42: A tribute to integrating baseball falls short

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Written and directed by Brian Helgeland

One of baseball's most iconic moments, Jackie Robinson's breaking the sport's color barrier in 1947 as a member of the Brooklyn Dodgers, an event whose impact resonated throughout America, is at the center of Brian Helgeland's *42* .

Helgeland, best known as the screenwriter of *LA Confidential, Mystic River, Man on Fire* and other films, focuses his work on the relationship between Robinson (Chadwick Boseman) and famed Dodgers president and general manager Branch Rickey (Harrison Ford). The film is set at a time when the Jim Crow apartheid system was still solidly in place in the southern states and racial prejudice was either encouraged or tolerated by many American institutions and much of its media and entertainment business.

The film begins in late 1945 when Rickey, portrayed superbly by Ford, announces to his subordinates his determination to integrate major league baseball. Told he will be breaking an unwritten code and become an outcast, Rickey responds, "So be it. New York is full of Negro baseball fans. Dollars are not black and white, they're green, every dollar is green."

Rickey decides that Robinson, a four-sport athlete at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), who has played alongside whites, been an officer in the army and is presently batting .350 with the Kansas City Monarchs, a Negro team, will become the first black ballplayer in the major leagues.

Upon meeting Robinson, and aware of the latter's combative temper and willingness to fight back (while in the military, Robinson was court-martialed for refusing to sit in the back of a military bus, but was eventually acquitted), Rickey insists that despite the abuse Robinson will inevitably be subjected to, "he wants a player that has the guts not to fight back."

Robinson agrees, and in 1946 signs a contract with the Montreal Royals, a Dodger minor league team. The first half of the film details the racism that Robinson and his wife are subjected to in Florida during spring training. Throughout the film, Boseman effectively expresses the player's restrained rage.

To assist Robinson during this difficult period, Rickey has Negro sports writer Wendell Smith (Andre Holland) travel with and mentor him in dealing with the press. Smith himself has long campaigned for baseball's integration and, even though a prominent sports writer for the Negro press, is relegated to sit with a typewriter on his lap in the stands because he is barred from the press box.

Robinson survives spring training in 1946 and goes on to have a very productive year with Montreal, becoming one of the favorites of that city's fans.

In the spring of 1947, Rickey attempts to avoid the overt racism that Robinson had been subjected to in Florida by holding the Dodgers' spring training camp in Panama. To his dismay, however, several Dodgers express their resentment toward Robinson by signing a petition declaring they will refuse to play with him.

Rickey calls on Dodger manager Leo Durocher (Christopher Meloni) to put down this insurrection. "I don't care if he is yellow or black, or has stripes like a zebra," says Durocher. "If Robinson can help us win and everything I have seen says yes he can, then he is going to play on this ball club." The one or two Dodgers who still resist are told by Rickey they will be traded.

Robinson makes the team and on opening day, April 15, 1947, in Brooklyn, becomes the first player since 1880 to break the major league baseball color line. More than half the 26,000 fans at Ebbets Field in attendance are black.

The second half of *42* follows Robinson's first year with the Dodgers. It depicts various incidents such as the racist diatribe Robinson is subjected to during a game by Philadelphia Phillies' manager Ben Chapman (Hamish Linklater). Also shown is a game in Cincinnati when Dodger captain and southerner Pee Wee Reese puts his arm around Robinson, in a gesture of support that silences a taunting crowd. This famous moment is depicted in a bronze sculpture unveiled at MCU Park in Coney Island, Brooklyn, in 2005.

Robinson goes on to become the major league rookie of the year, leading the Dodgers to the World Series in 1947, and winning over his teammates and fans everywhere by his excellence on the field.

Robinson went on to have a Hall of Fame career, and when he retired at the end of 1956—after helping to bring Brooklyn its first World Series victory in 1955—all but three teams had integrated. (In 1959, the Boston Red Sox, against the wishes of owner Tom Yawkey, became the last team to sign African American players.) Robinson died in 1972.

