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The Athletic

Honoring Robinson Beyond Wearing His Retired No. 42

Unidentified photographer, Jackie Robinson signing autographs, c. April 11, 1947

By Tyler Kepner April 13, 2024

Jackie Robinson is part of baseball's holy triumvirate with Lou Gehrig and Roberto Clemente, each a towering symbol of skill and sacrifice, tinged with sorrow. They accomplished so much and have been gone so long that generations know them only as icons.

For Robinson, whose 1947 debut for the Brooklyn Dodgers will be commemorated Monday on M.L.B's annual tribute day, the role was almost preordained.

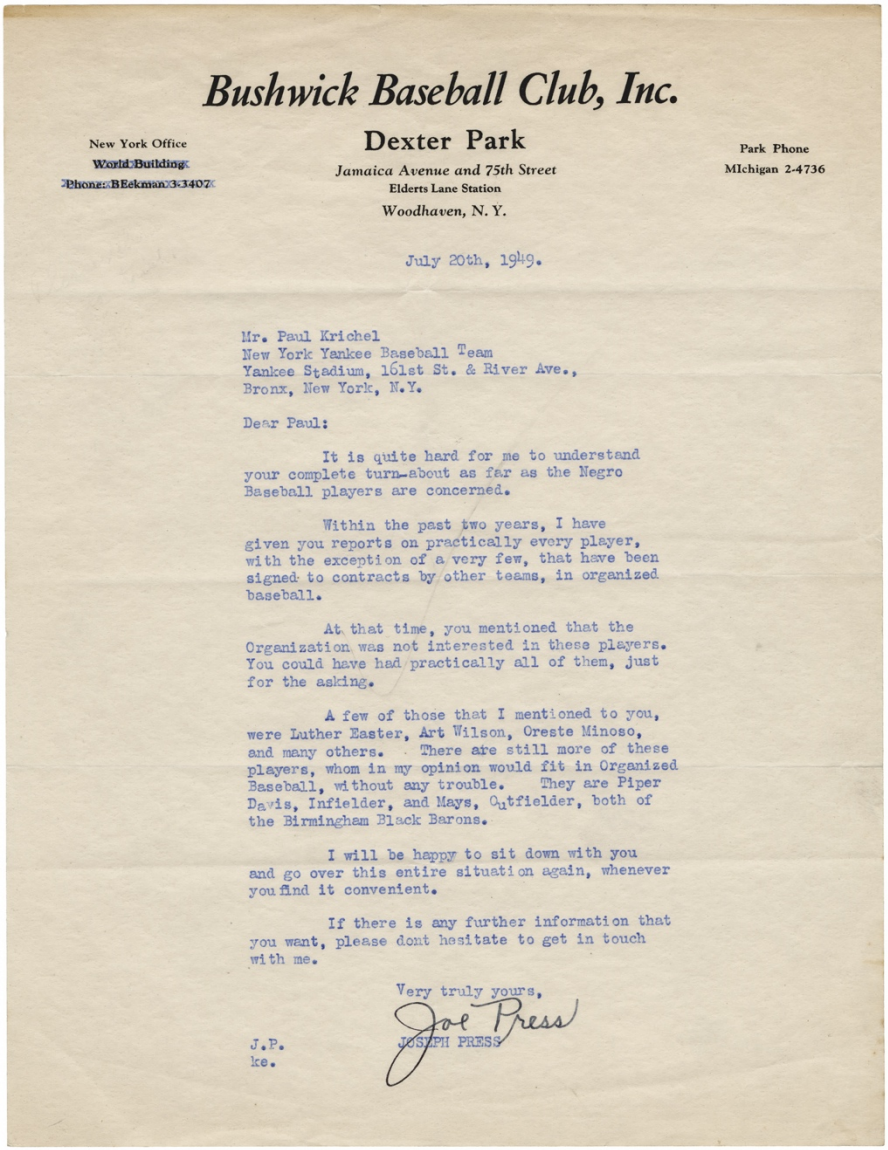
"From the beginning, Life Magazine photographed him as a hero," said Paul Reiferson, a prolific collector of vintage baseball photographs. "It was kind of like being one of the Mercury astronauts: just because you're chosen, before you go to space you're a hero. And you see that in all the images. Robinson is always photographed from a low angle or in some celebratory way."

Robinson surpassed even those grand designs, on and off the field, and MLB retired his number 42 in 1997, on the 50th anniversary of his arrival in the majors. The number is displayed in every ballpark, and all players now wear it each April 15.

An orchestrated salute, however noble, can only go so far. It is best, perhaps, to view Jackie Robinson Day as an invitation, a chance to study and understand the complexities and nuances of a man who was much more than a surface-level hero. In that spirit, here are a couple ways to do it.

Reiferson's collection will be presented as an exhibit, "Jackie Robinson and the Color Line," from Monday through May 24 at the Gitterman Gallery in New York. The photos and artifacts, including telegrams and letters, comprise more than Robinson's journey and stretch back to the integrated teams of the late 1800s.

Pioneers like Sol White and Effa Manley, and Negro League stars like Willard Brown and Mule Suttles — all Hall of Famers — are also featured, as well as fan letters to Dan Bankhead, Robinson's teammate on the 1947 Dodgers and the first Black pitcher to appear in a World Series (as a pinch-runner).



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July 20th, 1949.

