

OPINION

What Baseball Can Teach Business

In a day when American business could use some help with its public image, baseball may offer an answer.

Sixty-five years ago this coming Saturday, an innovative businessman named Branch Rickey signed a ballplayer named Jackie Robinson. The partnership that began in a Brooklyn office would radically change both baseball

and the nation for the better. In the many retellings of this story, alas, one point is often overlooked: The Rickey-Robinson relationship was at bottom a business partnership.



MAIN STREET
By William McGurn

To describe it this way is not to belittle it. To the contrary, recognizing the business aspect of this enterprise helps explain not only why it succeeded, but why it succeeded as smoothly as it did.

Robinson, of course, bore the brunt of the pain in that partnership. He was the man on the front lines, the one who endured the ugly racial epithets, who bit his tongue when his every instinct was to fight, and who was forced to prove himself to men and ballplayers who were not his equal in either category.

Rickey understood this going in. If the published accounts of that first Brooklyn meeting are accurate, Rickey may have better understood the terrible things that were awaiting Robinson on and off the field. Yet to his dying day Rickey insisted that he was just a businessman.

"My grandfather never accepted any effort to recognize him as a champion of civil rights, because he believed that



Jackie Robinson discusses contract terms with Branch Rickey, president of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

you don't accept awards for doing what's right," says Branch Rickey III, president of the Pacific Coast League. "His partnership with Jackie was perhaps the most daring in American sports history, but he knew, too, that it was a good business move, and he never ran away from that justification."

The Rickey-Robinson partnership changed America.

Not that Rickey was indifferent to racial discrimination and prejudice. He came upon it in 1903 as a player-manager for Ohio Wesleyan University, when a South Bend, Ind., hotel clerk refused a room to teammate Charles Thomas—a talented black athlete. Rickey prevailed on the manager to let Thomas sleep on a cot in Rickey's room,

where Rickey says he later found his black teammate in tears.

When Rickey became president of the Brooklyn Dodgers, he told the team's radio announcer, "For these 41 years, I have heard that fine young man crying 'It's my skin, Mr. Rickey.' . . . Now I'm going to do something about it."

And he did. But he did it with the acumen of a businessman, plotting every step of the way. Along the way he showed courage. At a 1946 meeting of all 16 major league teams, for example, he was the only one who came out against a resolution calling for teams not to integrate. Later, when his star pitcher Dixie Walker made clear he didn't want to take the field with a black man, Rickey risked the wrath of Dodger fans by trading him.

Three things attracted Rickey to Robinson: First, Robinson had the talent. Second, he had guts; as a U.S. Army officer, he'd been court-martialed (he was acquitted) after refusing a Fort Hood

bus driver's request to move to the back of the bus. Third, Robinson was also a Methodist. In fact, at that first meeting Rickey gave Robinson a popular "Life of Christ"—stressing that (at least in the beginning) he needed a man with the courage to turn the other cheek.

In retrospect Rickey's gamble seems obvious. At the time, that wasn't clear. What made the partnership between Branch Rickey and Jackie Robinson so compelling was how well they complemented one another, each bringing something that the other could not supply on his own.

In his own life, Rickey generally justified his decision as sound business strategy. "The Negroes will make us winners for years to come," he said, "and for that I will happily bear being called a bleeding heart and a dogooder and all that humanitarian rot."

That's not the whole story, of course. But Rickey was right about untapped talent. With the black athletes Rickey signed, Brooklyn went on to win a string of National League pennants. Other teams copied his business model by signing their own black players. And thus was Jim Crow dealt a crippling blow—at a time when lunch counters were still segregated and the Civil Rights Act was two decades off.

Today, it seems a shame that one of our most illuminating examples of a business leader doing well by doing good has largely been lost to history. Maybe there's a college or university out there that could help revive that lesson in perhaps the only way the Dodger executive might have accepted: a Branch Rickey School of Business.

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