

"42": Jackie Robinson Biopic Recounts Historic Breaking of Baseball's Color Barrier

Written by Kam Williams



From its formation in the late 19th Century until well into the 1940s, Major League Baseball operated in accordance with an unwritten rule that the sport was to remain strictly segregated. The tacit understanding among the owners stipulated that no Blacks were to be signed by any clubs, thereby frustrating the aspirations of many African-Americans who dreamed of playing professionally.

In the wake of World War II, however, this untenable state of affairs came to rankle Brooklyn Dodgers General Manager Branch Rickey (Harrison Ford), a man who fervently felt that to remain the national pastime, baseball needed to integrate. After all, thousands upon thousands of African-American soldiers were returning home to widespread discrimination based on skin color despite having been willing to die for their country in the conflict overseas.

So, in 1945, Rickey decided to challenge the status quo by being the first GM to put a Black ballplayer on the field. However, he also suspected that pursuit of that landmark moment might be met with considerable resistance, given the virulent strains of racism still running rampant through much of the nation.

Therefore, he knew that the choice of the person to break the color barrier was critical, because it had to be done by an individual blessed not only with extraordinary athletic talent but with the requisite character, namely, the amalgam of integrity, restraint and resolve that would assure the success of the challenging endeavor. The candidate he settled upon was Jackie Robinson (Chad Boseman), a college-educated, veteran Army officer who just happened to be an All-Star second baseman in the fledgling Negro Leagues.

The two forged an alliance soon after an exchange in which Robinson assured his boss that he wouldn't respond in kind to any of the racial epithets or vile vitriol about to be hurled in his direction while on the road. As it turned out, even some of his own new teammates initially took issue with his joining the Dodgers in 1947, the year he was brought up to the big leagues.

That historic achievement is painstakingly recreated in "42," a poignant cinematic portrait of an American legend directed by Brian Helgeland. The film carefully chronicles a host of humiliations Robinson was forced to endure en route to equality, from "Colored Only" bathrooms to separate accommodations to the relentless ribbing from bigoted fans in the stands

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and rivals in the opposing dugout.

Fortunately, Jackie managed to maintain his dignity and composure in the face of wearying adversity, thereby opening the door for the full integration of baseball by other African-Americans waiting in the wings. An emotionally-draining biopic featuring Oscar-quality performances from Harrison Ford and Chad Boseman in what is easily Hollywood's best offering of the year thus far.

Excellent (4 stars)

Rated PG-13 for PG-13 for epithets, ethnic slurs and mature themes

Running time: 100 minutes

Distributor: Warner Brothers

To see a trailer for "42," visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9RHqdZDCF0>