Mr. Paul Krichel
New York Yankee Baseball Team
Yankee Stadium, 161st St. & River Ave.,
Bronx, New York, N.Y.

Dear Paul:

It is quite hard for me to understand your complete turn-about as far as the Negro Baseball players are concerned.

Within the past two years, I have given you reports on practically every player, with the exception of a very few, that have been signed to contracts by other teams, in organized baseball.

At that time, you mentioned that the Organization was not interested in these players. You could have had practically all of them, just for the asking.

A few of those that I mentioned to you, were Luther Easter, Art Wilson, Oreste Minoso, and many others. There are still more of these players, whom in my opinion would fit in Organized Baseball, without any trouble. They are Piper Davis, Infielder, and Mays, Outfielder, both of the Birmingham Black Barons.

I will be happy to sit down with you and go over this entire situation again, whenever you find it convenient.

If there is any further information that you want, please dont hesitate to get in touch with me.

Very truly yours,
Joe Press
JOSEPH PRESS

J.P.
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This 1949 letter from Joe Press to Paul Krichell is featured in the “Jackie Robinson and the Color Line” exhibit on display at the Gitterman Gallery.

There is also a 1949 letter from a local scouting source, Joe Press, to the Yankees’ lead scout, Paul Krichell, imploring the team to consider signing Black players, including Willie Mays. Press indicates that the Yankees had been given reports on a bounty of Negro League stars for years.

“You could have had practically all of them,” the letter says, “just for the asking.”

Robinson signs his contract with Branch Rickey in 1950.

The Dodgers' Branch Rickey famously made the first move, signing Robinson in 1945. He marked the moment with a carefully choreographed photo that is featured in the exhibition.

"You'll see this one image of Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson signing a contract, and Branch Rickey has very deliberately placed a photograph of Abraham Lincoln over his own head and removed all the other photographs from the wall," Reiferson said. "So the photographers almost have to photograph him the way he wants to be seen, which is as the next Lincoln."

Robinson played 10 seasons for the Dodgers, retiring in December 1956 when the team tried to trade him to the New York Giants. By then, he had begun to demonstrate a passion for correspondence with politicians, editors, civil rights activists and labor and business leaders that would continue until his death in 1972.

"That man was no joke," Doug Glanville said.

Glanville, a broadcaster and former major-league outfielder, is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Connecticut's Neag School of Education. He has used the book "First Class Citizenship: The Civil Rights Letters of Jackie Robinson" as research material and a text for his students.

The book, edited by Michael G. Long and published in 2007, is a riveting compilation of Robinson's exchanges with major figures of his time: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; Robert F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey; Barry Goldwater and Nelson Rockefeller; Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon.

"It documents how much he engaged through one of the more patient forms of expression we know — methodical, unafraid to put words to paper knowing the permanence of such an effort," Glanville said. "For us, it frames time, an evolving perspective. Shifting alliances and evaporating boundaries that can be rebuilt if need be. I felt close to him, his story, his family in many ways.

“It also challenges his passivity and the terms of his barrier breaking. He did agree to be quiet for a while but then that stopped and his voice was heard. It echoed even. It gives us power to know we can evolve and change, yet inside of that we can still be consistent in our principles.”

Robinson pulled on the levers of power, as Glanville put it, praising and cajoling, calling out hypocrisy, demanding accountability and trading ideas on advancing the cause of equality. He supported Nixon for President in 1960 and maintained a close relationship for years, yet opposed him for Humphrey in 1968, doubting Nixon’s commitment to civil rights.

“If we are to survive as a nation, we must do it together,” Robinson wrote to Nixon in 1969, two days after his inauguration. “Black people will work for one America if we are given hope. Without hope, the present feeling of despair will lead to worse problems. This, Sir, is the most important role that your administration must play.”

Robinson never fit neatly into an ideology. He supported the Vietnam War effort and feared that King’s opposition to it would undermine the civil rights agenda. Robinson was on good terms with King but drew disdain from Malcolm X for, among other things, supporting Nixon.

“I must confess that even today you still display the same old ‘speed,’ the same ‘cunning’ and ‘shiftiness,’” Malcolm X wrote to Robinson, in a letter published in the Amsterdam News in late 1963. “You are still trying to win ‘The Big Game’ for your White Boss.”

Robinson replied with a denunciation of Malcolm X’s “sick leadership” and said he was proud of the White men he had worked for, including Rickey with the Dodgers and William Black at Chock Full O’ Nuts, where Robinson was a vice president.

“I shall always be happy to associate myself with decent Americans of either race who believe in justice for all,” Robinson wrote in his reply.

Yet while that comment highlighted a certain optimism, by 1969 Robinson had perhaps felt the weight of a turbulent decade. In a New York Times article published that July 4, Robinson said, “I wouldn’t fly the flag on the Fourth of July or any other day. When I see a car with a flag pasted on it I figure the guy behind the wheel isn’t my friend.”

He never stopped fighting, though, and nine months before his death, of heart failure brought on by diabetes, Robinson visited “The Dick Cavett Show.” The host introduced him as “a highly combative man” who “speaks his mind,” but the interview, from Jan. 26, 1972, is a frank, intriguing talk that packs a lot into just 15 minutes.

As we watch major-league players wearing Robinson’s number on Monday, it’s worth hearing some of the things the man himself stood for, in his own words, near the end of a brief and momentous life.