be a man completely committed to baseball who could bulldoze his way into integration. Rickey also had to be a man of caution. This may have been his most important attribute when it came to introducing a black player. He was cautious with his timing. The state of media and culture was not the only factor in Rickey's good timing. He also caught the baseball establishment at the perfect moment. When baseball's current commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis died, Rickey felt one of his final obstacles had been removed. He had fought Landis on the issue of farm systems, or minor league teams associated with major league teams to

³⁴ *New York Times*, October 24, 1945; Dodson, "Integration of Negroes," 75.

³⁵ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 367-368; Lamb, *Blackout*, 37-38, 67-38.

give talented players experience. He knew Landis would likely fight him on integration as well. With Landis's passing Rickey knew it would be hard for baseball to find someone else as stubborn who could oppose him. The next MLB commissioner was less confrontational and never caused Rickey any problems.³⁶

Choosing the right player was Rickey's most important decision. He cut no corners in doing so. He started scouting in Latin America because he thought the talent would be better. Leagues in Mexico were already becoming successful. He understood that the player had to be talented if he was going to be accepted. The biggest issue in this quest was the language barrier. Because of this, he decided to look into American players of color who spoke the language and were more accessible. When he moved on from Latino to black prospects, he still wanted to ensure he had a talented athlete. Rickey spent \$25,000, using three different scouts, to search the current negro leagues for this desired player. He wasn't willing to leave anything to chance.³⁷

Rickey had a well-thought-out list of requirements for choosing the right man. First, he needed to have a history of playing organized sports with whites. As previously mentioned, this was important because the athlete had to be a team player. Rickey knew that if his new player could not get along with the current players on his team, the experiment was doomed. He especially feared racial radicals, not only in the media and staff, but among players themselves. He knew that if the player could not fit in, it would likely be decades before another attempt could be made. Rickey knew this meant the player needed the right temperament. He could not fight back when he was taunted. A hotheaded player would seem to prove what Rickey

³⁶ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 358.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 349-350; Weaver, "Black Press," 305.

feared: that blacks could not get along with whites on the close proximity of a baseball team. Luckily, his choice of Robinson could not have been more perfect.³⁸

After he had made his choice, Rickey was careful in making the announcement. This meant waiting. He kept the deal a secret so he could continue laying the groundwork for the big announcement. Even Robinson didn't know the real reason he was being scouted by the Dodgers. He thought Rickey wanted him to play for his proposed Negro League team. Anyone leaking information too soon would allow for potential sabotage or attack from within. The announcement about Robinson would eventually be delivered in past tense. The team held a press conference about the signing of Robinson months after the deal actually occurred.³⁹

Before Robinson arrived, Rickey began preparing his team for a colored teammate. He lectured every player in his organization on religion, morality, and equality before Robinson was introduced. Robinson wrote about the preparation, saying, "he had done a fantastic job of persuading, bullying, lecturing, and pulling strings behind the scenes." Amazingly, Rickey did all this without ever asking his players to accept a black player. Once he was there, Rickey made it clear that Robinson must be accepted, but beforehand he took another approach. He tried to create a culture that would accept Robinson in his organization and on his teams. He was able to create a structure that not only accepted Rickey, but didn't want him to be challenged. Once, when he was removed late in a game, the players came to his defense against the manager. They would often represent Robinson's backup when he was taunted or challenged by opposing teams.⁴⁰

³⁸ Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 356-357; Lamb, *Blackout*, 8.

³⁹ Lamb, *Blackout*, 38-39; Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey*, 373-375.

⁴⁰ Jackie Robinson and Alfred Duckett, *I Never Had It Made* (New York: Fawcett, Crest, 1974), 46; *Montreal Gazette*, March 1, 1946; *New York Daily News*, March 1, 1946.

Other precautions were taken when Robinson was brought into his first games. Rickey left little to chance when it came to Robinson's comfort. He realized it would be easier if he was not the only black player. He also signed a black pitcher from the Negro Leagues, but he was never Rickey's real interest. He just didn't want Robinson to be alone. When it came to choosing the right city, Rickey decided Montreal was a safe beginning point because there was very little racial prejudice in the city. He wanted to avoid conflict off the field as much as possible, and he remembered the hotel incident at Ohio Wesleyan University.⁴¹

The choice of Montreal perfectly represents Rickey's caution. He understood that too much too soon would jeopardize the experiment. When Robinson was living in Montreal and Brooklyn, and when he travelled to other cities, Rickey told him to live under the segregation laws. He would have to adjust to the lifestyle for a time because challenging society could put his baseball endeavor in danger. Rickey would never challenge segregation anywhere except in baseball. He was smart enough to know that was his sphere of influence and expanding could hurt his efforts. Rickey's caution allowed Robinson to navigate his way slowly through the obstacles of baseball's prejudice.⁴²

Branch Rickey entailed everything baseball needed in order to break its color barrier. He was a man of desire, religion, innovation, commitment, and caution. His religion set a basis for his belief that all men were equal. Because he had a prestigious position in the baseball establishment, Rickey had the ability to accomplish what black media, activists, and athletes had been seeking for years. The cultural setting of the 1940s seemed to be ready for a black baseball player, but there was more opposition than appeared on the surface. Rickey had to fight an enemy that was unwilling to be honest about

⁴¹ Lamb, *Blackout*, 14; *New York Times*, October 24, 1945.

⁴² Lamb, *Blackout*, 64-65.

its true intentions. He did so as only he could: with gentle aggression. His history of innovation gave him credibility, as well as experience fighting tradition.

Rickey's cautious, unmovable commitment to integration was ultimately what drove integration to completion. He sacrificed his health, his wealth, and even his reputation. His choice of player was carefully thought out and could not have been more perfect. Despite players, managers, and owners who opposed Robinson, Rickey stuck with his man until he reached his goal. He was willing to sacrifice everything except the cause. By 1947, Rickey finally saw a black player playing for a major league team, fulfilling his obligation to God and himself. Baseball would not have integrated in 1947 without Wesley Branch Rickey. ▶▶

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