On April 15, 1997, the 50th anniversary of Robinson's first game, major league baseball officially retired his jersey, number 42. The only exception to this policy occurs on April

15 each year, when all major league players wear number 42 in tribute.

Near the end of Helgeland's film, Robinson presses Rickey as to why he has submitted himself to what has been a difficult ordeal, not only for the first African-American player, but also for the Dodgers' executive. In reply, Rickey relates the story of how when he was in college, the best player on his team was a Negro named Charlie Thomas, who was ultimately broken by racism. "There was something unfair about the heart of the game I loved and I ignored it. But a time came when I could no longer do that. You let me love baseball again. Thank you."

Helgeland makes an effort to bring this intense and moving moment, which continues to exercise an impact on anyone concerned about social progress, to life. The weakness of *42*, however, is its decision to portray the actions and courage of Robinson and to a lesser extent Rickey simply as attributes of exceptional individuals, largely outside of history.

The events treated in the film are separated from a series of social changes and developments that made the integration of baseball possible and even inevitable.

At the center of these developments was the explosive development of American industry, which drew masses of African Americans from the rural South to northern cities such as New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Detroit in the first 70 years of the twentieth century (interrupted only by a lull during the Great Depression). The social upheavals of the 1930s, including the growth of unionization in the mass production industries, often threw black and white workers together in a common struggle against corporations and governments.

During World War II, despite a segregated military, nearly 900,000 blacks served in the armed forces. Blacks and whites returning from the war soon took part in the greatest strike wave in US history. The years 1945 and 1946 saw more than 4 million workers on strike. By that time, over 500,000 black workers had become members of CIO unions.

In response to and as part of this upsurge, the labor movement, the Communist Party and the Negro press all took up the struggle to integrate baseball. In July 1940, the Trade Union Athletic Association held an "End Jim Crow in Baseball" demonstration at the World's Fair in New York. The next year, various unions sent a delegation to meet with baseball commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis to demand that baseball recruit black players. During this period, unions and civil rights groups picketed outside Yankee Stadium (Yankees), the Polo Grounds (Giants), and Ebbets Field in New York City, and Comiskey Park (White Sox) and Wrigley Field (Cubs) in Chicago.

The Stalinized Communist Party, which still included in its ranks militant workers and socialist-minded intellectuals, was attuned to the emerging civil rights struggles, and sought to take the initiative in the campaign against segregation precisely in order to prevent the struggle from developing a revolutionary character.

Lester Rodney, sports editor of the *Daily Worker* (the newspaper of the Communist Party), focused his writing on the campaign to end Jim Crow in baseball. The *Daily Worker* during this period had a circulation of tens of thousands and was particularly influential in New York. Rodney and the *Daily Worker* led a petition drive that eventually obtained more than a million signatures demanding that commissioner Landis integrate baseball.

At the same time, reporters for the Negro papers, and in particular Wendell Smith, featured in *42*, were carrying out their own campaign for an end to the color line in baseball.

In December 1943, Paul Robeson, the prominent black actor, singer and left-wing activist, addressed baseball's owners at their annual winter meeting in New York, urging them to accept black ball players. Under orders from Landis, the owners ignored Robeson and failed to ask him a single question.

In 1945, the New York State legislature passed the Quinn-Ives Act, which banned discrimination in hiring, and soon formed a committee to investigate discriminatory hiring practices, with a particular focus on baseball. In short order, New York's mayor, Fiorello LaGuardia, established a Committee on Baseball to push the Yankees, Giants and Dodgers to sign black players.

The postwar drive to break down color barriers in sports no doubt reflected newfound confidence and the objective unity of the working class, and its unwillingness to return to the conditions of the Depression. At the same time, this important but modest reform could only be granted because the powers that be in America came to see that it was unavoidable and even necessary, especially under conditions of the Cold War. After all, claims about Western "democracy" and the "free world" sounded a little hollow in the face of very public and institutionalized racism in America's national pastime.

The events and characters in Helgeland's *42* would have been better understood and more deeply treated within this general context. That could only have contributed to the work's artistry and impact on audience members, strengthening its ability to evoke this remarkable historical moment.